

# WALK YOUR WAY TO HAPPINESS

Shape your mind as well as your body with these simple walking meditations. **Words: Sally Brown**

**F**or something that's all about being calm and quiet, meditation has generated rather a lot of noise in the past decade. Thanks to advances in brain-imaging technology, scientists have discovered that tuning out mental chatter and focusing on the here and now may change the physical structure of the brain.

A 2005 study found that people who meditate regularly had noticeably thicker tissue in the left prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that controls emotional wellbeing. Other studies have shown that, as well as strengthening the areas of the brain involved in memory, learning and emotional flexibility, meditation shrinks the amygdala, the part of the brain that triggers the stress response. That adds up to less stress, anxiety and depression, and greater optimism, resilience, decisiveness and creative thinking.

'Science has shown that meditation just makes people happier,' says Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Centre in Massachusetts. And you can start to feel the benefits in as little as eight weeks.

The trouble is, knowing that something's good for you doesn't guarantee you'll start doing it. In a busy

life, 'learn to meditate' can feel like just another task to add to your packed to-do list. So here's the good news: if you're a regular walker, you're already halfway there. Repetitive physical movement such as that involved in walking, running, yoga or tai chi has long been considered a form of moving meditation in ancient Eastern cultures.

'If you're new to meditation, you may find walking meditation easier than sitting in a quiet room, which can make you feel like you're under pressure,' says yoga and meditation teacher Jacquelyn Cooper ([www.halcyonyoga.com](http://www.halcyonyoga.com)). 'Plus, you can do it anywhere – even the five-minute walk from your car to the supermarket can become a meditation.'

#### Adding an extra element


There's nothing new about using walking to clear the head and lift the spirits – a recent review of eight studies by the University of Stirling found that simply putting your trainers on and getting out the door is one of the best things you can do to protect your mental health now and in the future.

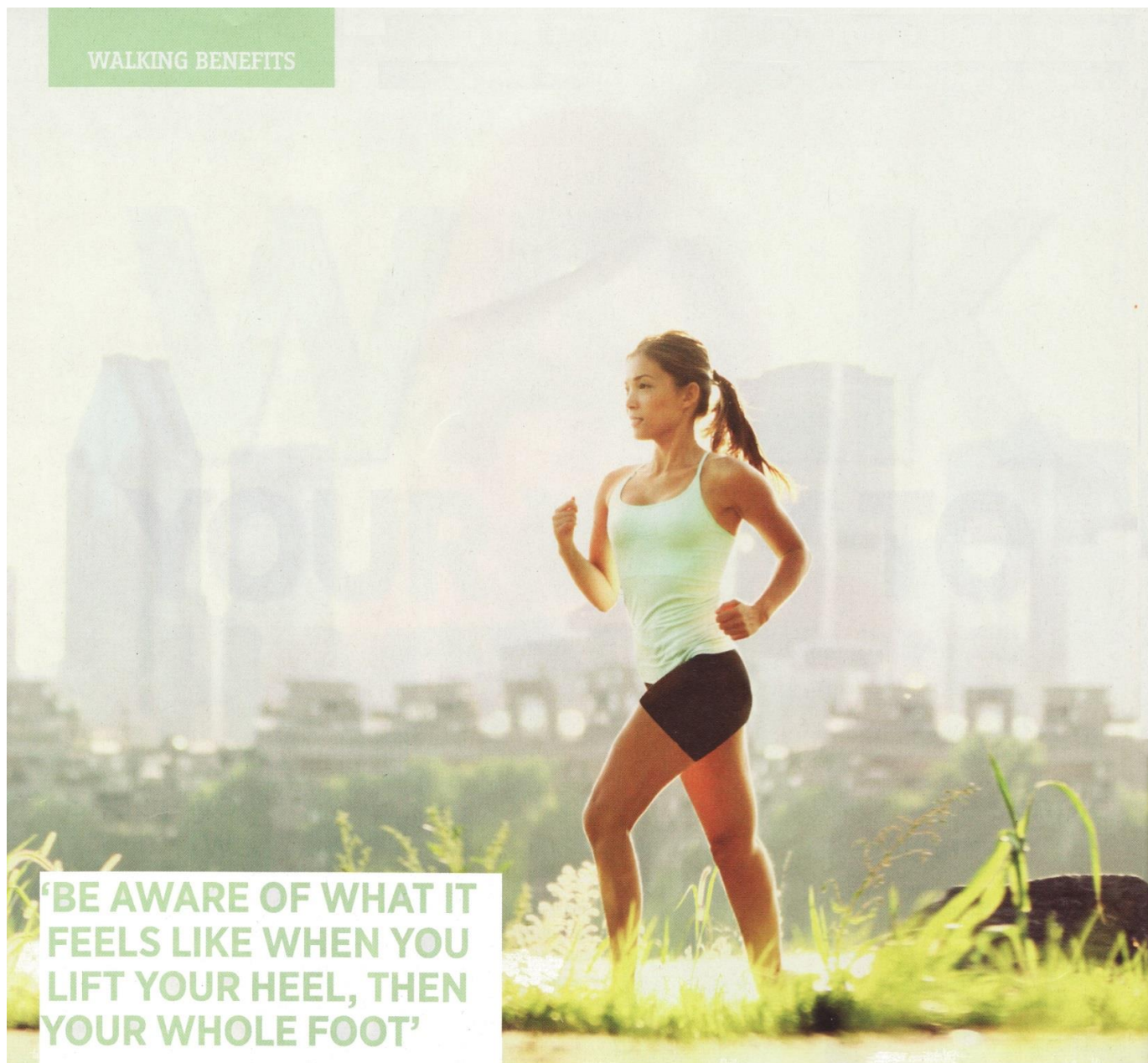
But by adding some simple meditation techniques to your walks, you can supercharge these benefits. 'Ultimately, meditation puts you in control of your mind, by allowing you to observe how it works,' says Cooper. Downloading

a guided walking meditation such as *Walking Meditations* by Meditation Oasis (69p from iTunes) can be a great way to start. Or you could try these three simple ways to walk your way to happiness:

**'YOU MAY FIND  
WALKING  
MEDITATION EASIER  
THAN SITTING IN A  
QUIET ROOM'**

#### 1 Sight, sound, smell

'Meditation is about noticing sensations, then feelings, then emotions, but always staying in the present, rather than getting caught up in thoughts, judgement or analysis about them,' says Cooper. 'Start your walk by taking a few minutes to connect with the sensations in your body and the pattern of your breathing. Notice what's going on in your mind and body. If you come across some unresolved emotions, leave them to one side during your walk and address them later. Start walking; then, with an open and relaxed mind, tune into the following senses in turn: 



**'BE AWARE OF WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN YOU LIFT YOUR HEEL, THEN YOUR WHOLE FOOT'**

**a. Sight** – What do you notice? What has changed since you last walked this route? What feelings are created by what you see?

**b. Sound** – What can you hear? Notice any tendency to label, analyse or judge what you hear, but try not to get caught up in these thoughts.

**c. Smell** – Bring your focus back to your breathing. What do you smell as you breathe in? What emotions are triggered? Then go back to the beginning and repeat the cycle as many times as you like. The key is to not try too hard – think of your mind as a receiver that's tuned into what's going on in the world.'

### 2 Step by step

During your usual walk, choose a safe place to slow down your pace and start to focus your attention on the movement of your legs and feet. Your aim is to tune into the sensations of coming into contact with the ground so you are feeling it, rather than thinking about

it. 'Be aware of what it feels like when you lift your heel, then your whole foot; what it feels like when you move your leg through space and place your foot,' says Salzberg. 'Make a simple mental note each time your foot lifts and each time it touches the ground – "lift, place, lift, place" or "up, down, up, down" – to anchor your attention.'

Try to finish one step completely before you lift the other foot. See if you can tune into how the sensations change throughout the movement, how your weight shifts and how the rest of your body responds. If you find yourself distracted by what's happening around you or you find your mind wandering, gently return your focus to your feet. Start with five minutes and try to increase the time up to 20 minutes.

### 3 Aimless wandering

'Aimless wandering encourages us to let go of the "get from A to B" goal orientation that usually drives us when

we are on the move,' says Ed Halliwell, co-author of *The Mindful Manifesto* (Hay House, £10.99). 'During aimless wandering, we try to simply be curious about everything we encounter. Simply start walking, slowly, in whatever direction the mood takes you (provided it is safe to do so). Notice any impulses to turn your wandering into a planned journey, any attempt to get somewhere, speed up or fulfil a particular task – beyond experiencing your aimless wander in a mindful way.'

Each time you feel such an impulse, Halliwell advises bringing your mind back to your experience – not just your bodily sensations and feelings, but also the environment around you. 'You can practise aimless wandering in the city, in a park, in rural areas or at the beach – anywhere you can take a directionless walk. Try to do ten minutes.'

*The Power of Meditation* by Sharon Salzberg (Hay House, £10.99) includes a free CD of guided meditations. 