



Mental Health in Motion:

*Walking Your Way to a Healthier,
More Resilient Workforce*

Inspiring your workforce to adopt a daily walking habit is the easiest, most cost-effective, and enjoyable way to enhance overall employee well-being. In addition to the wide range of physical health benefits, walking for exercise elevates mental/emotional health, too – playing a role in preventing or alleviating conditions like depression, anxiety, and high stress.

Many factors influence this facet of well-being – individual, biological, behavioral, environmental, socioeconomic, public policy, and more.

This paper focuses on:

- Walking as a convenient, adaptable, and inclusive activity
- The remarkable mental/emotional health benefits of walking
- How wellness leaders can inspire and support a workplace culture of walking.



Prevalence and Cost

The human burden of depression, anxiety, and excessive stress is substantial — impairing function, diminishing quality of life, and reducing work capacity. Rates for these conditions and all mental disorders are staggering:



1 in 5 adults will experience a mental illness this year — and in any given year¹



50% of people worldwide will have at least 1 mental health disorder in the course of their lives; mood disorders (depression, anxiety) are the most common mental illnesses²



44% of US adults experience anxiety symptoms³



29% of US adults will develop depression.⁴

Mental disorders negatively impact employee health and employer performance. The associated losses from absenteeism, presenteeism, burnout, and healthcare expenses are likely costing your organization a lot of money.

Consider these numbers (noted in USD):

- **\$200 billion** is what US employers pay annually for depression — in healthcare and disability expenses, higher rates of absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and burnout⁵
- **\$12 billion** in lost work days, which results in **\$1 trillion** from lost productivity, is the annual worldwide economic cost of *depression and anxiety alone*⁶
- **\$6 trillion** in mental health-related global economic losses are projected for 2030, including lost productivity and direct costs of care — exceeding the collective amount for cancer, diabetes, and chronic lung diseases.⁷



Estimate Depression Costs

Use this [Depression Calculator](#) from the Center for Workplace Mental Health to estimate what your organization pays annually due to this widespread mental disorder.

Walking: Convenient, Adaptable, Inclusive

Ensuring employees have access to mental healthcare is vital. But so is investing time and resources into reducing demand for these services. A healthy lifestyle supports both mental and physical well-being; that's where walking comes in.

Walking is simple. With just comfortable shoes and clothing, most people can get up and move — in neighborhoods or parks, city blocks, or on a playground; any safe place will do. This is part of walking's appeal as a mental well-being initiative: It's simple... no special skills needed. Individuals can make modifications to match their physical ability, goals, and preferences:

- **Easy breezy.** Brisk walking offers the most benefits, but a light stroll is worthwhile, too. Some folks balk at the idea of sweating during work; they could keep the pace slower and save more intense walking for before/after worktime.
- **Short and sweet.** Fitness beginners can start with short periods at an easy pace and build from there — being active, even in small doses, makes a positive difference. A 10-minute walk, done 2-3 times in a day, offers many of the same benefits as a single 20-30 minute walk.
- **Heat's on.** More-fit participants can elevate intensity by walking uphill, climbing stairwell or stadium steps, or doing faster-paced intervals. Extending time or distance can also increase the workload.
- **Action-equipped.** People with mobility challenges may be able to walk with assistive devices (like a cane or walker) or in a lap pool.

Taking even a short walk boosts creativity as well as mood. This basic activity is also a pathway to more social connection and enjoyment of nature; both come with additional mental/emotional well-being benefits.

“

I felt refreshed after walking and it was good for not only my physical health but my mental health as well. Walking gave me the opportunity to clear my head before reacting on some stressful days. I feel accomplished.”

Kathleen S.
University of Rochester
Walktober participant



How Walking Promotes Mental Health

Brain Function and Mental Health Boosts

Decades of research underscore the many health payoffs of making moderate-to-vigorous physical activity — like walking — a regular habit. The positive impact on heart health, muscle/bone strength, and overall vitality is common knowledge. Mental health and brain benefits like these are less widely known but especially relevant in light of our global mental health crisis:

- **Reduces inflammation.** A sedentary lifestyle is linked to increased inflammation. Chronic low-grade inflammation contributes to anxiety and depression. But sustained walking over weeks or months leads to sizable reductions in inflammatory markers and improved immune regulation in postmenopause, overweight, obesity, and other conditions.^{8,9,10}
- **Strengthens structure and function.** Exercise rewires the brain, building new connections in a process called neuroplasticity. This process helps us take in knowledge and adapt to change.

Moderate-to-vigorous exercise optimizes brain chemicals in ways that support learning, ability to manage and respond to emotions (emotional regulation), focus, and clear thinking.

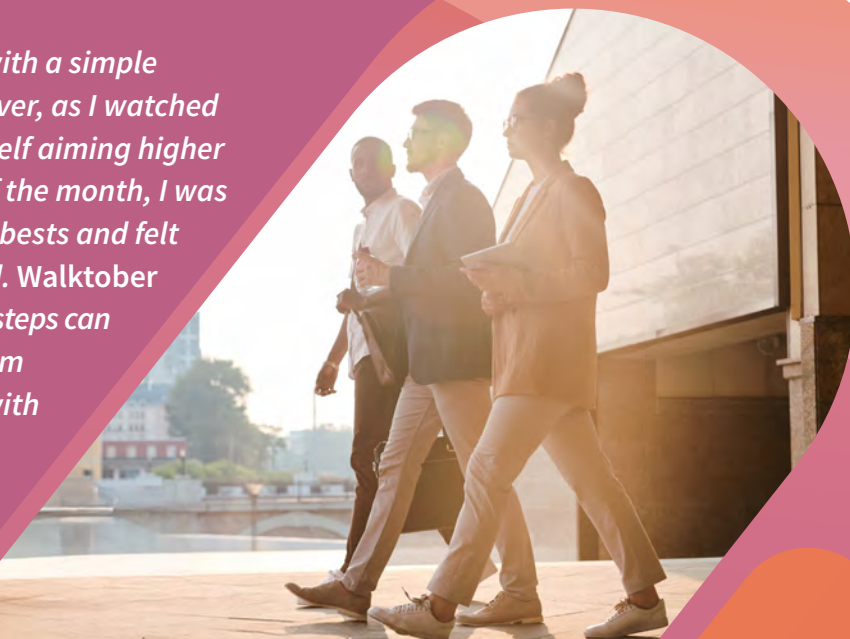
- **Relieves depression, anxiety, and stress.** Something as simple as a brisk walk outdoors can elevate mood and relieve stress for hours. Even a *single exercise session* can reduce anxiety, and short-term engagement in physical activity can buffer against stress-induced negative mood states.¹¹ Done regularly, exercise can be a powerful antidepressant. Physical activity is often recommended as an adjunct to clinical treatment for mental health disorders.
- **Builds resilience.** Exercise itself is a type of stressor that uniquely reduces the harmful effects of other stressors. A healthy lifestyle that includes activities like walking is an essential part of improving the ability to cope with — and bounce back from — setbacks and challenges.

“

My Walktober experience began with a simple goal — a bit more each day. However, as I watched my steps accumulate, I found myself aiming higher and achieving more. By the end of the month, I was regularly surpassing my personal bests and felt physically and mentally energized. Walktober showed me that small, consistent steps can lead to major improvements, and I’m excited to keep pushing forward with new fitness challenges.”

Sheela M.

West Technology Group
Walktober participant



Natural Mood Enhancement

Walking outdoors around trees, plants, and bodies of water brings even more dividends — above and beyond being active indoors. Time spent in nature actually elevates mood and settles the “monkey mind.” The American Psychological Association notes a wide range of mental/emotional results from stepping out into natural surroundings:

- Heightened attention and ability to focus
- More happiness and perceived well-being
- Increased positive emotions and empathy
- Better self-esteem, mood, and memory
- Less stress and more resilience.

More research findings:

- Compared to indoor walking, walking outside creates greater improvements in mood, revitalization, positive engagement, enjoyment, and plans for future exercise
- Outdoor exercisers rate their sessions as more restorative than being indoors — and this predicts a higher frequency of physical activity
- Walking in natural surroundings can reduce anger, fatigue, and confusion in addition to depression and anxiety, also improving mindfulness and positive mood^{12, 13}
- Postmenopausal women report less worry/frustration when walking outdoors and feel the exercise is more enjoyable than walking indoors¹⁴
- Exposure to morning sunlight (before 11 AM or so) helps regulate circadian rhythm, improving sleep quality; an early walk offers a double win
- Spending just 20-30 minutes immersed in a natural setting substantially decreases cortisol levels, reflecting reduced stress
- Regular time spent in nature is linked to better self-reported health and well-being; researchers recommend 120 minutes a week or more.

Because exercise, social connection, and time in nature each offer relief — and prevention benefits — for anxiety and depression symptoms, medical experts recommend making them daily habits. They’re even better when combined; just a quick walk outside with others near trees, a green space, or a river can work wonders for mood and mental well-being.



“

Walktober helped me focus on the positive aspects of my day. It helped me stay centered and improved my mental health. I was grateful for the opportunity to participate.”

Jamie L.

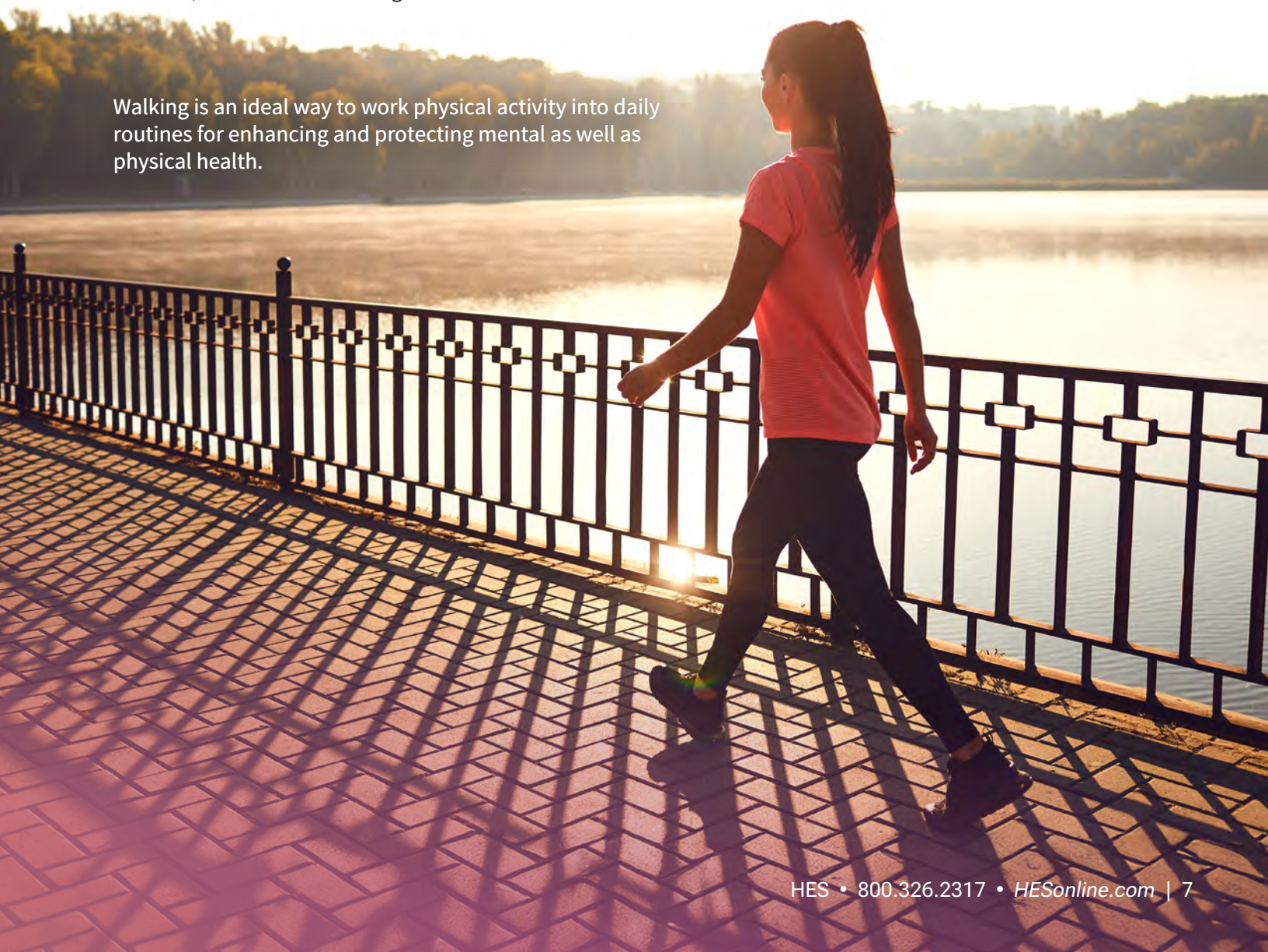
Jefferson County Schools
Walktober participant

Simple Strides to Better Mental Health

Scientists analyzed data from 97 systematic reviews involving 128,119 subjects including healthy adults as well as those with mental health disorders and chronic diseases:

- Several types of physical activity resulted in improvements, including aerobic, resistance, mixed-mode, and yoga
- Moderate-to-high intensity sessions, like walking, are more effective, but low-intensity activity also improves symptoms
- Activities of short (<30 minutes) or medium (30-60 minutes) duration are more effective than sessions over 60 minutes
- Exercise programs don't need to be intensive or long term to raise mental/emotional well-being.

Walking is an ideal way to work physical activity into daily routines for enhancing and protecting mental as well as physical health.



Walking Toward Better Mental Health and Brain Function

Mood and Well-Being^{15, 16, 17}

Reduces depression and anxiety symptoms

Brightens mood and improves emotional regulation

Relieves stress symptoms



Primes the brain to seek connection and get more pleasure out of socializing

Enhances sleep quality

Brain Function

Increases *neuroplasticity*

Protects cognitive function and emotional well-being

Optimizes brain chemicals for learning, emotional regulation, better focus, and clear thinking



Fuels creativity and imagination

Elevates focus and capacity for sustained attention

Reduces risk for age-related cognitive decline

Mental Health

Lowers the occurrence of substance use



Reduces social anxiety

Winning Workplace Walking Challenges

Employee mental/emotional health is vital to any employer's mission. Because walking supports this as well as physical health, a turnkey walking challenge is an excellent way to support the entire organization.

High-quality walking programs are solidly based in health, behavioral, and motivational science. Successful challenge experiences have these elements in common:

- 1. Leadership support.** When an executive, director, or manager takes walking breaks, they offer visible encouragement for employees to do likewise.
- 2. Precision promotion.** Key messages are positioned from multiple angles, in different formats to inspire participation. Captivate your workforce with eye-catching, flawlessly executed content that points to your program.
- 3. Easy registration and tracking.** Signups should be quick and simple. Capturing walking time or steps is fairly frictionless with device or app-based trackers.
- 4. Built-in ways to connect.** Social support is vital in establishing a walking habit and supporting mental/emotional health. Walking with friends, coworkers, and family makes being active more fun and meaningful.
- 5. Individual and team choices.** Competition appeals to many, but not all. Offer different ways to participate that support autonomy.
- 6. Recognition.** Acknowledge individual, department, and regional group efforts. Send a note, give a shoutout, or spotlight on the wellness blog. Plan wellness challenge kickoff and wrapup celebrations with awards, drawings for walking gear gift cards, participation in national/local walking events. Pull highlights, stats, and quotes from our end-of-program reports to celebrate collective achievements.



“

I was suffering from stress and upon joining this event I started walking more. It helps to balance work and life and to reduce the stress a bit and feel more energetic. I will continue the same routine. Also we had a team of 10 and everyone took active participation in this event and all feel good about it... with better bonding in the team as well.”

Shrinivasa G.
Delta Air Lines
Walktober participant

A photograph of three people walking on a paved path next to a stone wall. On the left, a man in a white polo shirt and dark trousers walks with a shoulder bag. In the middle, a man in a dark blazer and light trousers carries a briefcase. On the right, a woman in a tan blazer and light trousers holds a coffee cup. The scene is brightly lit, casting long shadows. Large, semi-transparent purple and orange shapes are overlaid on the left side of the image.

Ignite a Culture of Walking

A strategic organization-wide effort to promote and support walking may be just what your workforce needs... to build lasting habits for physical and mental/emotional thriving.

Set the Stage

Help engineer a walking-friendly environment:

- **Speak up for improving conditions essential to a healthy workplace.** Right-size workloads, regular breaks, good communication, flexibility, and opportunities for growth/development are just a few factors that support employee and employer well-being.¹⁸ When foundational health and safety elements are embedded in the culture, walking initiatives stand a much better chance of success.
- **Offer walking challenges and events intermittently throughout the year.** From seasonal challenges and charity walks to monthly Biz Walks days and Walk Wednesdays, you have endless ways to get — and keep — employees walking. A full calendar of regular and one-off events helps to make walking part of the workforce ethos and identity.
- **Promote persistently.** It's important to plug walking initiatives through every available channel. Provide talking points to managers. Share the mental/emotional health connection to walking in all communications. Tap the power of wellness ambassadors to help spread the word.
- **Facilitate walking group formation** — onsite, hybrid, or virtual. Looking forward to catching up with coworkers is a natural motivator to keep the habit going. Invite leaders at all levels to participate.

Emphasize Feel-Good Benefits

You'll get more traction by promoting walking enjoyment with ideas like these rather than touting just the mental/emotional health benefits:

- **Encourage outdoor walking** where people can experience the benefits of exposure to nature along with exercise and social time... a triple win
- **Underscore immediate feel-good perks** of physical activity like a brighter mood, more energy, and stress relief — natural magnets for repeat behavior
- **Highlight employee testimonials** of the difference more walking makes in their mental and physical well-being, then share on internal message channels, feature in a display, and use in promotional materials for your next walking challenge.

“

The idea of 10K-A-Day allowed me to interact with my neighbors; I would walk early AM and PM as they cheered me on to keep going. More importantly it reduced my work stress and made me focus less on work and more on my family and well-being after hours.”

Daniel F.
United Rentals
10K-A-Day participant



Inspire

Inspire Stretch Goals

Experiencing the mental/emotional and physical benefits of regular walking requires reaching beyond what employees are already doing:

- **Offer an annual walking-focused wellness challenge** wrapped in a fun theme — like Walktober, Star Trak, 10K-A-Day, or Summertime. A program with team/individual options and multiple levels that participants self-select — like 6000, 8000, or 10,000 steps/day — gives everyone the chance to push themselves and feel the payoffs.
- **Promote or sponsor 5K/10K/12K walking events.** Registering and training with coworkers help strengthen motivation as well as social connection while working toward a shared goal.
- **Spotlight regional walking/hiking trails.** Day hikes are a fun way to be active while enjoying time outdoors with friends and family.



Thrive

Walking Helps Your People Thrive

People want to work for employers that not only communicate care about their physical and mental/emotional health, but actively support it with a mentally/physically safe and healthy work environment:

- **92%** of US workers rated working for an organization that provides mental health support as very (52%) or somewhat (40%) important to them¹⁹
- **67%** of respondents reported 1 or more symptoms associated with burnout, including “lack of interest, motivation, or low energy, feeling lonely or isolated, and a lack of effort at work”²⁰
- **Nearly 80%** of surveyed workers said workplace stress affects their relationships with friends, family, and coworkers; **only 38%** of those who know about their organization’s mental health services would feel comfortable using them.²¹

Wellness leaders can’t fix everything, but investing in an organization-wide effort and fostering a workplace culture of walking can spark employees to maintain this resilience-building habit. In a world of uncertainty, a walking routine is something they can plan on... a daily uplifting gift to feel their best, to thrive in mind and body, on and off the job.



“

First challenge that I ever joined like this, and it was an overall great experience. Some days were challenging but loved the daily tips and recipes, exploring new parts of the world, and the 10k family. Great mental, physical and emotional support! Wish it didn't have to end. Thank you!”

Jackeline R.

Aon

10K-A-Day participant



Winning Workplace Walking Groups

Launching and supporting workplace walking groups couldn't be easier.

Walking groups can be:

- **Spontaneous.** Using internal messaging channels helps make “hey, anyone want to walk at 10:30?” meetups an accepted norm.
- **Organized.** Wellness leaders can get things started with scheduled 15/30-minute breaktime walking groups and making routes/maps available. Once established, these groups can run themselves.
- **Grassroots.** Employees naturally form in-person or virtual walking groups on their own. You can encourage this by sharing tips and testimonials.
- **All of the above.** A combination of walking group choices is helpful to suit different preferences and needs, so anyone interested in walking will have options.

Getting to know colleagues in other departments by walking together helps employees feel more connected — enhancing well-being plus communication and retention. The fun, enjoyment, and feel-good benefits they experience help the mental/emotional health payoffs of walking and social connection spread throughout your organization.



Mental Health and Lifestyle Medicine

The American College of Lifestyle Medicine identifies 6 behavioral pillars as a foundational approach to preventing and managing clinical conditions like heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and obesity. The pillars also play a significant role in mental/emotional well-being and reducing risk for disorders like depression and anxiety:

- **Physical activity** — Making physical activity a consistent part of daily life
- **Nutrition** — Eating a variety of fiber-filled, nutrient-dense, and antioxidant-rich mainly plant foods like whole (as well as minimally processed) vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds
- **Social connections** — Strengthening and maintaining relationships as well as connections with others that enrich life with meaning and purpose
- **Restorative sleep** — Striving for 7-9 hours of high-quality sleep
- **Stress management** — Building a variety of stress-reducing behaviors into everyday life
- **Avoidance of risky substances** — Reducing/eliminating consumption of and exposure to any substances that cause harm through toxicity, addiction, physical damage, or other adverse side effects.

Adapted from American College of Lifestyle Medicine

Scientific evidence points to 2-way influences of mental/physical health within these pillars; health status and health behaviors affect each other.²² That's why ongoing support for walking plus other healthy lifestyle behaviors is integral to any comprehensive workplace mental health effort.

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