

The Walking Cure

Adapted by John Williams from Annie B. Bond's summary of *Walking Your Blues Away*, by Thom Hartmann (Inner Traditions, 2006).

Science is more and more rediscovering what ancient peoples seem to have known—helping the two sides of the brain process a painful memory will put it to rest so that it no longer bothers us in the present.

Sleep is normally the process by which we process a bad experience so that it passes from being a vivid, emotionally charged and distracting memory to an unpleasant recollection that we can revisit if we want but does not intrude on our lives today. (It does this, by the way, during the Rapid Eye Movement phase of sleep, when the eyes quickly go back and forth, integrating the right and left sides of the brain to jointly process memories.)

However, if the painful experience overloaded our nervous system and cannot be processed overnight—this is basically the definition of trauma—then our nervous system can be affected every day afterwards, possibly for decades. Beneath our conscious awareness, we remain on alert to similar threats. This means we can be easily triggered to overreact to life circumstances and other people, and be unduly anxious, stressed and irritable. This tends to wear out our nerves (and our relationships).

Hypnotism, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing and bilateral sounds are all a part of the many side-to-side or bilateral stimulation techniques that are currently being used to help people with complex trauma and anxiety.

Now there is the discovery that walking, as a simple side-to-side movement, can help us work through problems, stress and heal old traumas. It is gentle, safe, effective and can work surprisingly fast. And it is do-it-yourself and costs nothing!

There are five steps to correctly perform a Walking Cure session. They are:

1. Define the issue.

Before going for your walk, consider the issues that are still hanging around in your life that you feel are unresolved. This could range from past traumas, hurts, angers, or embarrassments to relationship issues with people you no longer have access to (including people who have died).

There is no specific right or wrong issue to work with. If you can think of it, visualize it, and get a feeling from it, then you can walk and work with it.

2. Bring up the image and story.

The unpleasant incident or memory has one or more images associated with it. Choose the one that is particularly evocative, that produces the strongest charge. It will probably be strongly colored and may be quite vivid.

You will hold that image in front of you. This is what you will focus on, accompanied by the story and feelings.

Story in this context refers to such thought patterns as “She was cruel towards me” and “You only cared about yourself” and “Why did she have to die?” There is always an internal story, with you and the object of the story at the center, and it’s important to pull that story out so you can say and hear it explicitly.

How would you describe the story to yourself, in your most private and safe space, if you had to boil it down to a few words or a sentence or two?

Notice the strength of the emotional charge associated with this event. If you like, use a scale of 0 (truly don’t care) to 10 (the most intense you have ever felt), to come up with a number to rank the emotional charge connected with this event.

3. Walk with the issue.

Pick a route that is at least a mile long, and ideally two miles. It’s not necessary to find a distraction-free walking area—that’s pretty much impossible.

Rather, the key is to continue to remind yourself to hold your picture and feeling in front of you while walking. When you find your attention wandering, just bring it back to the issue.

This may not always be easy. It can be hard to stay with the painful feelings. To motivate yourself, think of the positive benefits you are aiming for—if this works, wouldn’t it be worth it?

There is no failure here, only feedback. Learn from the feedback and continue on.

4. Notice how the issue changes.

As the emotional attached to a picture and memory changes, its features will change. When people walk with an unpleasant memory, it’s not uncommon for them to say they see it beginning to disintegrate or get dimmer or lose its color or move farther away or even behind them.

Once the change has happened, people notice that the emotion they feel about the picture is now different. It’s still possible to remember the event, but the feeling about the event has changed. The charge may have gone from a 9 to a 3.

Often the story of “I was hurt and it still hurts,” for example, changes to something like “I learned a good lesson from that, even if it was unpleasant.” Present-tense pain becomes past-tense experience.

Let the process proceed until you notice a perceptible shift in feeling. Then ask yourself, “What’s my story about this memory now?”

If the process is complete, you’ll discover that the story you’re telling yourself will be considerably healthier, more resilient, and more useful than the previous story.

5. Anchor the memory.

When the picture is well formed and you notice that your self-told story about the event has changed, anchor this new reality by reviewing it carefully—observe the way the picture has changed, listen to yourself repeat the new internal story, and notice the feelings associated with the new state. Notice all the ways it’s changed.

Think of other ways it may now be useful to you, even helpful. As you’re walking back to your starting point, think about how you’d describe it if you were to choose to tell somebody else about it.

When you get home, consider writing something about your new experience, your new vision, your new story. If you don’t want to write it down, just sit in a quiet and safe place and speak it out loud in private to yourself.

These steps help anchor the new state, fixing it in its new place in your mind and heart, so it will be available to you as a resource—rather than a problem—in the future.

Experiment with this Walking Cure and learn the best way it works for you. If it might help with feeling safe and being better able to focus, invite a trusted friend to accompany you a few steps behind or in front of you as you walk. If you run into any concerns, just consult your therapist.