

Walking at Lunchtime Buffers Against Workplace Stress

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Managers may want to take note: A new study shows that taking a lunchtime walk provides employees with a much-needed afternoon mood boost.

It should come as no surprise that exercise can provide stress-busting benefits to workers, but most research looking at the implications of physical activity in the workplace has relied on people's reports of how they felt days, weeks, or even months ago.

A team of researchers led by psychological scientist Cecilie Thøgersen-Ntoumani of Curtin University in Australia made use of a specially designed cell phone app to gauge the changes in people's mood in the moment, in an attempt to get a more accurate picture of how exercise influences mood throughout the workday.

A group of 75 members of a university's administrative staff was recruited to participate in a workplace walking program. Nearly all of the participants were female, and all were classified as physically inactive—currently getting less than the recommended 150 minutes a week of moderate physical activity.

Half the participants were randomly assigned to immediately begin the 16-week lunchtime walking intervention, while the other half was assigned to a delayed treatment condition that would begin the walking intervention later in the year.

At the outset of the experiment, all of the participants completed a baseline questionnaire on their current levels of physical fitness and mood at work.

For 10 weeks, participants took part in 30-minute group-led walks during their lunch break. The walks were all self-paced and more than one walk was scheduled for each session, allowing participants flexibility in choosing a particular walking group. Designated walk leaders kept detailed attendance records for each walk.

After the initial 10 week section ended, participants were asked to keep walking on their own schedules for another 6 weeks.

Each participant was given a cell phone programmed with automatic alarms—once in the morning and once in the afternoon after lunch—to remind them to complete a twice-daily questionnaire on their mood at that moment, their workload that day, feelings of fatigue, and how motivated they felt about work.

Analysis of the responses showed that those who took a lunchtime walk were more relaxed and less stressed at work compared to the non-walking control group. On walking days people said they felt less tense and more relaxed and enthusiastic about work than on their non-walking days.

In addition, walking had a significant influence on people's mood as the day progressed; on days that people took a walk, they felt considerably more enthusiastic and relaxed at work during the afternoon even compared to their mood on the same day in the morning before the walk.

“Walking therefore seems to have both energizing and relaxing properties in the workplace, which supports the main hypothesis of the study,” Thøgersen-Ntoumani writes in the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*.

A follow-up study published in the journal *Mental Health and Physical Activity* found that lunchtime walkers also perceived that their work performance improved after their walk. The positive changes were surprisingly long-lasting—walking-related gains in work performance and mood were reported up to four months after the official intervention had concluded.

One explanation for why a short stroll packs such a mood-elevating punch is that taking a walk may help people mentally recover during the day, replenishing depleted mental resources and helping people cope with stress. In addition to the exercise itself, Thøgersen-Ntoumani and colleagues suggest that socializing during the walks may also have provided a mood boost.

Given that previous research has found that affective experiences at work are linked to workplace performance, these results may have broader implications for the success of companies. However, as workplace productivity was not measured directly, future research should specifically investigate the influence of physical activity on performance.

References

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