

The Emotional Benefits of Wandering

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One of my greatest pleasures is to be what the French call a “flâneur”—someone who wanders randomly through a big city, stumbling on new scenes. The flâneur has a long and honored literary history. The surrealists used to choose a Paris streetcar at random, ride to the end of the line and then walk around. And think of Mrs. Dalloway in London, Leopold Bloom in Dublin or Holden Caulfield in New York. But is there any scientific evidence for the benefit of “street-haunting,” as Virginia Woolf called it?

Two new studies led by Catherine Hartley of New York University and colleagues suggest that being a flâneur is good for you. In both, they cleverly combined GPS data with happiness ratings. The [first study](#) appeared in the journal Nature Neuroscience in 2020. Over 100 people in New York and Miami agreed to share their phone’s GPS data for three months, and they regularly rated their mood on an app. The researchers analyzed the GPS data with a measure called “roaming entropy,” which captures how new, varied and unexpected your locations are, and compared it with the mood ratings. More roaming entropy predicted more well-being. What’s more, how much you wandered on a given day predicted how happy you were later on, but not vice versa. So it looks as if wandering makes you happy, not just that when you’re happy you wander more.

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