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Authors	Palmer, Stephen;Di Blasi, Zelda
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Reflections on walking for enhancing creativity and wellbeing: a way forward for coaching and coaching psychology practice



Prof Stephen Palmer PhD is Co-ordinating Director of the ISCP International Centre for Coaching Psychology Research



Dr Zelda Di Blasi is a chartered psychologist and co-director and trainer of a Masters in Coaching Psychology at University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract

Coaching has been defined as ‘a partnering with clients in a thought provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential’ (ICF, nd). As coaches and coaching psychologists, understanding how to maximize creativity and inspiration is an important skill. A potentially powerful and innovative way to do this is by walking with our coachees outdoors in natural environments ie nature. In this brief article we review the evidence to highlight how walking side-by-side can potentially optimize coaching sessions.

Key words: *creativity, wellbeing ecopsychology, coaching and walking*

Throughout history philosophers, writers and scientists used walking as a way to gather their thoughts. For example, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal on August 19th, 1851: “Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow”. Friedrich Nietzsche (1889) noted that “All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking”. Charles Darwin walked on his “thinking path” and more recently, Steve Jobs would take long walks to have serious conversations.

Considering the importance of innovation and engagement in businesses, it is paradoxical that people spend an average of 9.3 hours per day sitting down indoors (Merchant, nd). Excessive sitting decreases creativity and negatively affects our physical and mental health. Advances in technology, commuting and screen-based entertainment have created sedentary lifestyles which have been linked to chronic illness, stress and low

energy (Magnon, Vallet, & Auxiette, 2018; Owen, 2012). Along with sitting down excessively, it is important to consider the effect of air quality in meeting rooms and its effect on performance, learning and safety. In one study, 24 people were tested over six days in environmentally controlled office spaces. CO₂ exposure was found to affect cognitive function, including strategising, focus, decision making, and the capacity to understand new information (Joseph et al., 2015).

Encouraging employees to move around more at work is becoming increasingly recognised and the use of standing desks and treadmill desks is growing. Recently, research has focused on assessing how increasing employee (movement) activity at work influences wellbeing and performance (Jirathananuwat & Pongpirul, 2017), for example evaluating the use of activity trackers (Freak-Poli, Cumpston, Peeters, & Clemes, 2013), and comparing the effects of walking treadmill desks with sitting or standing desks (MacEwen, MacDonald, & Burr, 2015). Shaefer and colleagues (2010) conducted an experiment with children and young adults. They found that all participants significantly performed a memory exercise better while walking on a treadmill at their own pace, rather than sitting (Shaefer, Lövdén, Wieckhorst, & Lindenberger, 2010).

Alongside the activity research are findings suggesting that walking outside increases our creativity (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014), and walking in natural environments ie countryside is more restorative than walking in urban areas (Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008). A systematic review of 25 studies found that

natural environments had direct and positive impacts on wellbeing even with short-term exposure (Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010).

A more effective way to increase physical activity at work are walking meetings. These are now being prescribed by Public Health England (PHE) as a potential cure to chronic sedentarism in the workplace (see Usborne, 2017). Walking, particularly walking in nature, is particularly important.

Due to our lifestyles we spend more and more time commuting, living in cities and spending most of our days indoors. Spending time in nature has been shown to improve our levels of wellbeing. Empirical evidence links exposure to nature with decreases in stress (Wooller, Rogerson, Barton, Micklewright, & Gladwell, 2018), reducing mental fatigue (Berman et al., 2008, 2012), and increasing energy or vitality (Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski, 2014; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). In a systematic review evaluating the effects of connecting with nature, flourishing and happiness those who were more connected to nature were found to experience more positive affect, vitality, and life satisfaction compared to those less connected to nature (Capaldi et al., 2014). In a new study of almost 20,000 participants, those who spent 2 hours or more in nature a week reported significantly better health and wellbeing (White et al., 2019).

In a classic study, Oppezzo and Schwartz (2014) demonstrated that walking outside can stimulate creative thinking. Divergent thinking involved asking participants to find alternate uses for everyday objects like car tyres. Convergent thinking required participants to complete Remote Associates tasks, by thinking of the one word that

forms a common pairing with three other words. In their experiment, adults completed a test of creative divergent thinking (GAU) and a test of convergent thinking (CRA) either while seated and then when walking on a treadmill. Walking increased most of participants' creativity on the GAU, but only increased 23% of participants' scores for the CRA. When seated after walking, participants exhibited a residual creative boost.

In a final experiment participants sat inside, walked on a treadmill inside, walked outside, or were rolled outside in a wheelchair. Walking outside produced the most novel and highest quality analogies, separating the effects of outdoor stimulation and walking.

In applying these findings to coaching, when brainstorming and generating possibilities, walking outside is likely to be more effective. But perhaps when dealing with tasks that require reaching consensus and finding a single best answer, sitting may be a better choice.

Coaches often act as partners in a journey where they help coachees identify the next steps and the actions needed to move forward towards their goals. A recent review article in the *American Psychologist* proposed that walking side-by-side involves some coordination of rhythms, resulting in a synchrony of steps and increasing affiliation and a sense of connectedness (Webb, Rossignac-Milon, & Higgins, 2017). Eytan (see Clayton, Thomas, & Smothers, 2015) has suggested that walking meetings may lead to better employee engagement by breaking down barriers between supervisor and subordinate or between co-workers.

In an exploratory study of 150 working

adults in the US, those who participated in walking meetings were found to be 5.25% more likely to report being creative in their job, and were 8.5% more likely to report high levels of engagement at work (Clayton et al., 2015).

A mere 12 minutes of walking was found to increase happiness, vigor, and attentiveness significantly more than the same time spent sitting. This was found whether participants had no expectations about the aims of the study, and whether they expected walking to have a negative impact on their mood (Miller & Krizan, 2016).

Kuo and Yeh (2016) examined the effects of either walking in a rectangular area or wandering freely within the area in young college students and older adult. The free walking group outperformed the rectangle walkers on the creativity task. Meandering freely rather than having a rigid path may be more useful to activate creativity. The implication of their findings is that if a leader or a coach sets the course and the coachee follows, the benefits of walking may not be as effective in terms of increasing divergent thinking.

Although research studies have found that there are wellbeing benefits when undertaking green exercise, a recent study has found that the type of exercise can influence the outcomes. Using a mixed-methods study design to compare psychological responses between two forms of green exercise, golf and walking, Fraser, Munoz, and MacRury (2019) found that only the walking condition significantly improved in a directed attention test. In addition, using the Exercise-Induced Feeling Inventory questionnaire they found no

significant improvements in the golf condition whereas the walking condition demonstrated increases in all four subscales.

The qualitative analysis highlighted that when playing golf, natural elements could be perceived as obstacles to effective performance whereas the walking group found that natural stimuli could evoke positive feelings.

Theory to practice

Based on research, encouraging people to be more physically active in the workplace and in their leisure periods too, can enhance physical and psychological wellbeing and also increase creativity. Within health and wellbeing coaching (see Williams, Palmer, & Gyllensten, 2019), it is very likely that increasing physical activity and exercise will be coaching goals. However, these coaching goals may occur less frequently in personal, managerial and executive coaching. Perhaps at the goal setting stage, the practitioner could offer suggestions which includes wellbeing-related goals or introduce the idea that coaching does not always need to be within the coaching room or office especially if creativity is required.

Di Blasi and associates (2018) undertook an ecopsychology inspired research study

exploring the effects of walking in a natural environment with sitting coaching in an organisational setting. 'Walk and talk' coaching was found to decrease negative affect and increase self-esteem, and there were large effect sizes for coaching and perceived management care, self-efficacy, positive affect and stress. Employees also reported that it had improved their relationship with the manager.

O'Riordan and Palmer (2019) reported on two studies using outdoor coaching formats undertaken with delegates attending two coaching conferences. Participants were encouraged to undertake a short 'walk and talk' coaching session involving a blue space outdoor-based activity. In both studies the participants self-reported wellbeing and vitality scores improved following coaching in a natural setting.

Conclusion

This paper looked at a number of studies relating to creativity and walking. It linked the potential benefits of increased physical activity such as walking and suggested that it could be integrated within coaching. More research is required into the benefits of walking in natural environments or urban parks whilst coaching.

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Biographies

Stephen Palmer is Professor of Practice at the Wales Academy for Professional Practice and Applied Research, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. He is Co-ordinating Director of the ISCP International Centre for Coaching Psychology Research. His other roles include being Director of the Centre for Coaching, London. He is interested in how ecopsychology research findings can inform positive and coaching psychology practice in order to improve the wellbeing of employees and also communities.

Email: president@isfcp.net

Dr Zelda Di Blasi is a Chartered Psychologist and co-director and trainer of a Masters in Coaching Psychology at University College Cork where she lectures in Positive and Health Psychology. Zelda has an Advanced Diploma in Personal, Leadership, Executive Coaching and is an Honorary Research Fellow of the International Centre for Coaching Psychology Research.

Email: Z.diBlasi@ucc.ie