

ACTION:

The *Action* section—you guessed it—is about taking action. Your brain is in high gear from the inspiration our fitness experts doled out. Your body is properly fueled with nutrient-dense plant foods. Now it's time to get moving! This section speaks to the myriad ways people can get fit.



Walking toward Fitness

for Folks of All Ages and from All Walks of Life

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Food is highly overrated. It is hardly the most important contributor to optimal health. Exercise is a more important factor than food, and peace of mind is more important than exercise. Someone who consumes beer and franks with cheer and thanks probably will feel better than someone who eats pears or sprouts with fears or doubts.

If we were to rate one type of food as more nourishing than any other, that likely would be chlorophyll. Similarly, if we were to rank one form of exercise above any other, that likely would be walking. While calisthenics, aerobics, gymnastics, athletics, aquatics, and even acrobatics may build greater strength or endurance, we hardly engage in any of those as consistently as we do walking. Indeed, walking is what gets us from home to gym to track to pool and then back home again. Walking is our most ancient mode of transportation, and our simplest. By the time you are two years old, your walking needs no further guidance or practice. By the time you are three, you are a master. As a master walker, you do not need walking shoes or running shoes or any shoes. All you need are your two feet.

Bicycle riding and jogging are but impatient forms of walking. Many hurried urban joggers take taxis to the park or drive cars to the track where, gerbil-like, they run around and around in circles. If they had walked to the park or track, they could have dispensed not only with cabs and cars, but with the track as well. Whether we briskly walk a mile in 16 minutes, or run it in six, we have cov-

ered the same distance, and that is what counts. If we go the extra mile, we gain regardless of speed. The bottom line is the finish line, not the stop watch.

Speeding to stop signs and rushing to red lights, ours is a nation of car cripples. When not stuck in traffic, our cars clutter seemingly endless parking lots. And when Mr. Lazy Bones parks in a space reserved for the handicapped, he cheats not only the disabled; he deprives himself of the pleasures and benefits of walking, and consequently cheats himself of happiness and health.

The health benefits of walking are well documented. Walking at a moderate pace for merely half an hour daily will boost your energy and stimulate your metabolism and circulation throughout your day. It can also lower your blood pressure and reduce the risk of diabetes and osteoporosis throughout your life. Going for a walk even guards against stress and depression. Just thinking about *not* walking should be enough to make anyone feel depressed.

For Thoreau, walking was a journey both on land and in the mind. In his essay titled *Walking*, published exactly 150 years ago, Thoreau explains that every walk is akin to a crusade,

and that the verb “to saunter” is derived from French for pilgrims en route to the *sainte terre*, walkers to the Holy Land. “It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker.” He further expounds upon the spiritual dimensions of walking which set it apart from mere exercises such as “the swinging of dumbbells.” Expressed in the lingo of our own rude times, dumbbells are for dummies.

No need to work out when you can walk. In this regard, mine is the voice of experience. Walking is as much a workout for me as is running for you. For the past 20 years, my manner of walking has included the use of my upper body, as would cross-country skiing, but without the skis. Let me explain.

I have hiked to several mountaintops, and the Grand Canyon from rim to river to rim, incidentally all while fasting, effectively walking on water. Then at age 39, I attempted a daredevil dive into a river, and the devil outdid my dare. I was paralyzed below the waist. Aging for most of us is a gradual process, its increments so creeping that we barely notice. But I experienced the rare event of instant old age, as though when I emerged from that river I had turned 99. **CONT'D ON P. 60**

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Contrary to bogus claims of miraculous recoveries by major league athletes, the degree of recovery from spinal cord injury is determined during the first eight hours after impact. After that, all one can do is hasten one's rate of recovery. In rehab, I first began to creep, then to crawl, then to inch forward with the aid of a metal walker. Nine months after injury, I began to walk with leg braces and crutches. Health and stamina contribute to one's rate of recovery; and my high raw vegan diet contributed then, as now, to my health and stamina. Indeed, I grew sprouts and greens even in my hospital room. While I relinquish my title as the world's healthiest and fittest vegetarian, I instead lay claim to being the world's healthiest and fittest paraplegic. And my sole exercise remains walking.

As we age, we can expect to lose muscle mass, and likely will need

to limit our activities; for instance, eventually we no longer will be able to skydive, or to hike the Grand Canyon from rim to river to rim, or to run a marathon, or even to walk a marathon. If we become so infirm that we can walk only from bedroom to bathroom to bedroom, walking will remain the one activity to which we will cling until the very end of our lives.

We need not be the fittest athlete on the block or at our game or in our class or for our age; we need be merely fit enough.

As we age, we will walk and fall and walk and fall. But better to walk and fall than to no longer try to walk at all. As a born-again pedestrian, I can attest that walking provides one of

my greatest joys in life. Often taking stairs rather than nearby elevators, I surprise and embarrass those who take the elevators. While my gait with crutches and leg braces is far from graceful, nevertheless I walk. Twenty-one years post-injury, I continue hiking hills and valleys.

The Darwinian doctrine of *The Survival of the Fittest* is thought by many contemporary biologists to be a misnomer. An individual need not be the fittest member of its species to survive. Rather, one need be only fit enough. Thus, biologists today discuss The Survival of the Fit Enough. Occasionally we may "pig out" on too much food, or sometimes "slack off" with too little exercise. While we may aspire toward 100 percent perfection, achieving only 90 percent can be quite enough. We need not be the fittest athlete on the block or at our game or in our class or for our age; we need be merely fit enough. 