

## Ladies, walk it off (the angst too)

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"It's a yellow magnolia." There are two of them, twin flowering trees on a manicured lawn. "I thought magnolias were pink." "They have yellow ones now," my friend informs me.

It figures. We are power walking through Rosedale. In this moneyed Toronto neighbourhood, everything can be what you want it to be. Trees are art. Addresses are pedigree. Cars are sex. We don't break our stride. We are breathing deeply, and not from annoyance. The arms pump.

The feet step quickly. What we encounter and observe is all part of the enjoyment and bemusement of walking through the city, through its ravines and the deep divides of cultural and socioeconomic preoccupations.

You may have mastered walking as a one-year-old, but suddenly it seems new. Doctors are prescribing it. The government is encouraging it through its Canada *in motion* program. Kellogg's promoted it on Special K cereal boxes. Free pedometers inside! It's as if we have rediscovered the locomotion that helps define our species.

The health benefits are incentive enough. Regular walking is an effective cardiovascular exercise that's easy to do. It helps manage several health issues, including obesity, high cholesterol, arthritis and diabetes. Recently, research published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute showed that women (12 to 35 years old) who ran 3.25 hours or walked 13 hours a week reduced their risk of breast cancer by 23%.

Not that we do it just for our breasts, arteries (and derrieres). There's a nostalgia to walking as exercise - a return to life observed in real time without the filter of some technological device or media outlet. It's like being on a train, watching fields, mountains and streams slide by, only you're seated in the engine of your body and the landscape in motion is diverse social anthropology. No fancy equipment is necessary - it's you, your feet and the pavement; a pedestrian activity in every sense of the word.

But the new ambulatory trend - or pedestrianism, the name of a sport that caught the public's imagination in the 19th century (all about how far how fast) - can best be attributed to health-conscious boomers.

"No one is running any more. It happened about five years ago," says Barb Gormley, a fitness trainer in Toronto. "Everybody is power walking. Walking is easier on the joints and can be done well into one's dotage. "I have clients who want to be exercising until they're 100," she says.

The boomers, groomed for competition in every aspect of their lives, have attacked it with their usual zeal. What is a pedometer if not a way to compare your accomplishment with others or, better yet, with yourself?

But walking can be seen as so much more than just exercise. A midlife woman striding through the streets purposefully? That may look like ordinary exercise, but it reminds me of modern womanhood itself - a state of always being in between destinations: home and office; your girlfriend's birthday party, your husband's business function, little Bobby's Grade 4 play and the yoga class that will save your sanity.

It's where women often are psychologically, too, wondering which identity (mother? wife? sister? professional?) they want to inhabit each day. Still, the modern woman manages all these transitions at her own pace. And most important, she keeps going and going, in the full swing of mature, responsible life. From a practical point of view, the activity suits women perfectly. It allows for multitasking. We can shave off calories while we talk - the essential remedy for processing the complexity of our lives. We are walking off some pounds; the stupid thing our partner said last night; the worry that maybe our son really doesn't know what he is doing at university; what to do about our car that smells funny in third gear and the fact our boss doesn't seem to get it that we could burn out at any minute if he doesn't let up.

Sure, we may look a little silly - arms and legs pumping in an exaggerated walking motion, like characters in a sped-up animated film - but who cares? That's the beauty of midlife. You don't worry so much what others think of you.

Which is not to say that men don't walk. They do - with their dogs and maybe their wives. But when was the last time you heard of a man phoning up his male friend and saying, "Want to go for a power walk in the park?" It's not a guy thing to do. They might think it's wimpy. Far more manly is a trip to the gym or a run, which suggests Superman qualities - strength, endurance, alacrity. And what man feels compelled to talk about his life?

Power walking compromises the masculine image. But here's the good news - there is only one good prescription for working through such heavy-duty issues as what people expect of you because of gender. Join the sisterhood, brother, and walk it off.

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### Tips for power walking

"There is a technique to effective power walking," says Barb Gormley, a fitness trainer in Toronto. "It is different than a brisk walk."

- Bend arms at the elbow in a 90-degree angle. Arms need to act like pistons at your side, pumping back and forth.
- Lift ribcage up. Lengthen the waist. This action engages the core muscles, which help you walk faster.
- No need to stretch in the beginning. Walk slowly for 20 minutes to warm up, then increase pace. Afterward, do a good stretch. A power walk should give the glutes and hamstrings a thorough workout.
- Around the block is good, but challenge yourself to go farther and faster to gain strength and stability.
- Keep eyes up. As soon as the eyes are cast downward, the shoulders have a tendency to roll.
- Keep hands in a loose fist, not clenched. Pretend you are holding a potato chip between your thumb and forefinger. The hands are one of few places in the body - along with face and neck - that can remain relaxed during a power walk.
- Move quickly with short strides, for maximum calorie burn. Push off with the ball of the foot, so you are propelled forward. Pretend you are pushing the road behind you.