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Practice

Walk to think: what a Stanford study found about walking and creativity

The experiments of Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz (2014), why walking helped with new ideas but not with problems that have a single answer, and how to use it at work

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The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that all truly great thoughts are conceived while walking. Many writers, scientists and artists have described similar habits. But is this just a personal feeling, or an effect that can be measured?

The experiments

In 2014 the psychologists Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz of Stanford University carried out four experiments. In one of the main tests, participants had to come up with as many new uses as possible for an everyday object, for example a key or a tyre. This is a well-known measure of **divergent thinking**, the ability to generate many different ideas.

Participants took the test sitting and walking. The results were clear: while walking, most participants produced noticeably more original ideas, in some experiments about 60 per cent more. The effect appeared both when walking outdoors in fresh air and when walking on a treadmill facing a blank wall in a room. So it was not only the view or nature; walking itself helped.

The effect that continues

The researchers also found that when participants sat down after walking, their creativity stayed higher for a while. Walking seemed to "warm up" the mind.

Where it did not help

Walking did not help with **convergent thinking** tasks, where a single correct answer must be found, as in some word puzzles. For these, sitting and concentrating may be more useful.

> *When you are looking for many ideas, walk. When you have to choose one, sit down.*

The limits

The participants were mostly students, and the tests were short. We do not know how much walking helps with long creative projects. But the experiment is simple and you can try it yourself at no cost.

How to use it

1. **Walking meetings** for new ideas, with one or two colleagues.
2. **When you are stuck on a problem,** go out for a 10–15-minute walk before trying again.
3. **Take a way of noting things down,** your phone or a notebook, so ideas are not lost.
4. **Separate the phases:** ideas while walking, evaluation and choice at the desk.

Sources

Oppezzo, M. & Schwartz, D. L. (2014). Give your ideas some legs: The positive effect of walking on creative thinking. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 40(4), 1142–1152. WorldCat

Nietzsche, F. (1889). *Twilight of the Idols*. Project Gutenberg. gutenberg.org

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