

Walking and Natural Grace

We have all witnessed the beauty of an excellent athletic or dance performance with a sense of awe. The same experience can also be triggered by just seeing someone with really good posture walking loosely, lightly, fluidly, and with a sense of effortlessness. What is it that sets this kind of movement apart from less esthetically pleasing movement?

The answer to this questions lies in the qualities we perceive and how they impact us. It is the power that resides in the lightness, freedom of movement and ease that resonates with something in us directly.



Any one of us could walk like this kind of ease and effortlessness, but instead we often find ourselves feeling heavy, tired, with stiff muscles and painful joints, even after walking only one or two miles.



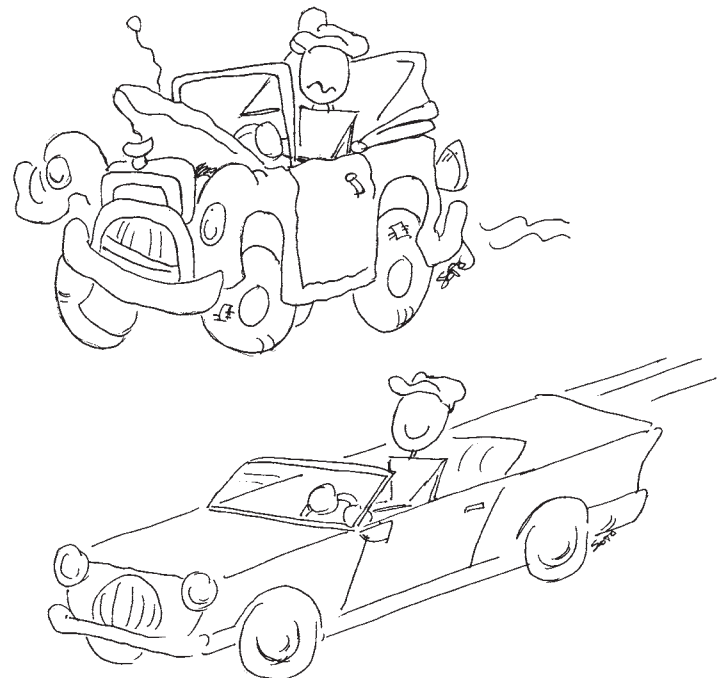
We take walking for granted, and don't realize that there may be a better way to do it. It doesn't occur to us that we could have a hand in mastering this mundane everyday movement.

As a physical therapist I work with lots of people: some are injured due to the way that they use their bodies, others are athletes that want to improve



their performance, and then there are people that just want to feel better in what they do. With most people, I start with the most fundamental movement-walking. As a person learns to walk correctly, they begin to learn how easy it is to transfer those skills to other sports and activities.

Since we all do so much walking, it is in our best interest do it in the most efficient manner possible. This enables us to: save energy, decrease wear and tear on the body and joints, avoid "garden variety" overuse injuries (such as shin splints, low back, hip, knee or foot pain), and most importantly, discover the joy that lies in achieving our health and fitness goals. We can trade in the bumpy ride for a new smooth ride.



Underlying effortless movement are a few principles that are fundamental to learning the specific skills associated with

walking. And the good news is that these skills are easily learned. The clumsy, the gifted and all the rest of us can benefit from walking correctly.

Eliminating Unnecessary Movement

There are two kinds of unnecessary efforts. The first are the out of symmetry movements, like a torso that sways side to side. The second kind is the excess tension/grip that we hold in our skeletal muscles. Both of these unnecessary efforts cause us to be inefficient and apply too much unnecessary force to all sorts of things we do. Including simple everyday things like brushing our teeth or walking. This results in all sorts of aches and pains in muscles, ligaments, joints and tendons.

Getting Grounded

Try this simple exercise: Stand fully upright, find the place on the bottom of your feet where your weight falls midway between the heels and balls of the feet. When you find this place relax your feet so that they can spread out a little. Next, relax your lower abdominal muscles and then your pelvic floor muscles. Keeping these areas relaxed, take a deep breath filling up your abdomen, chest and shoulder area. On the out-breath relax, soften your chest and let the muscles of your torso drop as if they were draping your bones. If you maintain a fully upright posture, your skeleton, and not your muscles will now be doing more of the work of holding you up. Take a short walk and focus on keeping yourself relaxed down into the ground. You may discover that you feel heavier and lighter at the same time, the paradox of being more grounded. Pain and injury

is often caused by not being grounded in our movement, and at the same time can be resolved by learning how to ground out. Being grounded helps us to identify and release the excess and unnecessary tension in our muscles.

CORE WALKING or Efforting from the Right Place

Each muscle of the body has its job description. If it is called upon to do all or part of another muscle's work, it eventually rebels in the form of tightness and pain somewhere. Using the right muscles for the job of walking means learning how to access the large muscles of our core for power production, and allowing the quads, hamstrings, and calves to relax and be good helpers.

Try this: Alternate marching and walking, while letting your legs relax. Pay careful attention to the role of the hips and visualize your movement as originating from your center. Practicing this can help protect and free up the knees.



Learning how to walk correctly can give us miles and miles of pleasure. When we become relaxed and fluid we are able to recycle effort and energy. Then we can become energy efficient and injury resistant!

Douglas Wisoff is a Physical Therapist with a private practice in Boulder. He specializes in posture and movement education. He can be reached at 303 447-9939. or visit his website at: www.radianrunning.com