

Learn how to walk off stress

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UAE residents are only walking half the distance they should, says a major local property developer - an average of only 5,500 steps a day, instead of the medically recommended 10,000.

Yes, a research programme using pedometers has revealed this serious shortfall in the kind of sensible exercise that controls weight, improves work-quality, makes us into more relaxed and resilient, and saves lost working days as well as reducing visits to doctors.

If you haven't got your pedometer handy, you can check the length of these familiar journeys in Dubai to help you visualise the distances. Gold Souq to Deira Old Souq (Arba Street) 1,502 steps. BurJuman to Dubai Museum 2,153 steps. Jumeirah Beach Residence (end to end) 3,988 steps. Safa Park (perimeter) 4,175 steps.

Familiar excuses include high outdoor temperatures (but only for three months), and new developments that don't provide convenient walking routes (but do provide air-conditioned malls big enough to allow at least a good hour of leisurely exploration).

Although walking has often been regarded as the 'kid brother' of serious training-runs, some European experts believe that a brisk walk has surprisingly similar effects on circulation and blood pressure.

Working from a huge sample over many years, I've noticed that most people in need of stress counselling take far less exercise than they should, and I have achieved good results by recommending regular walking, to many of my clients.

However, it is worth remembering that when older people start exercising again after many years of physical inactivity, they need to start again very slowly, building resistance gradually.

One of my clients was an ex-rugby player, who became banqueting manager of an international airline. As part of the job, he was given a full set of formal business suits, including two dinner-jackets.

However, being so close to tempting food all day tempted him to over-indulge, and soon he was bursting out of his clothes. He was too embarrassed to request a new set, and it brought the message home to him, vividly, that he been out-of-training for too long.

Unwisely, he plunged straight back into a hard exercise regime and as a result tore one of his tendons. The damage was so bad that he was told it would never entirely heal.

This was a bad psychological blow - he called it 'dying a little', but I put it to him that middle-age had merely arrived slightly ahead of time. However, anyone who excels in a young man's game is going to have to face up to physical and mental change as the years pass.

Gradually I was able to persuade him to come to terms with his new self, and also accept that banqueting managers do have a special need to avoid getting trapped into dangerous over-eating and drinking.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of the Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

Key points: Stepping up to task

- You should make a point of walking at least 10,000 steps a day.
- A brisk walk is probably better for most, than hard exercise. n Individual lifestyles need to compensate for an unhealthy job environment.