



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Ontario

Reference Guide for Community-Led Walking Programs

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Welcome

For more than a decade, Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario (CMHA Ontario) worked closely with community partners across the province to offer Mood Walks to members in their local communities. Led by CMHA Ontario, in collaboration with Hike Ontario and Conservation Ontario, the program was launched in 2013 to promote the physical, mental and social health benefits of walking in nature.

At the close of the program on June 30, 2026, Mood Walks was being offered by more than 60 community partners in over 80 walking locations across Ontario. These partners included community mental health agencies, social services organizations, and a range of others such as family health teams, community health centres, libraries, parks and recreation centres, and post-secondary institutions.

While CMHA Ontario is no longer supporting the Mood Walks program, partners are encouraged to continue offering their own community-based walking program to benefit participants and their organizations.

It is hoped that this reference guidebook will support the ongoing management of your program. Within it are best practices for delivering a safe, effective and inclusive community walking program, along with key activities to help sustain engagement with participants.

We thank you for your ongoing commitment to supporting community mental health.

Good luck and keep walking!

CMHA Ontario

Safe Hike Training

Before launching any community-led walking program, it's a good idea to consider the type of training you will be offering your staff and volunteers to ensure that they are leading safe and inclusive hikes.

Hike Ontario offers many types of training needed to prepare your team for leading safe walks. They have developed standards and training programs for hike leaders that are used by community colleges, universities, hiking clubs and outdoor training organizations for course delivery. Currently, Hike Ontario offers Safe Hiker, Certified Hike Leader, Wilderness Day Hike Leader and Wilderness Trip Hike Leader training courses. At present, there are over 500 certified hike leaders from across Canada who have taken the Hike Ontario Certification program.

These courses are recommended by Hike Ontario for any individuals and/or groups interested in leading organized hikes and walks in Ontario. They are excellent forums for learning some of the necessary and important tools in leading hikes or walks.

For more information or to get in touch with Hike Ontario, please visit hikeontario.com.

Find Partners

You may consider seeking partnerships with other community organizations. Through partnerships, you can work together to offer more participants the opportunity to join your walking group. This would expand your capacity and where you can cross promote and co-facilitate walks.

Finding Funding

Now that you have started a successful walking group, what's next? Perhaps your group wants to branch out and try something new, like urban poling, geocaching, or incorporating a strength training or flexibility component. Perhaps your group wants to meet more frequently or expand its membership. Making these changes may require funding!

Funding agencies are a source of revenue. The application process can vary according to the amount of work involved and the time of year that funding decisions are made. Before you apply or spend a lot of time writing your proposal, be sure to contact the funder to make sure your program is eligible. Many funders will also be happy to provide advice to help you strengthen your application.

Some funders look for applications that include strong partnerships with other community organizations. Partners can provide in-kind resources that take some pressure off your budget. They can also make your program more sustainable by reducing your reliance on one-time funding sources.

Here are some places to look for funding sources and grants:

- Charity Village lists a number of funding agencies and foundations of interest to nonprofit organizations (charityvillage.com/directories/funders).
- Community foundations across Canada focus on funding community vitality in a broad sense; learn more at cfc-fcc.ca.
- A list of Funding Opportunities in Ontario for Physical Activity, Nutrition and Environmental Initiatives created in 2010 by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario can be found at otf.ca.

You could also consider a fundraising initiative that promotes physical activity. A group challenge such as a walk-a-thon, dance-a-thon, or golf tournament can engage participants and attract individual donors or organizational sponsors.

Making a Walking Group Your Own

Organizational and environmental factors such as staffing, resources, skill set, geographical location, and cultural environment will influence how your group develops. Your group will be more effective if it's tailored to meet the needs of the participant. Encourage participants to take ownership by involving them in developing the group's identity and contributing to any plans or changes within the group.

Keeping Participants Engaged

Staying committed to physical activity is challenging for everyone. To reap the benefits of a walking group, participants will need to stay motivated and committed. This section outlines some strategies for helping your participants stick with it.

Leading an Inclusive Group

A successful group is one that ensures all participants feel included and positive about their involvement. Here are some tips to ensure all participants stay safe and feel like a valued member of the group.

Be Aware of Common Barriers

Commonly cited reasons for not exercising include:

- lack of energy
- lack of motivation
- a dislike of exercise
- competing priorities
- general poor health or mobility concerns that make exercise difficult
- transportation challenges

Recent evidence suggests that, aside from cost barriers, individuals living with mental health challenges most commonly discontinue participation due to the following factors:

- The group did not fit into their schedule
- They did not feel a sense of social connection with the group
- Injury

Individualizing your Group

Ask participants to suggest walking routes or vote on the routes your group will take. Create a bulletin board or virtual blog where you can display group accomplishments, news articles related to walking, or physical activity guidelines.

Ask the group to suggest possible names for the group and then vote on a winner.

Look for peer leader opportunities. A participant may feel comfortable leading the group walk one day, or leading some aspects of the group, such as a stretch or a warmup. A participant may also be interested in creating a schedule for your walking group, acting as a group sponsor/spokesperson to connect with other people who may be interested in joining, or maintaining the bulletin/virtual board.

Between sessions

Conducting constant check-ins between sessions can be helpful. Consider setting up a way to communicate with participants, to ask questions about course content or to talk about their experience between the sessions. These can include emails, separate 1:1 meetings, conference calls or virtual chats.

Be sure participants agree in writing to share their personal contact information. Joining such groups has more risk related to privacy, boundary setting, raising out-of-scope topics, and should remain optional if participants don't feel comfortable with the process.

Follow-up emails

Sending out emails between sessions might be a way to keep participants motivated. It might also be a way to remind people who've missed a session to come back, follow-up on topics that were discussed during a session, and share times and dates for upcoming walks.

Activity Discussions

If you feel that your group is needing additional support and the tone of a group session is becoming too heavy or unpleasant, try bringing the conversation around to a lighter subject or give them a rest break. If a participant continues to talk about a specific subject when you are running low on session time, or other participants appear to be uncomfortable, acknowledge that their contribution is valuable but that you may need to discuss it with them in private after the session.

Dealing With Distress

Participants should have realistic expectations of what the program is not about. This may be clarified during any orientation session which gives the program facilitator an opportunity to better understand the participants' requirements and make changes to their walking program.

If a participant gets very upset or is triggered during a session, **be sure to have additional resources available on hand who can provide the necessary supports**. A co-facilitator can help you manage any difficulties. When speaking one-on-one with a participant, ask about weekend plans or pets. When on a walk, focus on neutral subjects that help build trust before discussing personal issues or making suggestions about additional help.

Ensure you and your organization have a plan for dealing with unforeseen incidents. The course is designed to be fun and fits on the early intervention spectrum of mental health programs.

Tips to Consider:

Familiarize yourself with your organization's protocol around safety and have local resources available. Since you are facilitating your program in public, you need to consider all possible scenarios and the most appropriate solutions.

Participant Confidentiality

A participant may disclose something that needs to be shared with external agencies. You should contact a mental health professional or another professional if someone discloses that they:

1. Are being abused or at risk of being abused.
2. Plan to harm themselves.
3. Have harmed or plan to harm, or fear that they will harm someone else.

Attracting Participants

An essential step in running a successful community-led walking program is to get the word out!

To get started:

- Promote the program to recruit participants. You can use posters and social media to advertise the program.
- Hold a program introduction session to encourage sign up. This will allow you to get perspective of potential participants and describe the program.
- Host an orientation session – this is a good opportunity to have participants sign waivers, assess their physical readiness for the walks, make sure people know how to prepare for walks, set norms, and rules for the group, etc.
- Prepare for the walk – select a safe hike, become familiar with the area, and have a clear plan for the time you engage with your group.

Advertising your Group

Advertising may occur at different points of group development, for both new and established groups. Marketing your program can help you attract new members, remind members who have taken a break to rejoin, restart your group after a hiatus, or promote a special event.

Your advertisements should focus on walking group benefits that are the most valuable and likely to resonate with participants. Effective advertising uses the language of the people whom you want to attract, and;

- Grabs peoples' attention – “This sounds good”
- Gains their interest – “I think I'll read on”
- Encourages them to make a decision – “I will do that” and to take action – “I'll pick up the phone and join”

Recent evidence suggests that individuals experiencing mental health challenges, or at risk of developing them, found the most important benefits of joining the walking group were:

- Increased physical activity level
- Improved mood
- Improved overall physical health
- Improved social interactions and staying connected with others in the community
- Connection with nature and the natural environment

Raising Awareness

Ensure your community is informed about your program's values. Decision-makers in your organization may need some initial education about the value of your program and the effectiveness of physical activity in preventing mental illness and promoting wellness. Consider ways to keep your board members and management staff up to date on your walking group.

Shift your Culture

Launching a community-led walking group for staff may be a great way to promote positive mental health and wellness in the workplace. Look for leaders within the organization who may want to help with the program. Ask them to lead by example, making the case for improved productivity and a more joyful work environment.

Find ways to get your staff involved by seeing who in your organization has experience in walking or fitness. Encourage them to engage with the group and facilitate a walking group. Try hosting a challenge or implementing a co-workers' walk and talk group. These techniques will only serve to strengthen your ability to motivate and inspire your team.

Use Local Media

The local community is an important audience to reach. One way to reach out is through the local papers, TV, radio shows, and attendance at local events. This will raise your group's profile and raise your organization's profile as well.

Local media can offer the necessary promotion and outreach needed, while educating the community around physical and mental health issues. By connecting with local media, you can form new partnerships.

Planning Your Walking Program

4 - 12 Week Plan

The following outline illustrates how you can manage your group over 15 weeks, including estimated time allocations. The order in which these events occur is flexible. This outline is meant to give you an idea of what is involved in running a walking group from week-to-week. You will notice that the first several weeks requires more time – once the group is in action, the time demands on group leaders will decrease.

Week	Goal	Activities	Time
1 – 2	Planning and Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host “Information session” by webinar or in-person. • Create a bulletin/virtual board with posters highlighting the upcoming walking group and introductory session. • Promote to clients, staff, and other local agencies. • Advertise volunteer positions. • Begin to plan walking routes and create a schedule. • Review safety plans and gather safety equipment. • Arrange transportation if required (for weekly walks and outings to conservation area). 	20 hours
3	Introductory Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite partners to join you in an information session for potential participants. • Plan session and copy materials. • Invite participants and run session. • Complete Attendance and Session Tracking Form. 	4 hours
4	Orientation Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite everyone interested in participating to attend an orientation session about the group. • Plan the session and copy materials. • Run the session, including participant goal setting. • Complete Participants Questionnaire, PAR Q: (optional). 	4 hours
5 – 6	Group Walks for 4-8 week series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a theme for walks. • Prepare snacks. • Lead walks. • Debrief with partners, volunteers, and/or students. • Debrief with participants and look for peer leadership opportunities. • Update bulletin board and post newsletter. • Complete Attendance and Session Tracking Form. 	3 hours per week
7	Hike Ontario training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend training from Hike Ontario. 	2-6 hours

Week	Goal	Activities	Time
8 – 9	Plan Group Walks for 10-12 week series	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a theme for walks. • Plan routes. • Prepare snacks. • Lead walks. • Debrief with partners, volunteers, and/or students. • Debrief with participants and look for peer leadership opportunities. • Update bulletin board and post newsletter. 	3 hours per week
10	Midpoint Check-In	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with participants' progress towards goals. • Get feedback about group so far. • Go for a short walk. • Complete Attendance and Session Tracking Form. • Plan route for upcoming walks. 	5 hours
11 – 13	Group Walks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update communiques (newsletters, bulletin boards) to keep participants informed. • Select a theme or activity for walks. • Plan routes. • Prepare snacks. • Lead walks. • Debrief with partners, volunteers, and/or students. • Debrief with participants and look for peer leadership opportunities. • Complete Attendance and Session Tracking Form. 	3 hours per week
14	Walk at Conservation Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalize transportation arrangements if applicable. • Prepare snacks and lead walk. • Debrief with partners, volunteers, and/or students. • Complete Attendance and Session Tracking Form. 	6 hours
15	Final Walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update communiques (bulletin boards, newsletter) to keep participants informed. • Run “Recognizing Successes and Thinking Ahead” session. • Go for a final walk using a favourite route. 	5 hours
Post-program	Provide Your Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize results from your questionnaire and tracking forms 	1 hour
		Total Time:	60 hours

Time Saving Tips

Involving participant leaders, partners, students, and volunteers can reduce the time demand on you.

Here are some ideas:

- Ask your hiking club or conservation area partner to suggest walking routes for your group.
- Invite a partner or volunteer to pre-walk your routes and provide you with feedback to help you plan a successful outing.
- Offer volunteer roles to group participants who may be interested in helping, perhaps by maintaining the group bulletin/virtual board or on-line blog, creating a group schedule, making reminder phone calls, and gathering feedback from other participants.
- Students may be interested in planning special events, such as awards ceremonies or guest speakers, or leading group activities such as a goal-setting activity.
- Students may also be able to help participants complete the Participants' Questionnaire.

Intake and Registration Process

Some partners use an online registration platform. You will need to include the description and objectives for your community-led walking program.

It is strongly recommended you run an Information session to get participants acquainted with the program.

Information Session

Participants will want some information about what to expect from your walking group before committing. An introduction session can be a useful tool to attract participants to your group. It is important to note that effective introductions generate enthusiasm and encourage participant engagement. Running an introductory session will also allow you to screen participants' readiness to engage in physical activity.

Once participants have committed to being part of the group, an orientation session will ensure you get to know the goals and needs of the members, as well as provide more detailed information about the group. This information could be provided on a one-to-one basis or combined into one session. In any case, here are some ideas for ways you might introduce participants to your group:

Ice Breaker Activities

Start with an ice breaker. Participants may introduce themselves and share a favourite place to walk, now, or in the past.

Invite participants to brainstorm all the benefits of walking outside. Review their ideas and invite a discussion.

Information for your walking group

Sharing information

- Identify when and where the group meets.
- Determine how participants will get there.
- Decide what the format of a typical group will be, such as warmup, cool down, 40-minute walk, stretches, and snacks.
- Address mobility and/or general fitness level requirements.
- Determine if participants will be joining independently or with a support person.
- Identify how many participants you expect to attend the sessions to determine how many volunteers may be required.

Are they ready to join?

Get a show of hands as to who would like to join and who is unsure. Use the following questions to help with the discussion.

For participants who are willing to join:

1. How will they make their decision?
2. Ask what they are hoping to get out of the group?

For participants who are unsure:

1. Ask if they are open to trying the group to see how it goes?
2. What would need to be different for them to join?
3. How will they keep up their physical activity?

For participants who are not interested:

Your aim is for participants to leave your Information session feeling excited about the possibility of joining the group and making some changes in their lives. Be sure to assure potential participants that it is common to feel intimidated when joining a new group and these feelings tend to pass. Walking with a group can be an easy way to connect with others, so you'll want to highlight the benefits for the participants and share in their enthusiasm. Be an inspiration for others to make change!

Keep the Walking Checklist available for reference and use this to prepare for your walking groups.

Planning Group Sessions

Orientation Session

After an Introduction session, participants may need some time to reflect on the materials you have provided and decide if the group is right for them. Once participants have decided to join the group, an orientation session can be an opportunity to:

- Sign physical activity waivers, consent to use image, and any other forms your organization requires to participate in the walking group.
- Set rules and norms for participants and identify the steps to follow while on walks.
- Describe how participants should get ready for a walk and help them prepare for the series.

Group Rules and Norms

Creating group norms can be a team building process that increases a participant's feeling of ownership within the group. Norms may be modified as your group develops. Your group can create its own rules on ways they want the group to operate.

Here are some example rules you can use:

- Respect your body and go at your own pace.
- Let the group know if you need a break or if you are not feeling well.
- Watch out for others and let others know about hazards.
- Ensure that no one walks alone.

Areas for group discussion might include:

- Determine how long to wait for latecomers.
- Decide if headphones and cell phone should be used during walks?
- Are you allowed to smoke while on walks?
- Can you bring pets or other people to the group?

Signing Participant Agreements

Let participants know that although they will receive numerous health benefits by participating in the group, there is a small degree of risk involved. Participants should be advised that the program is being planned carefully to limit any risk.

Ask participants about their comfort level having their photograph taken and used in promotional materials for their group. If they are willing to have their photographs taken, please have them sign your organization's photo consent form.

Goal setting

It is useful for participants to set a goal for their participation in the group. See the goal setting section for more details on helping participants set goals for this program.

Orientation Session Topics

Helping Participants Prepare for a Walk

Dressing for a Walk

- Wear comfortable, non-restrictive clothing.
- Dress in layers since climate and body temperature both change. Light layers can be removed and tied around the waist or shoulders.
- Wear loose-fitting layers in warm weather to allow ventilation and close-fitting layers in cold weather for insulation.
- Synthetic fibers designed to wick moisture away (polyester or propylene) are better to wear against skin than cotton. Cotton absorbs water such as sweat and can leave you feeling chilled. Similarly, jeans tend to be uncomfortable in humid or rainy conditions.
- An outer shell to protect against wind or rain can be handy.

Having appropriate clothing and footwear will improve your participant's comfort level when walking and may help to prevent injuries.

Footwear

Well-fitting socks help prevent blisters.

Be sure to have a well-fitted, supportive, sturdy, and broken-in shoe before heading out on a hike.

Shoe should have:

- a snug fit
- a well-cushioned heel
- good toe room
- flexible non-slip soles

Look for soles with a tough outer layer of rubber and a soft midsole that runs the full length of the shoe.

Helpful Tip: Preventing Blisters

Apply Vaseline/petroleum jelly to your feet before putting on socks.

Sun Safety

During the summer months, be sure to discuss the effects of the sun.

- Cover up and wear light-coloured long sleeve shirts, pants and a wide-brimmed hat made from breathable fabric.
- Wear sunglasses that protect against both UVA and UVB rays.
- Limit your time in the sun between 11 am and 4 pm. When your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun is very strong. Look for places with lots of shade like a park with big trees.
- Check the UV index forecast online or on your local radio or TV show. When the UV index is higher than three, wear protective clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- Use sunscreen especially when the UV index is more than three.
- When the weather is very hot, consider cancelling your group.

[Source: Sun Safety Basics \(Health Canada, 2012\)](#)

Nutrition

Encourage participants to have a small, balanced meal before heading out on a walk.

Here are a few discussion points to consider:

A small meal one to three hours before exercising.

- A serving of oatmeal with nuts or fruit
- A slice of toast with peanut butter or fruit

An easily digestible snack thirty to ninety minutes before exercising.

- Banana
- Half a bagel, an English muffin or a piece of toast
- Yogurt

Pay attention to what works for you. Encourage participants to try different foods at different times to see what works best for them.

[Source: Dietitians of Canada](#)

Hydration

The importance of hydration, especially in summer conditions, cannot be overstated.

Drink plenty of liquids before, during, and after a walk.

Here are some suggestions about when and how to consume water:

4 hours or less before exercise	Drink about 1–2 cups of fluid (250-500 mL)
2 hours or less before exercise	Drink about ½–1½ cups (125–375 mL) of fluid if you have not produced any urine or only a small amount of bright yellow urine
During exercise	Keep fluid with you when you exercise. Sip water during your workout. Drink enough to replace the water lost through sweat.
Immediately after exercise	If you drank enough during your exercise, let your thirst guide you through the rest of the day.

Water is typically the best choice for moderate activity or exercise, under an hour in length. Water is also a good choice after a walk. Liquids like milk, chocolate milk, 100 per cent unsweetened fruit juice and sports drinks can be included, although they provide extra calories. Avoid carbonated soft drinks, regular sweetened or unsweetened fruit juices, fruit drinks, lemonade or any drinks that contain a lot of sugar or caffeine, as they may cause stomach upset and discomfort while walking.



Goal Setting

You may wish to encourage participants to view walking as a health-promoting practice that can be continued on an independent basis. Goal setting within the group helps individuals link to positive changes in their lives outside of these sessions.

Goal setting also helps participants stay motivated as it provides concrete proof of an individual's success and helps to identify the next milestone.

Setting SMART Goals

SMART is an acronym for goal setting:

S = specific

M = measurable

A = attainable

R = realistic

T = timely

Goals should be straightforward. Be sure to clarify and define what you're going to do by asking the following questions: Why is it important to do it now? What do you want ultimately to accomplish? How are you going to do it?

Example: Instead of setting a goal to lose weight or be healthier, set a specific goal to walk five kilometers to challenge yourself or start off at a slower pace and increase that pace by measuring it in time or by speed.

Measurable

Goals need to provide measurable progress so you can see the change occur. How will you know when you reach your goal? Be specific! "I want to walk in my neighborhood four times a week, on my own, before Victoria Day." Show the specific target to be measured. One's progress might be, "I want to start walking" this is not measurable. There needs to be a time or a method in which they can measure how they achieved this, from the beginning to the end, and there must be a way to see the improvement.

Attainable

Goals should be within reach. You cannot commit for too long towards goals that are just too challenging, "lose 20 lbs in one week." It simply isn't achievable. Instead, consider setting a goal to lose 1 lb per week. When you've achieved that goal, keep losing one more pound, each week, until you

reach your specific healthy weight. This example is a goal which is possible to reach and is attainable.

Realistic

Having the required skills and ensuring your goals align with your personal plans, as well as with your mental and physical capabilities, are essential for successful goal accomplishment. The goal to conquer the most challenging trail in the area may not be realistic for someone who is new to walking. It might be more realistic to set a goal of completing the easier trail on a regular basis and then continuing to progress until you can challenge yourself by walking the most difficult trail.

Timely

Set a time frame for the goal, for example, "In three months by my next birthday, I would like to walk the difficult trail." Putting an end point on your goal allows your goal to be measurable, attainable, and realistic, it gives you a clear target to work towards. If you don't set deadlines for yourself, the commitment is too vague and there's no urgency to begin acting.

Ideas for Goals related to your Program

Participants are likely to attend your walking program for different reasons and will differ in terms of what they would like to accomplish. Participants might set goals related to walking and physical health, or one related to participating in an activity beyond the group.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Improve my ability for more demanding walks.
- Make walking a regular component of my routine.
- Use walking as a form of transportation to do a regular errand or attend an appointment.
- Take a short walk daily at a certain time, such as first thing in the morning or after dinner.
- Schedule a weekly walk with a friend or family member.



Group Activities

Five Tips for Facilitators

1. Trust the process

Group activities help people to recognize and gain more understanding of their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It helps people gain feedback from others, leading to a greater understanding of themselves.

Group activities help people to communicate with others, gain support, alleviate isolation, gain trust, and learn how to relate positively to other individuals.

2. Be honest:

Effective facilitation requires that you be honest with yourself and with the group. This includes being honest about the limits of one's own abilities and knowledge. If the facilitator doesn't know the answer to the group's questions, they should admit it and work on finding the answer. Honest facilitators gain the trust of the group and model the importance of honesty from all participants.

3. You are not an expert:

Keep in mind that your goal is to moderate and guide communication, not make personal contributions to it or push your own agenda. Remain flexible and responsive to the group and encourage participants to be open and honest.

An effective way to avoid voicing your personal opinion is to reflect questions back to the group. For example, "What do you think?" By responding in this way, the facilitator has remained neutral and encourages further reflection by the group.

4. Be prepared:

When possible, familiarize yourself with the types of challenges people in your group might have with the materials and technology you will be using for your activities.

5. Recognize your strengths:

Focusing on your strengths allows you to facilitate effectively. Understand the skills you possess and use them to bring a group of people together. For example, patience, humour, wisdom, and flexibility can help you to develop rapport and promote successful interventions.

Sample Themed Walks

The following themes can be used to plan your walk sessions. Walks should be reasonably challenging for participants and should gradually increase in difficulty as confidence and physical fitness improve. Feel free to change the order or to modify the following outlines to meet your group's needs.

Activity: Introduction to the group

When starting out, focus on ensuring all group members feel comfortable and have a positive first experience. It's also an important opportunity to focus on group safety, especially if you are walking near busy roads.

Here are some suggestions:

- Start with an icebreaker activity.
- Use your first walk to observe participants, considering their physical fitness levels, apparent mood, energy levels, and social interactions.
- At the end of the walk, hold a check-in about how it went, ask about the pace and the route, and use this feedback to plan future sessions.
- See if participants noticed any change in their mood and energy levels after the walk.
- Congratulate participants for their efforts.

Activity: Focus on posture

After the warm-up, briefly review good posture when walking and encourage participants to notice their posture throughout the walk. Here are some tips about posture:

Head: Centered, with ears over shoulders. Chin parallel with the ground. Eyes looking forward 2–3 meters.

Shoulders: Down and back, not forward. Think tall.

Chest: Think of broadening the chest.

Arms: Swinging naturally and comfortably. Arm-swing should not cross the centre of the body.

Legs: A comfortable and efficient stride length. To increase speed, take quicker, shorter steps instead of reaching for a longer stride.

Feet: Toes pointing forward. Heel touches the ground first, then your weight rolls forward to the ball of the foot.

Check with participants during the cool-down to hear if they noticed anything about their form or posture during the walk. Challenge participants to try to fit in a short walk (with good posture) on their own time, sometime during the coming week.

Activity: Trail etiquette

Take a walk on a local trail, perhaps at a local conservation area. Use the opportunity to discuss trail etiquette and “Leave No Trace” principles. Here are some trail etiquette tips to share, courtesy of Hike Ontario:

- Stay on existing trails.

- Avoid very wet and muddy conditions.
- Know the local rules, regulations, and concerns about the area.
- Obey gate closures and signs.
- Slower traffic has the right-of-way: yield to those who are going uphill.
- Keep to the right, except when passing others.
- Get the owners' permission to walk on private land.
- Do not disturb trees, plants, or wildlife.
- Leave the trail cleaner than you found it.

Activity: Mindfulness a walking meditation

Walking can be a way to incorporate mindfulness and meditation techniques. Before beginning the walk, encourage participants to bring their attention into the present moment, using all their senses. The idea is to quiet the thoughts of the mind and to experience a sense of calm. You might guide participants to focus on each of the following aspects during different moments throughout the walk, while limiting conversation.

Breath: Focus on the experience of breathing. Notice the rate and depth of breath, the temperature of the air, the filling and contraction of the lungs.

Stepping: Try to feel each phase of movement in the feet and legs—pushing off with the foot, lifting and swinging of the legs, and each foot contacting the ground. Notice the rate of stepping.

Senses: Take in all the sights in the environment—colours, textures, lights, objects, vegetation, and animals. Notice different scents along the way. Feel the temperature of the air and the feeling of a breeze on their skin.

Be aware of bodily sensations throughout the walk—the feeling of their heart beating or of blood pumping throughout the body.

Afterward, ask how participants experienced mindfulness throughout the walk and if they use mindfulness techniques in other settings.

Activity: Breathing Positive Energy

Set-up: Participants quietly stand or sit a safe distance apart from each other and close their eyes.

Ask participants to focus on the length of their breaths. Count the number of seconds on the way in and the number of seconds on the way out.

Guide participants through the following breathing meditation:

As you breathe in, raise your arms above your head. Interlace your fingers, bend your elbows, and make a circle as you raise your arms.

Take a deep breath, breathing in the good energy that surrounds you. As you exhale, lower your arms to your sides and exhale negative energy that may be causing you to feel tense.

Repeat the motion, inhaling while raising arms and exhaling while lowering them.

While participants perform the above actions, encourage them to breathe in for a count of four, hold, and exhale for a count of four.

Activity: Mix it up

To help participants develop some familiarity and comfort with each other, invite them to get to know at least one new member of the group. Challenge participants to walk with someone new, find out where they are from and if they have a favourite walking trail or route, past or present. Invite participants to share what they have learned during the cool-down.

Activity: Scavenger hunt

Provide teams of participants with a checklist of items to look for on your walk and reward the most successful team!

Here is a sample list of nature items that could be looked for:

- A feathered friend
- Animal tracks
- Another person walking
- Beetle
- Dead tree
- Flowering plant
- Fork in the path
- Furry friend
- Hole or tunnel dug by an animal
- Leaf with pointed edges
- Leaf with rounded edges
- Plant bearing fruits or nuts

The scavenger hunt can be adapted to suit more urban settings: look for cars, signs, or certain-coloured houses; or focused on people-watching, looking for couples, people wearing red, or people walking dogs.

Activity: How walkable is your neighbourhood?

If appropriate for your group, go for a walk around your community and see how pedestrian-friendly it is. Pay attention to the condition of the sidewalks, street crossings, traffic, and noise concerns (there are various community walkability checklists and tools online you could use).

Compare observations at the end and discuss changes that would make the neighbourhood more walkable. If participants are keen to act, the group could inform local recreation centres, health departments, traffic engineering or public works departments, local government representatives or the media.

Activity: Planning with a map

Before the walk, work with the group or several group members to use a map or online mapping websites to plan a route for your group to take. Estimate the total distance of the walk, the difficulty level and the time it will take for your group to complete it. Time your walk and see how accurate you were.

Group Challenges

Special challenges for the group can help keep it fresh and can be a great way to bring together participants with different levels of ability. Challenges can also help to gradually “up the ante” for group participants.

Some ideas for challenges are:

Provide group members with pedometers (some public libraries will loan them free of charge) and encourage them to record their number of steps per day. Set a goal for total number of steps for the group—10,000 steps daily per person is recommended. Recognize the participant with the most steps over the week, or the biggest increase in total steps from one week to the next.

Activity: A Special outing

Revisit a favourite route chosen by participants and extend the walk, perhaps sharing a picnic afterwards. Have a group discussion about how participants use walking outside of the group and places they might like to walk in future.

Group Challenges:

Are there other walking groups in your area? If so, connect with them and consider a friendly group challenge. Use an app like MapMyWalk to track weekly distances and gradually increase goals to keep participants motivated and engaged.

Display the total distance your group has covered on a map on a bulletin board or in an on-line blog. Set a group goal for the total distance you want to cover.

Activity: How Am I Coping?

Ages: All ages | Approximate time: 45 - 60 minutes

Summary and Goals

This activity aims to help everyone and all ages to recognize common effects of stress and to match common stress reactions with [Healthy Coping Skills](#).

Set Up and Materials

- Download and print out the two sets of cards:
 - Common Stress Reactions and Healthy Coping Skills
- There are five categories of Common Stress Reactions
- Cards:
 - Behavioural
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Social

Part One

Before your walk begins, hand out all Common Stress cards to each participant, some people may have a few cards each.

Part Two

Instruct participants that you will read aloud the Healthy Coping Skills cards and they need to match the cards they have in their hands with the strategy. Also, explain that you will stop and run the exercise a few times during your walk.

Activity: Toss Me Some Kindness

Ages: All ages

Goals and Summary

This activity begins with playful, positive interactions that foster group cohesiveness.

In addition, expressing nice things directly to each other offers the potential of establishing an increased level of communication.

Set Up

Any soft ball or object that can easily be tossed around.

Activities:

Option 1: Words of Kindness

Explain to the group members that each person will take turns gently tossing the ball to other members. As they toss the ball to someone, they are to say something nice to that member.

The pattern is repeated a few times and periodically throughout the walk so that every person has heard at least two nice things about themselves.

Optional: Ask each person to describe their experience of what other group members said that was nice to them. For example, ask: What was it like to say nice things to everyone? How did you feel when another member said something nice to you? Did you receive any unexpected comments?

Option 2: Enjoyment

Begin the activity again, however this time, ask them to say something they would enjoy doing with the person to whom they throw the ball. Do this periodically throughout the group and allow all group participants to have a turn sharing.

Option 3: Personal Goals

The person who catches the ball is instructed to answer: What two things do you want to change in your life? On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is this change? In what ways would your life be improved after these changes were made? Stop periodically throughout the walk until every member gets a turn.

Supporting Participants During Walks

Before the Walk Begins

Arrive at your meeting location a few minutes early to welcome new members and assure people that they are in the right place. Ensure all participants, volunteers and guests have ample time to learn each other's names. Here's where name tags can be helpful. When new walkers join your group, start with a round of introductions and maybe a quick ice breaker. Participants can introduce themselves and state their favourite place to walk, or how long they have been involved with the group.

Remember how many walkers you have with you and remind participants not to leave the group without letting the facilitator know.

Introduce the group, describe the length of the walk and how long it will likely take to complete. Review the terrain, its gradients and overall difficulty. Outline any hazards you may encounter. Encourage participants to share their perception of any other hazards with the group to keep everyone safe.

Make sure everyone has a buddy and encourage participants to change buddies from time to time. This will ensure individuals get to know one another and no one is left to walk alone.

Get walking within five minutes of the advertised start time, to keep the group on track.

Warming up and cooling down will help prevent injuries and create a regular routine for the group that provides a level of comfort for members to take turns leading warm-up and cool-down exercises.

Group leaders and volunteers are encouraged to move among pairs of walkers, facilitating conversation and observing a participant's physical exertion and overall mood. Make sure all walkers are managing the demands of the walk. Be attuned to signs of physical distress, dehydration, lightheadedness, nausea, headaches, or cramping. Encourage participants to respect their body's limitations by reducing the pace or calling a rest break when needed.

Some participants may be directive with others and ask overly personal questions or want to share uncomfortable personal information. Be aware of the conversations that may leave walkers feeling deflated or frustrated and intervene by being prepared to step in if a participant appears uncomfortable.

A safe alternative to awkward topics of conversation might include observations about the natural environment and wildlife.



Warming Up

Warming up before you start walking increases the temperature in your muscles and joints and increases blood flow. A warmup will reduce the risk of injury and make exercising more comfortable.

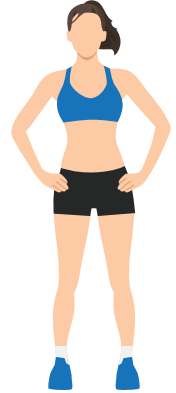
1. Ankle circles

Standing on one foot, lift the other foot off the ground in front of you. Slowly flex the ankle through its full range of motion, making circles with the toes. Do eight to 10 circles; then reverse the direction of your circle and do the same count in the opposite direction. Switch to the other leg.



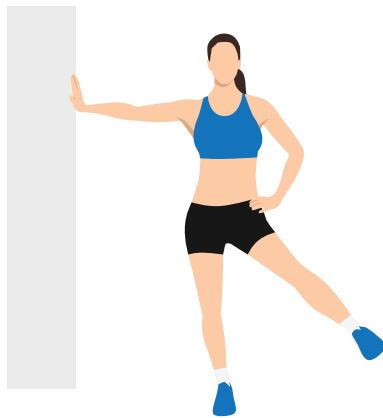
4. Pelvic loops

Stand with your hands on your hips, your knees gently bent, and your feet hip width apart. Keep your body upright and make 10 slow, continuous circles with your hips, pushing them gently forward, to the left, back and to the right. Then reverse direction and repeat.



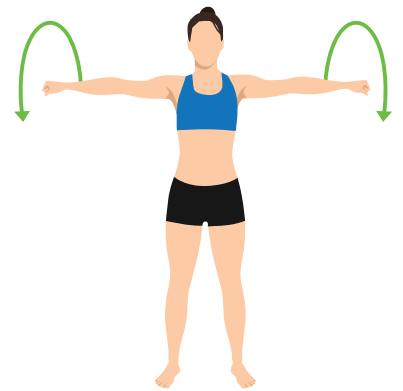
2. Leg swings

Stand on one leg, swing the other loosely from the hip in a front to back motion. Keep it relaxed and unforced, like the spinning of a pendulum. Your foot should swing no higher than a foot or so off the ground. Swing each leg 15 to 20 times.



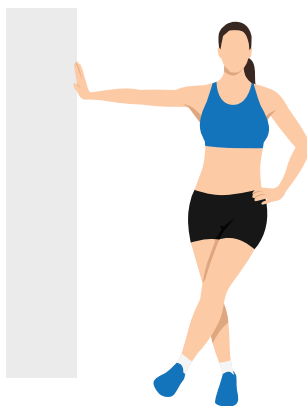
5. Arm circles

Hold both arms straight out from your sides, make yourself into the letter T. Make slow backward circles with your hands, starting small and finishing with large circles, using your entire arm. Shake out your arms then repeat with 10 to 12 forward circles.



3. Figure eight leg swings

Just like the leg swings, swing one leg from the hip in a front to back motion, but this time, trace a figure eight with your leg. Your leg should trace a circle in front of the body and another circle behind. Count 15 to 20 swings with each leg.



6. Hula hoop jumps

Begin hopping in place on both feet. Keep your head and shoulders facing forward and begin to twist your feet and lower body left, then right, going back and forth on successful hops, 20 times.



Source: America's Walking (PBS)

Support Participant Attendance

Help members of your group plan and remember walk dates. Tools to support them can include: offering reminder phone calls the day before a walk. Reminding participants to prepare appropriately, ensuring they eat sufficient food and drink water before walks. Visual prompts (posters or handouts) can be given to those without a phone. Use incentives, such as frequent flyer card where participants collect points for each walk and redeemed for prizes i.e. fifth walk wins a T-shirt.

Social Interactions

All participants should feel safe on group outings and recognize themselves as a valued member of the group. Participating in a walking group should foster a sense of inclusion. For some, joining such a group might be perceived as a risk, accompanied by doubts and insecurities about belonging. They may not spend much time in public places and may be self-conscious in the community.

Participants may be socially isolated outside of this group and may feel intimidated by social interactions or experience troubled thoughts in social situations. Initiating and sustaining conversation may be challenging. As a leader, you can help create a safe, inclusive, supportive group environment by keeping the following in mind before, during, and after the walk.

Assign a Leader

Designate one group facilitator to be the lead at the front of the group and one leader at the back to ensure no one is left behind. Remind all facilitators that no one walks alone! Participants are welcome to buddy up by walking with the group or partnering with a group member.

Manage Physical Challenges

Gradually increase the physical challenge associated with walking. Witnessing their own physical capabilities will provide a sense of achievement and result in physical health benefits. Here are suggestions to gradually increase the physical challenge level of your walks:

Increase your speed

- Time the routes and then revisit the route several weeks later with a group goal that will beat the previous time, even by a small amount.
- Take less frequent or shorter breaks.
- Encourage participants to rest whenever necessary but with the goal of decreasing the total amount of time they spend resting.

Extend the length of your walks

- Try tacking on an extra five minutes of walking each time, to set a reasonable goal.
- Tackle more challenging terrain by navigating more rustic trails like uneven or muddy walking surfaces or obstacles like fallen trees or rocks. Take routes with steeper hills.

Pacing

Participants will have different levels of physical fitness. Some participants may be able to walk at a brisk pace for extended periods of time without feeling any exertion, whereas others may walk more slowly and need to take regular breaks. The most talkative members in the groups can help participants carry on conversations during your walk. Participants may be motivated to walk for various reasons. Some may view the walk as their daily exercise and may be looking forward to the challenge, whereas others may be more motivated by social connections or the opportunity to observe the environment around them. For these reasons, it's necessary to have at least two facilitators supporting your walking group, with more support providing extra benefit. Having additional staff, students, volunteers, or peer leaders means more people can feel comfortably accommodated and supported.

The following walking distance table can be helpful when planning your route. Use it as a rough guide for times and allowances for walkers and you can adjust the timing for those who walk more slowly:

Walking Speed	Time			
	10mins	20mins	30mins	60mins
Slow	0.6km	1.2km	1.8km	3.6km
Medium	0.9km	1.8km	2.7km	5.4km
Fast	1.1km	2.2km	3.3km	6.6km

Source: [Walking Program Walk Leader Handbook \(BCRPA\)](#)

Another way to estimate your walk speed is to use the following guidelines, courtesy of *Hike Ontario*:

Leisurely	Less than 2km/hour
Slow	2-3km/hr
Moderate	2-4km/hr
Fast	5km/hr

Physical Activity During all Seasons

Say you have created a successful walking group in a milder month. What next? How will you manage the winter? Hopefully, participants are growing accustomed to engaging in physical activity and will continue their efforts for a longer period. Here are some ideas to keep up physical activity as a group throughout the year.

- Walk all year long. Provide tips on dressing for the cold weather and consider ending the walk at a coffee shop with a hot beverage. Walking outside in the winter is a great way to get a little vitamin D and appreciate the season.
- Meet at a mall or large public area that permits indoor walking. Depending on weather conditions, your group will have the option of walking outdoors or inside.
- Develop a partnership with the local community centre,

recreational centre, or somewhere that provides an indoor track. You may use these facilities on really cold days or in the case of inclement weather.

- Consider trying a winter sport like snowshoeing. It is good exercise and not too challenging to learn. Skating can be fun and a great group outing if people know how to skate. Urban poling, also known as Nordic walking or over striding, has gained popularity in certain areas. Again, look to community partners for affordable equipment and instruction.



Here are some suggested strategies to help your participants through specific situations.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

Barrier	Strategy
Lack of Energy	<p>Exercise is energy-boosting! Suggest that participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start with short exercise sessions and notice any energy boosts afterwards. Keep a journal to track energy levels and notice what activities are energy-draining or energy-boosting. Try to schedule energy-draining activities so they do not fall before group sessions and think about including energy-boosting activities that inspire and motivate them before a group walk.
Lack of Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set goals and track progress (see “Goal Setting”). Congratulate participants on their achievements and encourage them to reward themselves.
Scheduling Conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve participants as much as possible and in the time allowed. Mornings tend to be a difficult time to get together. Point out that exercising first thing in the morning can help start the day on the right foot (it also limits excuses). By starting in the morning, participants have the rest of the day to accomplish other tasks. Encourage everyone to make their health a priority and try to schedule other commitments around group time.
Not Fitting in Socially	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep group communications inclusive and role-model good social skills. Enlist volunteers and peer leaders to ensure that no one walks alone. In a private setting, offer participants constructive feedback about social interactions. Brainstorm ideas to start conversations with fellow participants and observe their reactions and interests in social interactions. Remind participants that other people may be experiencing personal difficulties and not to take perceived slights too seriously. Not all people will connect and that is okay.
Fear of Injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide warm-up and cool-down activities to limit the risk of injury (see “warm-up and cool-down exercises”) on pages 20 & 24. Remind participants to move at their own pace. They should listen to their bodies and take breaks when necessary.
Weather Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage participants to plan ahead for the weather. Discuss appropriate clothing, page 12 Consider having a back-up plan for inclement weather, such as meeting at a small track or somewhere you can walk indoors. Present varying weather conditions as opportunities to experience familiar environment in a new light. Suggest that participants bring dry clothing on rainy days to change into after their walk.

After the Walk

Do a quick head count to make sure everyone has returned and congratulate the group on their efforts.

Be sure to ask participants for their feedback on the walk. If it's your last walk in the series, have them fill out the participant walk survey. Be sure to do a quick check-in to determine if the pace and the length of the walk was satisfactory, if they thought the route was a good choice, and if they have suggestions for the next walk.

Update the group about the next meeting or any upcoming events. Offer specific feedback to participants, perhaps in private, about your observations of them working within the group. If the participant tried to engage with other participants, or appear more comfortable, provide them with your thoughts and positive feedback.

For some, participating in a group like this may be a major accomplishment. Recognizing their improvements can be helpful and will keep them motivated.

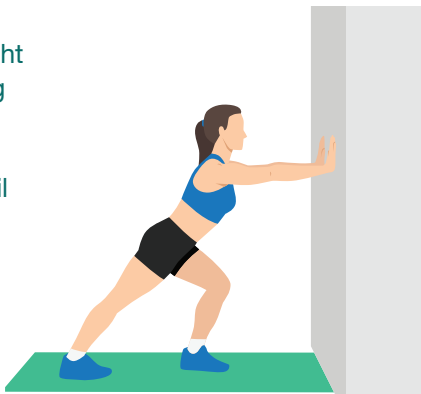
Source: How to Lead a Walk (Walk4Life, Walk England)

Cooling Down

After the main portion of your walk is complete, encourage participants to walk at a slower pace for five to 10 minutes. Consider including the following stretches as part of your cool down. Muscles that have been worked are more pliable and can be stretched safely. Hold each leg with a comfortable amount of tension, on both sides, for a count of 20. Do not bounce.

1. Standing upper calf stretches

Stand in a walking position with one leg stretched straight behind you and the other leg bent in front of you. Using a wall or a chair for support, lean forwards and down until you feel the stretch in the upper part of the back calf. Have both feet pointing straight ahead and keep your heels on the floor the entire time.



4. Standing Achilles tendon stretch

Standing with one leg slightly behind the other, push your heel down while bending your knee.



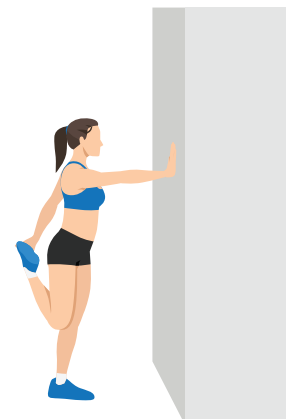
2. Hip flexor stretch

Stand in a straight stride position. Put both hands on your front knee while keeping the back knee straight. Push your pelvis forward. Keep the back leg straight. The stretch should be felt in the front of the hip and slightly down the front of the thigh.



5. Standing quadricep stretch

Hold on to something for support with one hand and grab your ankle with the other hand. Pull your ankle toward your bottom, then try to straighten your knee while resisting with your hands and allowing no movement. Then pull your ankle towards your bottom again.



3. Standing hamstring stretch

Place one heel on a low step or bench and keep your knee and back straight. Bend your upper body forward from your hips. You should feel the stretch behind your knee.



Source: [Walking Program Walk Leader Handbook \(BCRPA\)](#)



**Canadian Mental
Health Association**
Ontario

Updated Reference Guide: a revised version of the Program Manual completed by Jennifer Cooke and Ambica Jones, CMHA Ontario. Art direction and design by CMHA Ontario (2024).

The original Mood Walks Program Manual was written by Andrea Town, CMHA Ontario. Revised by Bojana Milanovic. Art direction and design by Shannon Griffiths. Copy edited by Linda Miland (2018).

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