

WALKING WITH PURPOSE

We all know that hiking is good for your health, mental and physical, but what exactly is so great about it? TV's Dr. Alex George, who claims walking regularly has changed his life, is here to tell you what's going on in your body and mind to make you feel so good.



The feeling when you complete a hike is like no other. Bundled in your car, on the train home or in the pub having a well-deserved pint – it's like you can feel the endorphins rushing around your body and bathing you in the satisfaction of your accomplishments. The benefits of hiking have long been established, not only for its cardio-vascular potential, but for its embrace of the great outdoors.

Dr. Alex George, an A&E doctor who rose to notoriety on the 2018 series of ITV's *Love Island* and has since become the UK Government's Youth Ambassador for Mental Health, is loud and proud about his love for walking – or stomping as he calls it (stomping is walking with purpose; the purpose being for your own self). He regularly says that his daily walk around Battersea Park with cavapoo Rollo has changed his life and he's even started a podcast to encourage others to reap the benefits as well. Here, as both a doctor and mental health professional, he explains just why hiking is so good for you.

Taking the First Step

"[Walking has] come in and out of my life at different points and at the right points made a huge change. My brother passed away three years ago due to suicide and that was very difficult. Then, coming out of the pandemic, my mental health was at a low and I had taken on the role of mental health ambassador which brought a huge amount of pressure because I wanted to help people. My health just took a real turn, I became so overweight, I was drinking a lot of alcohol, I was on antidepressants to try and stabilise my mood, I was not in a good place at all. One day I thought, "Gosh, I've got to change this". I got a dog (Rollo) and I had to walk him and suddenly I realised "this isn't just for him. It's for me too." What I didn't expect in the most serious, genuine sense is the effect that it would have on me. Since I started the Stompcast [Alex's weekly podcast where he interviews various experts whilst walking in their favourite outdoor spaces], which we've been doing every week for like 70 weeks, I've passed a year alcohol free, which I'm hugely proud of, and I was diagnosed with ADHD. I've learned about therapy, I've learned about exercise, I've fallen back in love with running, I've fallen back in love with the gym. All of that has come from walking each day, so the change is huge. I think all of a sudden, "I actually care about

my health, I'm not going to put alcohol in my body, I'm going to eat better food, and look after my mind".

Same Place, Different Mindset

"When I started, I did short walks for 15 or 20 minutes because I was really unfit. But I started anyway and now I can walk really far. That's because I've been walking for a year and a half consistently, so you build up a good amount of fitness. It starts small, I would always say to someone just start with 15 minutes and don't focus so much on distance, focus on time. Then you don't start creating mindsets like "oh, I only walked this far and took this time". Do it for a time and do a little loop."

Although the variety of hikes we have in the UK is one of the best things about the country, Dr. Alex reminds us that we don't have to take on the Pennine Way to feel the benefits. Local, familiar trails are just as important for your mental health as for your physical.

"My own psychiatrist gave this tip that when you go for a walk in your normal place and routine, you'll walk that loop not only in different seasons and weathers and temperatures, but also in different times of your life. Some days when you're walking you're on a really bad day or something bad has happened or you're anxious or you're depressed. You walk at other times when you're feeling really brilliant and life is going well. What that teaches us is that you can be in the same place in a completely different mindset. That is a beautifully grounding thing, because then you realise that when you're having a bad day you will walk there again and feel better. That knowledge that you're going to come through is incredibly powerful psychologically, and that's another reason why I do it every day at the same time. I think that's why that it's affected so many other parts of my life because it's habit stacking. Starting with the fundamental core habits that have a knock-on effect on the rest of your life, your way of thinking, your decision making. I know that I'm going to walk at half past seven every morning so I go to bed earlier at night and get a better night's sleep, so I'm motivated to make better decisions and cook better meals."

The Happy Hormone

So what's actually happening to make us feel so good?

"As we're moving our muscles and we're getting our heart going, we produce endorphins and serotonin. We think of endorphins in mod-



ern day life as the happy mood hormone. The mood element is actually secondary. Endorphins are our body's natural opiates and are released because, when we were hunting, we'd be running for long distances and would need to overcome pain or muscle fatigue to complete the activities we need to survive. Endorphins are the body's way of pushing through that. They were there to get us to achieve our task and push through the pain. A beautiful positive is that it makes us feel good. So when we start moving our body, particularly walking or going outside, we release a lot of endorphins as our bodies are naturally ready to move. There's also a lot to do with the mental benefits of being amongst nature. When we're outside seeing green things, seeing living things, seeing water, seeing dogs and seeing birds, that makes us psychologically anchored within the world and that anchoring makes us feel part of something. Ultimately, humans need a sense of purpose and a sense of place in the world.

We also often forget the benefits on cortisol levels. When you move you reduce levels of cortisol in your body and reducing levels of cortisol means less stress, less inflammation, less risk of heart disease, and less damage to your body. That is a huge one because we have much higher levels of cortisol in modern society because we're on our phones, we're stressed, we're focused on doing all these things all the time. So anything that reduces cortisol levels is great. That also obviously helps you sleep and good sleep means good health.

Then we can't ignore the fact that walking builds your heart health. Those that walk and get at least 5000 steps a day reduce the risk of mortality associated with strokes and heart disease. They're more capable and able. Walking or running or hiking is a great way to build up your physicality, your muscles, your legs, your core, your stability, and is a great way to stay fit and young."

Psychological Hacks

Hiking isn't just about what you do, it's who you do it with, which Dr. Alex is pleased to tell you will make all the difference to your health as well:

"Freud established that by lying patients on their back and having them look at the ceiling during therapy, you would break eye contact and people would open up more. Obviously, people don't use lying down therapy anymore, but when you're walking and talking you're taking away the confrontational aspect of a conversation. You're taking away this me against you feeling and you're making things more comfortable by not being locked in gaze. It really, really helps. The other part of it is that, when you're walking with people, you need to look ahead like I am right now [Alex was actually stomping around Battersea Park whilst speaking to Anna from Wired For Adventure on the phone]. I'm looking ahead of me, I'm gazing at where I'm going, looking at the floor, I'm checking around. The brain is always looking for dangers and things you can trip over, even subconsciously. What that does is move your eyes and creates a horizontal gaze. You've heard of hypnotherapy and also eye movement desensitisation therapy which is very effective for PTSD, it's all based around lateral gaze. There's a psychological thing that happens when you move your eyes left to right across a horizontal 'x' axis. It helps the brain relax, open up and become suggestible to new ways of thinking. It's a real psychological hack that horizontal gaze is basically a way of making you feel calmer, more at peace, and more suggestible. So when you're walking, when you're driving with someone, or even cycling as well, you can find people open up more and they feel more relaxed."

It's clear that the benefits of hiking are far reaching and comprehensive whether you go and conquer the Camino de Santiago or enjoy a regular stroll around the park. Whatever your style is, make time to get into the great outdoors this year.

If you need some inspiration, take a listen to Dr. Alex's podcast, The Stompcast. It's designed for you to walk alongside Alex and his guests as they get to the nitty gritty of life and mental health. [W](#)

