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Forget Everything You Knew About Walking: Why You May Need Gait-Training Boot Camp

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In high school, my twin obsessions were classical literature and supermodels. On weekend afternoons, I'd walk up and down the deck that wrapped around my father's house, trying to move with some combination of lightness and attitude. I wanted more than anything to resemble Virgil's Venus: "Her gait alone proved her a goddess."

Despite these efforts, I have never felt completely steady on my feet. A clog accident a few years ago left me with a broken nose. On the morning of my most recent birthday, I tripped over my dog's leash and sprained my ankle. I decided it was time to investigate these issues.

It turns out that I'm not alone in feeling out of step. Jessica Rose, a professor of orthopedic surgery at Stanford University and director of the Motion & Gait Analysis Lab at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, tells me that as a society, we're in worse shape than ever. "Modern life isn't very forgiving when it comes to walking," she explains. "Sitting for long periods can cause stiffness." Other culprits are heavy shoulder bags and high-heeled shoes,

which interfere with our heel-toe progression by requiring us to put too much weight on the balls of our feet.

It may seem like the most natural activity in the world, but the apparent ease and convenience of walking are deceptive—according to an article published in 2012 in *Podiatry Today*, abnormal movements put stress and strain on regions of the body remote to the foot, setting off a “kinetic chain” of health issues including arthritis and lower-back pain. “If the patient doesn’t have a congenital problem or hasn’t fallen out of a sixth-story window, most low-back issues are the result of gait dysfunction,” says the article’s author, George Trachtenberg, D.P.M., when I track him down at his upstate New York office. The connection between our footwork and greater well-being cuts both ways: A Harvard study from 2012 found that memory problems can lead to an unsteady gait, and experts warn that conditions ranging from tight fascia to chronic headaches can also affect our stride. “For every injury, your body will overcompensate somewhere else,” says Manhattan chiropractor Emily Kiberd. “So an old right-knee problem might mean you lean to the left a little more when you move. These are small, subconscious changes, but they add up.”

And so I vowed, at the age of 38, to learn to walk all over again. In fact, Santa Monica, California, physical therapist Sherry Brouman’s walking and gait clinic, once the province of models and tennis players, is attracting more and more people like me who want to correct insidious habits. During a trip to the West Coast, I make an appointment to visit her home office. When I arrive, Brouman asks to see my shoes, then shakes her head when I proffer the running shoes I normally see my trainer in. “You’re not getting to the front of your feet; the back of the shoes are all worn down,” she tells me. Ideally, she explains, our entire body weight should push off the big toe with each step.

She then studies my bare feet and pronounces the outer areas “flat tires”—dry and callused from supporting too much weight. Finally, she instructs me to walk back and forth across the room. Her diagnosis: I’m constantly leaning back, like a Looney Tunes character approaching oncoming traffic. She readjusts my shoulders so that I hold myself straight.

My new walk makes me feel hunched and off balance. When I watch the video that Brouman has taken with my iPhone, I point out that my supposedly proper form resembles that of a cavewoman. She is unmoved, and makes me promise to spend five minutes every day practicing moving this way. She sends me off with the reminder that my current habits will only result in chronic back pain as the years go on.

Back home in Brooklyn, I do my homework faithfully, but after a month, I still suspect I look rounded over. If my walk is how I present myself to the world, I am in need of a little fine-tuning. So I visit Jonathan FitzGordon, a

yoga teacher who leads Core Walking classes in Carroll Gardens. His assessment of my gait sounds familiar: “You are barely using your feet,” he says. “You walk outside of your midline, with the toes turned out.” To add insult to injury, he performs a mortifying imitation of my rigid, duck-like gait. Over the next hour, FitzGordon works with me on straightening my upper body, but also has me practice crossing my feet in front of me, rotating my pelvis, and swinging my arms when I move. It feels unnatural, yet when I catch my reflection in the mirror I see I’m moving elegantly and with confidence.

FitzGordon’s final words to me—“Swish, glide, freedom”—reverberate in my head long after I leave left his studio. I spend the next two months replicating what he taught me. I hear his mantra while walking my dog in the morning or cutting across a crowded room at a party. A new walk is about so much more than homework. I feel lighter in spirit, stronger, and more equal to my surroundings. I may even be a more graceful version of myself. Somewhere, Virgil is smiling.

Ready to learn how to walk? These physical therapists, yoga teachers, and trainers offer gait analysis and instruction on proper form.

New York City

CoreWalking

Jonathan FitzGordon is a yoga teacher whose combination of movement, exercise, and release work has earned him a cult following. Classes are available one-on-one in Brooklyn or via Skype.

corewalking.com

KIMA Center for Physiotherapy and Wellness

Individual gait analysis is done with research-grade force-plate analytics at this Flatiron clinic.

kimawellness.com

Manhattan Physio Group

Every private session at this New York City–based physical-therapy center begins with a look at the patient’s gait to look for cues of misalignment, weakness, or tightness in the body.

manhattanphysiogroup.com

Los Angeles

Sherry Brouman

Los Angeles–based Brouman uses her training as a physical therapist and yoga teacher in her walking and gait clinics, offered either in person or over Skype.

sherrybrouman.com

Chicago

On Your Mark Coaching and Training

Try the small group F Train or F Core classes for instruction in how to be more efficient in movement, prevent injury, and build body awareness.

oymtraining.com

Tucson, Arizona

Canyon Ranch

The Tucson spa's 30-minute gait analysis uses a special treadmill to analyze your walk on video and via a computerized assessment of your foot's biomechanics.

canyonranch.com