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If you have found it challenging to stick to an exercise plan this past year, listen up! Routine exercise isn't just good for your physical health, new research has found when you ride a bike, hike, walk outdoors or do laps around an indoor walking track, and you're also helping your memory.

The takeaway message from new research is this: If you are over 50 and are having trouble sticking to a regular walking regimen, you may want to focus on committing to your walking schedule. Changes in patterns of walking—walking less frequently, walking with different gaits as you age, and walking slower and less steadily on even paths can indicate cognitive problems later on in life.

What's more, new research from various institutes including the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois found walking or riding a bike for six months or up to a year can help improve memory as well as problem solving skills in older adults by up to 20 percent.

The new research also points out that adults over 50 who take regular walks are more likely to improve their memory than people of the same age with sedentary lifestyles.

The links between walking, exercise, and better memory are based on research that shows that staying fit through ongoing walking can increase the size of crucial parts of the brain. As human brains age they typically grow smaller, one reason for a shrinking memory.

A large study at the Mayo Clinic which involved basic walking, also found that walking was linked to cognitive abilities. This study found a strong connection between declines in executive function, the ability to plan and organize activities, and slower walking.

New evidence from several research universities has said that cognitive skills like memory and the ability to process information, parallels the ability to keep up a steady walking pace over time.

Willpower Needs “Tweaking”

So why do many people have trouble sticking to an exercise routine, even when it may involve low impact walking?

Many people think they'll find the willpower to get off the couch and go outside and walk a mile or so every day. But in reality they don't have the willpower to resist the comforts of sitting in an easy chair watching TV.

Did you know that willpower is a source of mental energy? If you don't have sharp cognitive skills often referred to as “executive decision” you may have difficulty getting up and going outdoors to walk around the block when the weather isn't great.

So don't blame all the distractions in your life on not making walking a priority.

Instead, blame it on poor executive decision, a term well-known by scientists who refer to our ability to multi-task, make good decisions, plan ahead, prioritize and weigh options.

Evidence has shown that those who fine-tune their executive function can have stronger willpower.

Establish a Walking Schedule

- Commit to doing it. Just like any new lifestyle activity, you'll want to make sure you "practice what you preach." Every person reacts to different motivators. Start by simply making a commitment to walking more frequently.
- Put a plan together that you can realistically follow. Write down your goals such as walking two city blocks a day. Write down increments of how many blocks you want to accomplish by when such as after 30 days you want to get up to a mile five days a week. The purpose of goal setting is to give you something to work toward. If the goal isn't working, fine-tune it to fit your lifestyle. Just keep walking on a consistent basis.
- Sign up for reminders. Use whatever reminders you need to tell yourself it's time to get out and walk. It might be memos on your computer or notes on a bulletin board. If the weather is bad, walk around a room. A small amount of exercise is better than none at all.
- Share your goals with family and friends. Tell people what you are doing. They may want to join you on your walks which will extend the possibility for making walking more fun.
- Don't be too hard on yourself. Keep in mind that you need good executive function to keep on top of your goals. If you use willpower as a tool to get something you want, that's the prize and ultimately the pleasure you'll get from more frequent walking.