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Walking and Talking in the Great Outdoors

“WALKING IS MAN’S BEST MEDICINE.”

— HIPPOCRATES



Anna-Marie Watson, ACC

Anna-Marie is a Performance Coach who loves to head into the great outdoors with clients before, during or after work.

Her coaching philosophy and ethos are reflected through her consultancy business Reach for More. She is an accredited Analytic-Network and mBraining coach and certified in eDISC and iWAM psychometric profile tools.

Anna-Marie is a qualified Mountain Leader, certified in Wilderness First Aid and a member of the British Mountaineering Council with more than 10 years of international expedition experience. She works in partnership with the Fresh Air Learning Company to facilitate experiential learning for teams outdoors. Learn more at rfmcoaching.com.

The art and science of coaching combined with kinesthetic motion in a natural environment creates a powerful blend to facilitate transformational change. Walking and talking coaching sessions range from a reflective meander along a nearby river or local urban adventure of exploration to a focused, brisk march to reach a desired destination, the challenge to summit an iconic peak or an expedition overseas to discover unknown territory. Each occasion offers the chance to escape beyond our habitual office space and disrupt daily routines to create a bespoke coaching experience with a wealth of relational metaphors and connections that can be unpacked.

Experiential coaching while walking outdoors has repeatedly provided evidence of benefits including improved creativity, increased productivity, stress reduction, mental clarity and appreciation of different perspectives. These benefits are all succinctly captured through the words of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking." The walking and talking coaching niche emerged initially from personal experience spending time outdoors with family and friends, then developed during military and expedition work and has subsequently been refined alongside professional coaching development.

Take a Step Back to Basics

The pace of life in our frenzied 21st-century existence continues to escalate through the real or perceived demands of work, technology, finances, social obligations, politics, environmental considerations ... the list continues. Each individual component commands our time and energy as the divide between work and life becomes increasingly blurred.

These work commitments and social interactions are predominantly sedentary, with daunting statistics repeatedly quoted by the global media to highlight our endemic "sitting disease" and obesogenic environment. In Western society, the daily average time spent sitting down is eight to 10 hours, and the figures continue to trend upward. Yet, from an evolutionary perspective, the human species is designed to walk up to 12 miles per day.

The action of stepping back into nature reconnects with our genetic physiological predisposition as hunter-gatherers and creates biochemical changes within the body: More blood and oxygen circulate to the brain, new connections are formed between brain cells, and the hippocampus (the center for emotion, memory and autonomic nervous system volume) increases. In a nutshell, walking and talking in the great outdoors support our innate neurological, biological and genetic physiological factors to improve cognitive function.

Walking Works Wonders

The myriad of benefits from walking and talking supports a holistic

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“TALKING THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF WORK, THE DISTRACTIONS OF A TIME-CONSUMING HOBBY AND THE FRAGILE NATURE OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN AN ENVIRONMENT UNTOUCHED BY THE TRAPPINGS OF MODERN LIFE ENABLED ME TO ORDER MY THOUGHTS.”

—SOPHIE, PROJECT MANAGER

well-being approach and interlinks mental and physical factors. The list below provides a mere snapshot:

- Improves cognitive performance.
- Supports working memory, reasoning and learning.
- Increases productivity and energy levels.
- Raises self-confidence and happiness.
- Alleviates anxiety.
- Reduces stress and depression.
- Keeps brain cells healthy and encourages neurogenesis.
- Increases levels of usable brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF).
- Aligns our circadian rhythm and reboots our body clock.
- Increases Vitamin D absorption.
- Helps regulate appetite.
- Enriches cardiovascular and immune system.
- Decreases risk for heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, stroke and diabetes.
- Strengthens muscles and bones.
- Improves strength and balance.
- Improves blood flow to provide oxygen, glucose and metabolic products to the cells.
- Improves blood flow to remove toxic electrons from the cells.

Walking Through a Coaching Session

Walking and talking in the great outdoors can be leveraged in a variety of different ways to enhance a coaching session or engagement:

- Offer clients the opportunity to experience a single walking and talking session to enhance your usual coaching arrangement and structure.
- Design dedicated walking and talking sessions and vary the duration (half-day, full-day or multi-day), location, distance and approach.
- Use the outdoor environment for coaching-based exercises during or in-between coaching sessions (e.g., personal reflection, mindful walking/sitting, breathing exercises, deconstructing metaphors drawn from nature, deepening relationships through conversation).
- Conduct virtual coaching sessions from your “green office” outdoors through Skype, Zoom or another online platform.

Things to Consider

The great outdoors is an amazing environment to support and deepen the overall coaching experience. The following considerations should be taken in advance to maintain high-quality coaching services:

Experiment. If walking and talking is a completely new coaching idea, test the concept in advance with your peers or willing clients. Select an accessible local park or open space to test, then adjust and learn from the experience.

Client comfort. Not everyone enjoys spending time outside! Co-create the entire outdoor element with your client and reference this within the coaching agreement.

Inclement weather plan.

Some clients are content to don waterproof jackets and boots and huddle under an umbrella; however, some might prefer a drier, more comfortable option.

Location, location, location.

Think about the venue and route in relation to terrain, distance, accessibility, fitness levels, confidentiality and medical issues.

Health and safety at work. Make sure first aid, public liability and professional insurance are covered. Consider your personal safety as well, especially when meeting a new client for the first time.

Client medical disclosure.

Clarify any medical conditions relevant to walking outdoors that might not usually arise during the coaching partnership. 

“I’VE ALWAYS BEEN AT MY MOST REFLECTIVE WHILE OUT FOR A WALK. BEING IN THE FRESH AIR WHILE GENTLY EXERCISING THE BODY IS A GOOD TIME FOR THINKING THROUGH WHATEVER IS PLAYING ON THE MIND.”

—PETE, ENGINEER