

Neuroscientist: Walking Is 'a Superpower' That Makes Us Smarter, Healthier and Happier

In a new book, a neuroscientist digs deep into the brain benefits of just walking around.

Walking probably feels like one of the easiest things you do all day. According to neuroscience, it isn't really. It's a superpower.

[Walking](#) is a handy way to get from point A to point B, and it has [surprisingly huge health benefits](#) for something so low-key. But what really makes it a superpower, neuroscientists insist, is what happens in our brains when we do it.

Just crossing the street is pretty miraculous.

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Walking might feel easy, but according to Shane O'Mara, a neuroscientist and author of the new book [In Praise of Walking](#), it's actually hugely complicated for your brain to pull off. As O'Mara wandered around Dublin [speaking with the Guardian's Amy Fleming](#) recently (hat tip to [Kottke](#)), he explained everything your brain needs to juggle for you to go for a stroll.

On top of the basics like keeping your heart beating and lungs breathing, your brain engages in constant "cognitive mapping" when you walk. Fleming neatly sums this up as "our internal GPS," the process that keeps you basically oriented with a sense of where major landmarks are and which direction you need to go. When you walk, your brain is doing this without your awareness all the time. The system even works pretty well when you're blindfolded. (And no, O'Mara insists, GPS isn't ruining our sense of direction. "That's absolute garbage," he says.)

Then, there's the whole task of not running into anything or anyone, which involves the social intelligence to predict the actions of others. All of that is on top of what goes on in our conscious brains when we take a walk. Our waking minds are often "flickering between big-picture states - thinking about what we have to do tomorrow, plans for next year, engaging in what is called 'mental time travel' - and task-focused work," O'Mara explains.

In short, everyday walking is actually an incredibly difficult task. "Robots can't do this. Getting a robot to cross the road is really hard," O'Mara reminds us. But for your incredible brain, crossing a busy intersection is a breeze.

Happier, smarter, and more creative

All of this makes clear that walking is way more cognitively complex than most of us realize. But it's not just the hidden difficulty of walking that makes it a superpower. All of this mental gymnastics means simply going for a stroll has incredible impacts on how we think and feel. By exercising so many brain systems, [walking works like an](#)

[antidepressant](#), an aid to learning, and [a huge creativity booster](#).

Putting one foot in front of the other loosens us up to make new connections that help spark new ideas. It dampens down the stress and anxiety that keep us from curiosity and learning. It can even change your personality for the better over time.

In the *Guardian* article O'Mara "cites a 2018 study that tracked participants' activity levels and personality traits over 20 years, and found that those who moved the least showed malign personality changes, scoring lower in the positive traits: openness, extraversion and agreeableness." Sitting around all day can literally make you a grumpier, more [narrow-minded person](#).

All of which seems like ample evidence to conclude that O'Mara is right. Walking might seem like the humblest of activities, but that's just a perception problem. Viewed correctly, it's clearly a superpower, and one that's easily within your grasp.