



Walking Group

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements | PAGE 3

Overview | PAGE 4

Implementation steps:

- Building community partners | PAGE 5
- Forming the walking group | PAGE 6
- Selecting and mapping walking routes | PAGE 7
- Publicizing Step It Up! | PAGE 8
- Organizing the kick-off event | PAGE 9
- Establishing SMART goals | PAGE 10
- Leading walking groups | PAGE 11
- Enhancing participants' motivation | PAGE 12 - 13
- Maintaining participant interest | PAGE 14
- Identifying peer leaders | PAGE 14

Handouts:

- Walking fundamentals | PAGE 15
- Benefits of walking | PAGE 16
- Stretching examples | PAGE 17

References | PAGE 18

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OVERVIEW

The evidence

Engaging in 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity 5 days a week has numerous health benefits including improved blood pressure, sleep, mood (depression and anxiety), quality of life, and insulin sensitivity [1]. This level of physical activity also lowers the risk of chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity and osteoporosis, and certain cancers [1]. Physical activity improves physical function, fitness and strength and may improve cognitive function in adults [1]. Despite these health benefits, nearly 75% of US adults fail to achieve adequate levels of physical activity [2]. Rural residents tend to have higher rates of obesity, heart disease and cancer [3-5] and are less active compared with their urban counter parts [2].

Walking is the most common and accessible form of physical activity. It can be done without specialized skills or equipment. Walking can be done year-round either indoors or outdoors. Group-based walking programs have been shown to increase walking, physical activity and fitness and improve health outcomes [6-8]. Group-based walking programs promote the adoption and maintenance of walking for health by building social support, group cohesion, and social capital [8-10]. In rural communities, social support (or lack of social support) can be an important facilitator (or barrier) for walking [11-13], and group-based walking programs can strengthen social networks and improve social support [14, 15]. Community group-based walking programs are recommended by the Community Guide [16] because of the strong evidence base for increasing physical activity.

This toolkit

In an effort to improve the health of rural Americans, this Toolkit focuses on implementing a group-based walking program that supports walking by providing social support. The Toolkit will provide you with the tools to implement a group-based walking program, Step It Up!, in your community. There are 10 steps of program implementation:

Ten steps of program implementation

1. Building Community Partners
2. Forming the Walking Group
3. Selecting and Mapping Walking Routes
4. Publicizing Step It Up!
5. Organizing the kick-off event
6. Establishing SMART goals
7. Leading walking groups
8. Enhancing participants' motivation
9. Maintaining participant Interest
10. Identifying peer leaders

Expected outcomes for individuals participating in Step It Up!

- Increased physical activity and physical fitness
- Increased companionship, encouragement and support for physical activity
- Increased confidence in the ability to walk for health

Building community partners

Successful community walking programs require working with community partners who will be invested in the success of the walking program. Below are some examples of possible community partners.

POSSIBLE PARTNER	POSSIBLE ROLES
Neighborhood associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote walking program with members Suggest neighborhood walking routes
Community organizations, schools, faith-based institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote walking program to a variety of community residents Suggest meeting locations for walking group Offer indoor location for walking group
Departments concerned with municipal parks, recreation, and transportation departments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggest neighborhood walking routes that are safe and well maintained Promote walking program Offer indoor location for walking group
Law enforcement agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggest and ensure safe walking routes
Local health departments, healthcare agencies and health care providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer participants to walking program Promote walking program Advocate for benefits of physical activity
Local media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote walking program
Local businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsor walking programs with possible incentives (e.g., coupons) Promote walking program Offer indoor location for walking group

Partners are members of the community and/or have strong ties to community members and they will be essential throughout the program planning and implementation periods.

- Determine the best way to engage with the partners to inform them of the benefits of the walking program and your plans. For example, you might hold an information session with a small group or meet with each individually.
- Carefully consider the potential role for each partner. See table above for examples.

Forming the walking group

What kind of walking group do you envision? In other words, how big will it be, how often will it meet, and what other rules or guidelines would you put in place to create the group?

Walking groups can function well under different rules and in different settings. Here are some things to consider:

Size of the group. How many participants would you like to be in the group? Consider that attendance will likely fluctuate each week. You may decide on a minimum number of participants in order to get the group off the ground, and you may want to identify a maximum number of participants.

Timeline. Will your walking group go on indefinitely, or for a year or two? You may ask participants to commit to attending for a period of time (such as 2 months, 6 months) or leave it open to however long they wish to participate. How often will the group meet; once a week, twice a week? How will you decide the time and day of the group walk?

Group rules. You may decide on some rules from the beginning or leave it up to the group to discuss when the walks begin. Some examples: should the group keep the same participants each week, or always remain open to new members? Can participants bring dogs or young children? Can participants bring friends or family to the walk?

Participants. Your organization may require only certain people can join the group, such as being a minimum age or living within a certain area of your organization. You may want to create a group for specific people, such as teenagers, families, or older adults. You might decide that you want to design the group for individuals who currently don't get much physical activity. You might want to consider whether there are health conditions when you will ask an individual to obtain permission from a health care provider before participating.

Contact information. You will likely need to contact participants on a regular basis to lead the group. Consider what information you will need: address, email, phone number, etc. Does the group want to set up a text or social media group?



Selecting and mapping walking routes

It's helpful to identify at least one walking route before recruiting participants so they know beforehand where they will be walking. Here are some tips on selecting and mapping walking routes:

- Choose at least one walking route that takes approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.
- Walk the route in advance and time the walk.
- Consider selecting and mapping several routes for variety.
- Determine an indoor route for inclement weather.
- Consider safety, aesthetics and location of walking route. Are sidewalks or greenways available? Is the route in an enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing walking environment? Is it easy to find and accessible? Are there parking and restroom facilities? How about lighting if for walks after dark in the winter?
- Use your own knowledge of the community and advice from community partners to determine the most suitable walking routes.
- Consult with community partners if maps of possible routes already exist. If not, you will need to develop a walking route. See table below for possible mapping resources.

RESOURCES	BENEFITS
Map My Run Free app Website: mapmyrun.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map mileage by pointing and clicking directly on the map
Google Maps Free app Website: maps.google.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used on the computer or the mobile app • Offers walking routes icon (walker) to map routes more suitable for walking
Strava Free app Website: strava.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real time GPS that monitors speed, mileage, and location • Participants can post their results on social media

- Maps should highlight the walking route, length of the route, and elevation changes.

Publicizing Step It Up!

- Publicize the program in a broad range of platforms, such as social media, local newspapers and/or radio stations, and posters in key community locations to reach as many members of the community as possible.
- Disperse fliers in community and recreation centers, faith-based institutions, stores, healthcare settings, fitness centers, senior centers, schools, libraries and other public places, as given permission by owner/manager of the building.

- Make sure the flyer features your email address and/or phone number so interested individuals can contact you.

- The flyer can also be used in your organization's social media post, an advertisement for print media or in your organization's newsletter.

- The flyer can be made in postcard and business card-size versions. These can be handed out at public events.

- Make sure that all the text on the flyer is accurate and approved by everyone involved in the program. Any photos should come from public domain sources or feature people who gave permission to use their photo.



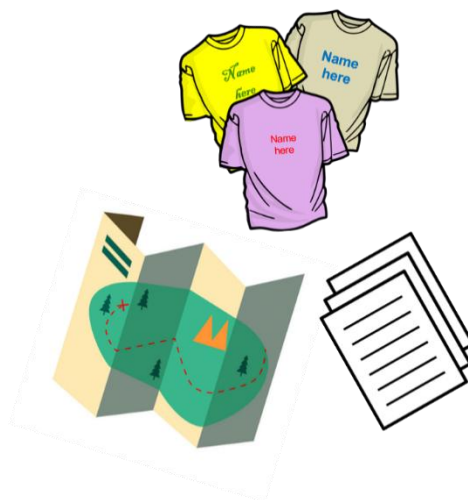
Example of a promotional flyer.

- The text on the flyer may also work for a script when promoting the program on local radio stations.
- Involve community partners by asking them to recommend the walking program.
- Use word of mouth to spread the information about the program. The more people you can get excited about the program, the more information about the program will spread.
- You might find that women are more likely than men to want to participate in the walking group, consider ways to reach men in the community.

Organizing the kick-off event

This is an important step in getting participants excited. The goals of the kick-off event are to foster social support among participants, give you the chance to become acquainted with them, and help participants establish SMART goals. Here are some tips for a successful kick-off event:

- Select a central community location for the kick-off event to take place.
- Wear a name tag and ask participants to wear name tags.
- Ask each participant to introduce themselves. Record attendance if keeping attendance.
- Give a brief description of your role of walking leader.
- Create a group name by asking participants for ideas. This helps build group identity which fosters continued participation.
- Ask the group if they would be interested in t-shirts with the group name. Group t-shirts build pride and identity with the group which fosters continued participation.
- Distribute welcome kits that include maps of walking routes and the “Walking Fundamentals” and “Benefits of Walking” handouts at the end of this toolkit.
- Conclude the Kick-off event by going on a 20-minute walk. Regroup and stretch briefly.



Group norms

Creating group norms help foster an environment of respect, inclusion, and trust. Create these norms at the first group walk to set expectations for the rest of the program. Start by giving examples or suggestions to get the discussion going. Write them down and occasionally remind the group of them. Let the group members know they can revisit the list at any time and make changes. Inform new members of the group norms. Group norms should cover:

- Commitment to attending and active participation
- Trust and respect
- Openness and flexible approach to thinking
- Individual responsibility and reciprocity
- Arriving on time and not running overtime
- Making decisions together as a group
- Let others fully speak their mind before commenting or sharing
- Encouraging and valuing different opinions or viewpoints

Establishing SMART goals

SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals are important in reaching a fitness objective. SMART goals can help participants stay on track and remind them of their priorities, so they're able to follow through with every walking event.

Ask participants to think of a SMART goal for themselves and let them know you will check-in about their goals over each week.

SMART goals should meet the following criteria:

Specific: An example of a goal that's not very specific would be "to get healthy", which is a bit vague and not concrete. An example of a specific goal, on the other hand, would be to walk for 45 minutes every week, or walk for at least 30 minutes three times a week. Goals can be narrowed down to be more specific over the course of the walking program. Having a baseline to compare to helps participants measure their progress.

Measurable: Participants should choose a goal that is measurable so they have definite way of knowing when they've reached their goal. How long and how often a participant walks, for example, is a goal that is measurable. Participants can quantify their progress by comparing their current activity with what they did at the beginning of the walking program.

Attainable: While it can be helpful to set big-picture goals in the long-term, participants can benefit from a more achievable goal in the short-term to keep on track. Recognizing small and early successes can encourage long-term consistency. Participants should consider the size of their goal, since setting smaller goals are within reach of achieving.



Relevant: Participants should choose goals that feel worthwhile to them. Pinpointing why a goal is important can make it feel more relevant. For example: wanting to be fit enough to play with grandchildren may help motivate a participant to reach their goal of walking three times a week.

Timely: Identifying a deadline can create unnecessary pressure, but it's also important not to set a goal too far out. Participants should identify a timeframe for when they would like to achieve their goal. As mentioned before, it helps to set smaller goals along the way that build to a larger goal. It's important to be honest about what each participant can accomplish, and expectations should be adjusted so they're in line with a participant's schedule and commitments.

Leading the walking groups

The success of the walking group will largely depend on the leader. Here are some tips on leading successful walking groups:

- Arrive at the start location at least 10 minutes early and welcome each participant by name when they arrive. Complete attendance form if tracking attendance.
- Provide name tags to help people remember everyone's name.
- Start every walk with a 10-minute check-in. Topics to discuss among the group could include progress toward reaching SMART goals, barriers and challenges, feelings regarding walking /physical activity experiences, and any positive benefits from walking/physical activity.
- Lead a 30 to 45-minute walk. Start at 30 minutes and build to 45 minutes as participants are able to over a period of 3-4 weeks. Make sure the group stays within eyesight of each other and circulate to check in with all group members during the walk.
- Celebrate any successes of participants meeting goals. Affirming successes helps participants build confidence.
- There will be slower and faster walkers, so ask the group to develop a plan for how to accommodate walkers of all fitness levels. For example, making sure everyone is walking with at least one other person who walks at the same pace. If faster walkers get too far ahead, they can turn around and walk back to re-join the group.

Social support and connection

- Encourage wearing the group T-shirts, if made available, to establish common group identity.
- Encourage walking with at least one other group member on group walks.
- Encourage interaction among participants.
- Compile a contact list of participants to facilitate networking among participants and walking with others on other days

Keeping safe

- Carry a small first aid kit, snacks, and extra water on each walk. Carry "in case of emergency" contact numbers for each participant.
- Encourage participants to look out for one another. Watch for signs of overexertion in others, including dizziness, severe cramping, excessive sweating, and breathlessness. Ask the participant to slow down and call 911 if symptoms persist.
- Call emergency responders (911) if there is a serious injury.



Enhancing participants' motivation

As a group leader, you may want to help participants who have been missing walks to attend more frequently. You may also want to help participants renew their interest in achieving their SMART goals. What is the best way to do this?

Here's what likely *doesn't* work:

- Explaining *why* the participant should attend more walks or reach their goals
- Telling the participant *how* to attend more walks or reach their goals
- Emphasizing how *important* it is to attend more walks or reach their goals
- Trying to *persuade* a participant to attend more walks or reach their goals

Above are examples of a directive style of communication that isn't effective when it comes to helping participants change their behavior.

A more effective kind of communication is Motivational interviewing (MI) - an evidence-based approach to talk to someone about behavior change. Using MI can help you enhance the motivation of participants to attend walking groups more consistently and reach their SMART goals.

The following is a four-step example of how to use MI with a participant:

Raise subject



Raise the subject by asking permission to discuss missed group walks.
Example:

"I'm calling to check in. You have been great about coming to group walks/sessions, but we missed you the last few weeks. Would it be ok if we took a few minutes to discuss attending the group walks?"

Be transparent about your role. Example:

"As group leader, my role is to follow up with participants to better understand how they feel about the walking group."

Elicit and share



Ask the participant why they missed the group walk. Example: "Why do you think you didn't make it for the last group walk?"

Reflect back what you heard. Examples:

- "You needed to take care of an issue with your dog."
- "You enjoy the group walks, but it's hard to find the motivation sometimes to leave the house."
- "It sounds like you feel you don't walk fast enough to be in the group."

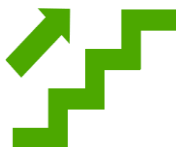
Elicit and share



Share some information about the benefits of the walking group. Example: “We know that individuals are more likely to experience the benefits of walking when they do it on a regular basis. Things like lower blood pressure, increased cardiorespiratory fitness, better mood, etc.”

Caution: avoid framing the information as advice or a recommendation

Enhance motivation



To enhance someone’s motivation to change, begin by asking the participant’s perceived pros and cons. Example: “I’m curious: what do you like so far about participating in the group walks?” Then ask: “Is there anything that you don’t like, or worry about when it comes to the group walks?”

Summarize what you heard the participant say. Example: “On one hand you enjoy the walking and socializing with other walkers. On the other hand, it takes time out of your busy day.”

Try to gauge the confidence of the participant to change by using a scale of 0-10. Example: “I’m curious: on a scale of 0 – 10, with zero being not confident at all to attend groups walks every week, and 10 being really confident, what number would you pick?”

Then ask: “Why do you think you picked that number instead of a lower one?” This question encourages the participant to verbalize reasons to change their behavior. When people hear themselves verbalize reasons to change, it enhances their motivation to change.

Identify plan



If the participant sounds ready to change, ask what plan they could put into place to help. Example: “What kind of plan would help you come to the more walking groups?”

People more likely to change when they come up with a plan. Possible examples of plans: setting a phone alarm for when it’s time to go to the walking group, arranging regular rides beforehand, wearing different clothes to feel more comfortable during walking, asking the group for a partner to walk with, etc.

Below is a script that may be helpful when talking to a participant about missed walks.

Identifying peer leaders

Walking groups are usually more sustainable when they are not dependent on just one leader for an indefinite amount of time. Consider asking for a participant take over as leader of the program, or two co-leaders. You may want to hand over leadership after 6 months, for example.

To identify potential peer leaders from the group, look for the following characteristics:

- Enjoy walking
- Familiar with walking routes
- Punctual
- Motivating
- Can commit to 6 months as leader
- Dedicated and committed to the ideals of the walking program
- Committed to safety

If a participant is willing to lead the group, provide a copy of this toolkit.



Walking fundamentals



Wear comfortable shoes for walking. Are they supportive? Will they give you blisters?



Hydrate and re-hydrate. Drink lots of water before, during, and after you walk, even if it's cold out and you don't feel thirsty.



Dress appropriately for walking in different weather conditions. Hot, cold or both? Try some layers. Wear bright and/or reflective clothing so you can be seen.



Apply sunscreen ... even if it's cloudy out!



Safety First. Wear bright clothing and bring lights if it's dark outside. Don't wear headphones. Go at your own pace and listen to your body!

Benefits of walking

Physical activity doesn't need to be complicated. Walking briskly on a regular basis helps you live a healthier life. For example, regular brisk walking is associated with:

- Lower risk of early death
- Lower risk of heart disease
- Lower risk of high blood pressure and adverse lipid profile
- Lower risk type 2 diabetes
- Lower risk of colon and breast cancer
- Lower risk of metabolic syndrome
- Prevention of weight gain
- Improved cardiorespiratory fitness
- Improved muscle fitness in legs
- Prevention of falls
- Reduced depression
- Better cognitive function

The faster, farther and more frequently you walk, the greater the benefits. For example, you may start out as a slow walker, and then work your way up to walking faster and walking a mile in a shorter amount of time. This can be a great way to get aerobic activity, improve your heart health and increase your endurance while burning calories.

Source: Physical Activity Guidelines for All Americans 2nd ed and Mayo Clinic

Stretching examples



Shoulder: Stand with feet shoulder width apart. Roll shoulders back and down. Bring left arm across body and use right arm to gently push left arm toward right shoulder. Hold for 30 seconds. Switch sides. Complete 3 repetitions.



Side: Stand with feet shoulder width apart and facing forward. Place left hand on hip and stretch right arm up. Bend to the left until you feel a slight stretch along the right side. Hold for 30 seconds. Switch sides. Complete 3 repetitions.



Inner Thigh: Stand with feet 2 to 3 times shoulder width apart with feet facing forward. Turn left foot out and bend left knee. Keep right leg straight. Lean away from straight leg while facing forward and arms at shoulder height. Feel a slight stretch on inner thigh of straight leg. Hold for 30 seconds. Switch sides. Complete 3 repetitions.

Stretching examples, etc.



Calves. Step forward with the right leg. Shift the body's weight on to the front (right) leg, while keeping the back heel pressed into the floor. Hold this position for 15–20 seconds. Do three sets and then repeat on the other leg.



Quads. Stand up right and hold onto something for balance. Bend the knee on the side that you would like to stretch and use your hand to hold onto the ankle. Pull the ankle towards the back of your hip. Aim to feel a stretch at the front of your thigh. Hold for 30 seconds and do the same for the other leg.



Hamstrings and Hips: Stand with feet shoulder width apart and facing forward. Slowly bend forward from the hips. Keep knees slightly bent and neck and arms relaxed. Go to the point you feel a slight stretch in back of legs – not too far. Hold for 30 seconds. Switch sides. Complete 3 repetitions.

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