



Work, Life Getting You Down? GET OUT – Outside that is – AND MOVE! I Did And It Changed my Life

By Norm Gagne

I regularly walk, run and hike. We backpack in the wilderness. It wasn't always so. I was never much of an athlete. I was an active kid and then played basketball through high school, some intramural and a few years of City League ball after and then my organized sports "career" ended. And so did my regular physical activity.

Lawyering is a sedentary activity. So too is judging. We sit, often for long hours at a time. The incentives reward the iron butt. I slid into a life of long hours at the office and little activity. I would go home, have a drink to relax, have dinner with my family, watch a little television and then fall into bed before starting all over again the next day. Weekend work was common. It is all too easy to slide into this lifestyle.

I fell into an unhealthy routine; too busy, I thought, to get out, too tired to do much, too many drinks to try to relax and to try to ease the stresses of a difficult profession. I gained weight, more than was comfortable on my tall but slight frame, and, in retrospect, began feeling worse and worse physically and mentally. I was doing all the wrong things. I tried to fix it and began playing tennis once a week and very occasionally riding my bike. It never amounted to more than a very few hours each week. All the while I kidded myself that I was doing just fine. I wasn't.

In my mid-forties something changed. Through my older son's sports activities I had the opportunity to be around people, teenagers but also adults, who were physically active, glowing with health and energy. It slowly sunk in. My existing ways did not compare favorably with the vitality and joy I saw in these people. At age forty four, I got out and became active again. I started running. Mind you, I hated running when I was younger. But I was traveling constantly in my work and really don't like hotel health spas. A pair of running shoes, shorts, a t-shirt and a cap for most of the year,

a long sleeve shirt, tights and gloves in colder winter weather and I was good to go. It was the easiest, most portable activity I could do. I could run anywhere my work took me. In time it became a very enjoyable way to explore an unfamiliar city.

I adjusted my diet to match my more active life. That coupled with activity caused weight loss to a more comfortable fit with my frame. I felt better. The paradox of exercise is that expending energy begets energy. My mood was vastly improved as was my resilience to stress. In time, I gave up drinking entirely.

In short, it changed my life.

I even began competitive running. I soon switched from road running to trail running. With a lot of help and encouragement from others, I have done every distance from 5k to a 34.5 mile "ultra marathon." I was never very fast, a middle or back of the pack competitor with an occasional age group medal. But winning is not the point. Moving, participating and finishing are. Along the way in addition to just plain feeling good, I have seen miles of beautiful country, met some wonderful people and made some good friends. Jane and I run, hike and backpack all the time, life affirming and bonding activities we enjoy together.

Is running not for you? (don't discount it entirely - I once hated running). There are other ways to get out that are just as rewarding and beneficial. For most people, walking is the single most available and accessible form of exercise. It is also one of the best. [*Walking: Your Steps To Health*, Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School (October 2020)]. You can do it in your neighborhood and wherever you travel. Near Albuquerque are miles of Open Space trails. Our neighboring Sandia Mountains have enough trails to keep you hiking and exploring for a long time. If on foot is not your favorite way to get around outdoors,

Albuquerque has over 400 miles of bike paths and trails to explore. Mountain bike trails are everywhere. Many other communities have walking and bike paths and trails. The State has abundant public lands and recreational opportunities can easily be found near where you live. With a little looking around, you will soon find your favorite places.

Getting out and moving is good! But don't just take my word for it. There is a sound, scientific basis for the physical and mental benefits I derive from my active life.

First, just getting outside is a boost to your physical and mental health. [*A Prescription For Better Health: Go Alfresco*, Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School (July 2010)]. Being outside increases Vitamin D. Epidemiological studies suggest that maintaining healthy levels of Vitamin D have protective effects against everything from osteoporosis to cancer, depression, heart attack and strokes. (Id.). Additionally, you are likely to get more exercise outdoors, you will be happier particularly in winter - light elevates mood, your concentration will likely improve and, if you have an injury or illness, you will likely heal faster. (Id.)

Other studies show that being outside reduces stress, anxiety and depression, lowers blood pressure and calms the body. [*Sour Mood Getting You Down? Get Back To Nature*, Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School (July 2018)].

Throw some exercise into the mix and magic happens. Studies show that exercise can improve sleep, increase libido, improve endurance, relieve stress, improve mood, improve energy and stamina, reduce tiredness and increase mental alertness, reduce weight and cholesterol and improve cardiovascular fitness. *Exercise For Mental Health*, Sharma, et al., The Primary Care Companion to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 2006; 8(2): 106.

Almost any kind of regular movement outside is enough to make a difference. And all by just getting out of the chair and out the door!

"Yeah but . . ." I hear you say. Ah, the "yeah buts," graveyard of good intentions.

"Yeah but I don't have time." Neither did I. Make time. It doesn't need to be a lot particularly at first. Take a walk around the block in the morning before you shower and leave for work. Or in the evening. Do little things to increase movement outside. Don't look for the nearest parking spot but park some distance from the entrance and get a little walk to and from. Walk the stairs instead of the elevator - OK, not outside but still

good. You get the idea. Just get moving. You will find that you have more energy, can concentrate longer and work more efficiently.

"Yeah but I travel a lot." So did I. A pair of walking or running shoes, comfortable walking clothes or running togs and you are good to go. Uncertain about safety in the area where you are staying? Ask the hotel. Hotel staff have directed me to some great routes for my runs. I have explored virtually every city and town to which I have traveled since I started running, have never felt insecure and have never had a problem. If you are concerned carry a small pepper spray.

"Yeah but the weather!" Too hot? Go early before it gets hot or late after it cools down. Too cold? Wait until it warms up and bundle up in layers; layer up when cold, down when warm. I find that when I am outside frequently, I adjust physically and mentally to temperature shifts with the seasons and have a much greater tolerance for temperatures outside of the narrow indoor range. Too windy? You won't blow away. Too rainy? You won't melt. You get the idea. You are much more adaptable than you think. Besides, weather is really pretty cool. We have had our most memorable runs, hikes and backpacking trips in epic weather.

"Yeah but I have physical limitations." Do what you can. There is probably an activity and a level of exertion that will work for you. If in doubt, talk to your doctor, a physical therapist or a trainer.

"Yeah but Covid 19." Outside activities are and have been the least restricted and, by consensus of all the health experts, the safest. Social distancing is easy. In our experience, most people you encounter outside are respectful and careful. It is easy to step aside and avoid the few who are not.

"Yeah but . . ." **"Yeah but. . ."** **"Yeah but. . ."** **"To borrow a phrase, JUST DO IT!"** Grab your mask. Get out, walk, hike, run, bike. You won't regret it. ■

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