



Mental Wellness and the Green Lift: Mood Walks Summit Breakout Group Responses

During the Mood Walks Summit (March 31, 2015), we invited all attendees to work together in small groups to generate suggestions for removing barriers and improving participation in the Mood Walks program. Here are some of the many ideas shared.

How can groups accommodate members with varying physical abilities?

Break into two or more groups based upon experience, comfort with nature, stamina, and challenge level by choice. Set walking/hiking routes of varied distances and terrains to accommodate different physical abilities. Offer differently paced walks/hikes, as well as both short and long hikes.

Have several hike leaders, to support beginner, intermediate and advanced hikers. Make sure there is a high volunteer-to-participant ratio. Create a buddy system between volunteers and participants.

Design a route that is looped, so people can stop at different points if they wish and still meet up with the group at the start/end point. Designate drop-off points before the walk starts. Know the trail, and let participants know what bugs, terrain, rest stops, and timing to expect.

How can we solve transportation issues?

Maximize access to carpooling. Ask volunteers with vehicles to take part, picking up participants, and accompanying on walks to support people with higher physical challenges. Arrange for volunteer drivers to have conservation area/park stickers.

Use agency vehicles or partner with other organizations that have transportation resources. Partner with an accessible transport service or an agency that owns a handi-van/vans or other accessible vehicles. Approach a car rental company to donate a van. Explore Autoshare. Contact ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program).

Approach local hiking groups to offer volunteer rides. Fundraise for local taxi slips.

Help participants develop public transit/bus utilization skills.

If transportation problems remain an issue, design walking routes “where you are, and as you are.”



How can Mood Walks be more appealing to people not already comfortable in nature?

To reach new participants, create displays in city malls about nature walks. Create a Mood Walks pin or button. Promote the idea that natural settings offer less noise and less crowd. Downplay the hiking aspect of Mood Walks by using a term like "Adventure Walks." Partner with local media and create a P.S.A. or infomercial. Use word of mouth.

Provide an informative orientation class to begin. Let people attend with someone they trust so they are not alone. Bring a conservation officer in to discuss the local terrain. Show pictures and slides from previous Mood Walks groups. Show the SAFE Hike PowerPoint. Have conversations to find out fears, and educate with talks by guest speakers.

Create a gradual introduction to walking in wooded areas by starting with walks in familiar local parks. Consider starting with indoor walks or very short outings around city blocks. Meet in an urban setting to talk about nature and possible trails before embarking on outdoor walks/hikes.

When starting a hike, be prepared with information participants will need to feel more comfortable. Give accurate time limits, and start off slow. Know where washrooms are, as well as benches and places to sit and rest. Bring along someone knowledgeable about natural fauna and flora (for example, wild garlic, onion, carrot, sumac), edible wild things, trees, birds and other local information.

Offer cash and product incentives to become involved in a Mood Walks group. Partner with a local equipment supply company to provide water bottles, hats, etc. Offer a "Try a Day" visit with Mood Walks. Combine Mood Walks with geo-caching or other fun-added events.

Are there any other significant barriers that make running or starting a Mood Walks group difficult?

Human resources, partnerships, funding, and transportation may be challenging to put in place. There may be work to do to get an agency to "buy in" to the value of starting up a Mood Walks group, to locate support staff and volunteers, and to manage the potential risks and legalities of the program. Communicating the time resources needed to properly run a program may be hard to convey to management.

Convey the Mood Walks idea to management with a slideshow of conservation areas, parks and nature trails where groups would conduct their walks.

MOOD WALKS



Funding may be difficult to find. Clothing, footwear, hats, sunscreen, and equipment can be expensive. Approach existing hiking clubs for donations.

For people with mental health challenges, motivation can be affected by a variety of factors. Bad weather may throw off attendance. Low turnout or irregular group size can, in turn, be discouraging. Plan alternative activities in case of bad weather.

Lack of social skills, discomfort being in a group, and shyness may cause inconsistent attendance. Fear of being in the woods or of bugs or darkness may get in the way of participating. Going into new places and uncertainty about the location of meeting spots may weigh against attendance. Get to know the varying abilities of group participants to best support their attendance.

How can Mood Walks become more inclusive in your community (both socially and practically)?

Involve partners, family and friends in the groups. Open up the groups to all ages and abilities. Offer pole walking to increase physical stability for those who would like this. Make a suggestion box available so ongoing feedback can help steer the group's development.

Regarding feelings of not fitting in, and low self-esteem, allow time to establish relationships. Use ice breakers to get the group talking and relating. Use the "buddy system" within the group, to nurture familiarity. Support the group's peer-led capacity, where participants "train the trainers" about their own needs and strengths.

Actively promote the start-up of new groups. Advertise! Create a good promotional flyer to distribute or a print ad to run in local media. Distribute a call for participation through community and social support agencies. Post news about Mood Walks meet-ups on social media.

Promote well-being through the physical health benefits of Mood Walks, and educate your community on mental illness so it's not as intimidating to advertise the groups for those with mental health issues.

Make connections with local environmental organizations, hiking clubs, schools, physical health programs, as well as local clubs (for example, Rotary, Knights of Columbus, Legion). Ask them to spread the word in their listings and on bulletin boards about new Mood Walks groups forming. Ask them to partner by donating resources and/or volunteers. Invite people from other groups to join in on a Mood Walk, to find out first-hand about its benefits.

Do outreach through multicultural organizations. Partner with other programs on joint public events.



Would you enjoy other activities combined with walking/hiking in a Mood Walks program? What activities?

Many suggestions were made, including:

- BBQ and/or picnics
- Community kitchen before setting out
- Discussing nutrition/hydration
- Swimming at a local park or conservation area
- Walking meditation and/or rest-period seated meditation
- Walk'n'Talk themes and activities
- Yoga, stretching, relaxation breaks
- Singing, music making, percussion
- Book activities, reading, journal writing on site or after walks
- Walking or rest-period storytelling
- Drawing, painting
- Nature identification – bring along a conservation guide or naturalist
- Build a group notebook of species observed
- Visiting waterfalls, unique features of terrain
- Animal tracking, owl/bird watching
- Photography, nature sound recording
- Scavenger/treasure hunt
- Foraging
- Orienteering, camping, geo-caching
- Games: Disc Golf, I Spy, Paint Chip game, co-op games
- Create a trail
- Trail maintenance – giving back with environmental stewardship
- Rest-period campfire (where permitted)
- Take an expert with you – guest speakers, motivational speakers, tour guide
- Sport or pop celebrity guest hikers (e.g., well-known hockey player)
- Canoeing, kayaking, fishing
- Gardening, tree planting
- Early morning walks, night walks ("Moon" Walk)
- Hug a tree
- Contribute to a shared Mood Walks database of Ontario trails, flora, fauna
- Using everybody's expertise
- All-day, all Mood Walks programs event