Solve your problem with a wink

I Started Counting My Walks, Then Just Checking Them Off

How to Get Back to Moving Every Day Without Obsessively Tracking Your Results



Max Paradox

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PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

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INTRO

You went out for a walk. The air feels pleasant, your legs are working, and for a little while, the world isn't demanding that you reply to messages. You're strolling along peacefully when, suddenly, you glance at your watch. Two thousand eight hundred and forty-seven steps. Not bad, technically, but your daily target is eight thousand. You pick up the pace. A few minutes later, you check again. Three thousand one hundred and twelve. Something clearly isn't cooperating. What was supposed to be a relaxing walk has turned into a production performance review. All that's missing is a shift supervisor asking why your step-count growth rate is falling behind projections.

The funniest part is that nobody forced you into this. You set the target yourself. You bought the device that monitors it. You agreed to receive notifications informing you that you haven't yet earned your little green circle. And now, instead of enjoying the fact that you've actually left the house, you're wondering whether a walk that doesn't meet its quota should count at all. Somewhere along the way, movement that was supposed to make you feel better acquired its own rulebook, grading system, and invisible examination committee.

There's nothing wrong with counting steps. Numbers can be motivating, reveal progress, and help us notice how much time we spend sitting still. The problem begins when they stop being information and become a verdict. When five thousand steps no longer means an enjoyable walk but three thousand steps of failure. When resting requires an explanation, and an ordinary day without exercise produces

more guilt than a forgotten wedding anniversary. At that point, it's worth examining not your legs but the rules under which you're allowing them to operate.

Perhaps you know this pattern all too well. First comes an innocent idea: I'm going to walk more. Then an app suggests a daily target. You start watching your statistics, comparing weeks, and celebrating new personal records. For a while, everything works beautifully. Until the day it rains, you have more responsibilities than usual, or you simply don't have the energy. Your numbers drop. The next day, you try to make up for what you missed, even though yesterday's walk isn't an overdue invoice. Eventually, you begin thinking about physical activity primarily in terms of how much you've managed to accomplish.

And that's precisely when you can overlook something important: a walk doesn't have to be an achievement to be worthwhile.

Imagine going outside for fifteen minutes because you need to clear your head. Along the way, you stop beside a tree, notice a dog attempting to negotiate an additional five minutes in the bushes with its owner, and return home feeling a little better. You haven't broken a record. You haven't closed an activity ring. You haven't earned a digital medal that looks suspiciously like an award for distinguished service to the pavement. And yet you've done something good for yourself. These are exactly the kinds of experiences we can lose sight of when we try to turn every activity into a measurable success.

This book isn't a manifesto against technology. We won't be organizing ceremonial smartwatch disposal events or arguing that pedometers represent the first stage of humanity's eventual subjugation. Devices are tools, and they

can be extremely useful. The point is to regain the freedom to choose. To reach a place where you can check your results, but you don't have to. Where you can set a target without treating it as a binding commitment to the International Federation of Recreational Walkers. Where you can even leave the house without your phone and return knowing that your walk genuinely happened, despite the fact that no server received official confirmation.

Getting back to moving freely can be harder than it sounds, especially if you've spent a long time getting used to rewards for consistency. Streaks of consecutive active days can be encouraging, but breaking one can make you feel as though your entire walking career has been wiped from the record books. Meanwhile, your body doesn't erase the benefits of previous walks simply because you stayed home on Tuesday. Consistency matters, but it doesn't demand perfection. Movement can remain part of your life even when its frequency and intensity change according to your responsibilities, health, or ordinary tiredness.

I'm not going to tell you that all you need to do is stop caring about numbers. If it were that simple, you could stick a note saying "Relax" on your watch and consider the problem solved. Habits, however, don't disappear on command, particularly when they've helped us stay motivated for a long time. That's why we'll explore how numbers so easily take control of our attitude toward physical activity, how to recognize the moment when motivation turns into pressure, and how to gradually rediscover the pleasure of moving without constantly judging the results.

There will also be room for real life, which rarely resembles an advertisement for healthy living. Sometimes

you come home from work and all you want to do is sit down. Sometimes a walk with a child involves more stopping than walking. On other occasions, taking the dog outside lasts half an hour, but the animal spends most of that time conducting an extraordinarily detailed scent investigation across approximately three square metres. Activities like these don't always look impressive in your statistics. Nevertheless, they can have a place in everyday movement, where the goal isn't to win a competition but to function and feel better.

It's also worth remembering that people have different abilities and circumstances. Not everyone can walk every day, cover long distances, or increase their pace. Health conditions, mobility limitations, recovery from illness or surgery, and individual medical recommendations take priority over universal targets suggested by an app. If physical activity causes concerning symptoms or needs to be adapted to a medical condition, the appropriate person to consult is a qualified healthcare professional, not an online step-count leaderboard. This book doesn't propose one standard for everyone. Instead, it encourages you to develop a relationship with movement that is sensible, sustainable, and suited to your own circumstances.

You can begin with a small experiment. During your next walk, try spending a few minutes without checking your numbers. Instead, notice how you feel, whether your pace is comfortable, and what's happening around you. If you instinctively glance at your wrist, you haven't ruined anything. It's simply information about a habit, not evidence that you lack willpower. The aim isn't to set a new record for not checking records. It's to discover that your attention can

move away from the screen and return to the experience of walking itself.

You don't have to abandon targets, plans, or measurements immediately. Perhaps you'll continue to enjoy them. What matters is being able to distinguish between a tool that helps you and a rule that's beginning to control you. A good walk can be long or short, brisk or leisurely. It can take you somewhere specific or nowhere in particular. Not every walk has to improve your fitness in a measurable way. Sometimes it's enough that it gives you a break from your responsibilities and lets you spend a little time outside your own four walls.

So imagine that one day you leave the house, walk for as long as you feel like walking, and then calmly return home. You don't check whether you've earned congratulations. You don't wonder how far you fell short of your target. You don't add a few extra laps around the block just to keep your device happy. You simply went for a walk.

And that really is enough to call it a walk.

Chapter 1 - When Your Walk Got Its Own Quality Control Department

The first sign that something has gone wrong usually appears in a completely innocent situation. You come home after an enjoyable walk, take off your shoes, pour yourself a glass of water, and glance at your phone. The app informs you that you haven't reached your daily target. You're twelve hundred steps short. Just a moment ago, you were perfectly satisfied. Now you feel slightly disappointed, as though someone has just checked your homework and found a mistake in the final exercise. For a moment, you consider going out again, even though you don't feel like it. Eventually, you start walking around your apartment. From the living room to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the hallway, and then back again. Your family members look at you suspiciously because you resemble someone who has lost their keys but refuses to admit defeat. Meanwhile, you're conducting an important rescue operation. Today's step count must be saved.

It doesn't matter whether you're short by two hundred, one thousand, or three thousand steps. What matters is what happened inside your head. Fifteen minutes earlier, your walk was an enjoyable experience. After looking at the screen, it became a task you had failed to complete properly. Nothing changed about the distance you covered, the time you spent outdoors, or the physical activity itself. Only your interpretation changed. A number that was supposed to describe your activity began determining its value.

This is one of the most important moments to recognize. Not because checking your steps is inherently wrong. The problem arises when information from a device starts carrying more weight than your own experience. You might feel perfectly fine, but the app disagrees. You might be exhausted, yet the graph suggests that you should put in a little more effort. You might have had a genuinely active day during which your device failed to record some of your movement, and still feel that you've somehow fallen short. In this peculiar relationship, you gradually stop being the owner of your walks and start working as a subcontractor for your own watch.

How an Innocent Measurement Turns into a Judgment

At first, everything seems perfectly reasonable. You want to move more, so you decide to monitor your activity. A step counter provides concrete information you didn't have before. You discover that on certain days you move considerably less than you imagined. On other days, you realize that running ordinary errands actually involves quite a lot of walking. The data helps you notice differences. There's nothing suspicious about that. It's exactly how a tool should work: providing useful information that helps you make decisions.

Then comes the target. Perhaps you set it yourself, or perhaps you accept the app's suggestion. A target has one simple advantage: you know what you're aiming for. Instead of a vague resolution to "be more active," you get a specific point of reference. When you reach it, you feel satisfied. Your screen lights up with congratulations, the graph changes color, and your device announces that something worthy of celebration has just occurred. Your phone doesn't

open a bottle of champagne, but apparently that's only because it lacks the necessary equipment.

Over time, however, it's possible to confuse two separate experiences: the pleasure of moving and the pleasure of achieving a result. The first comes from the activity itself. The second appears when you meet a particular criterion. Both can exist together, but they aren't the same thing. You can feel wonderful after a walk that doesn't meet your daily target. You can also achieve your target by pacing nervously around the house late at night, without enjoying a single moment of it. If the greatest satisfaction increasingly comes from receiving a task-completed notification, it's worth checking whether movement has become merely a way of obtaining digital confirmation.

An additional difficulty is that numbers look objective. Eight thousand steps seems like a concrete fact, whereas saying "I really enjoyed my walk today" sounds like a subjective opinion. But the counter answers a very narrow question: how many steps did the device record according to its own measurement system? It doesn't answer whether the walk was necessary, appropriate for your abilities, enjoyable, or sufficient under the particular circumstances. When you treat one number as a complete assessment of physical activity, you're rather like someone trying to judge a restaurant solely by counting its chairs. The data might be accurate while the conclusion is completely misguided.

It's also worth noticing how easily a daily target becomes an obligation. Initially, you plan a walk because you want to move. Later, you go out because you still have something to complete. Sometimes even the language you use begins to change. Instead of saying, "I feel like taking a walk around the neighborhood," you say, "I have to get my steps in."

Instead of "I walked quite a lot today," you say, "I managed to hit my quota." The words themselves don't prove anything, but they can reveal your mindset. A quota must be fulfilled. A task can be failed. A result can be judged. A walk, meanwhile, can simply be part of your day.

Three Signs That Your Step Counter Has Taken the Wheel

The easiest way to recognize the problem isn't by looking at the number of steps but by examining your behavior. Someone might check their activity every day without experiencing any pressure whatsoever. Someone else might open the app only in the evening, yet a single disappointing result is enough to ruin their mood. The frequency of checking, therefore, tells us relatively little. What's much more important is what you do with the information you receive.

The first warning sign is a change in mood caused by a result that tells you nothing significant about how you actually feel. Imagine returning from a family outing. You talked, relaxed, and spent time together. Then you discover that you've taken fewer steps than usual. Suddenly, you begin regarding the entire day as less successful. If a small difference in your statistics can diminish the value of the whole experience, the number has probably been granted far too much authority. In a normal organization, that kind of promotion would require at least a job interview.

The second warning sign is changing your behavior solely to improve the record. This isn't about consciously deciding to extend a walk because you feel like moving more. It's about being tired, wanting to rest, but forcing yourself to complete another few laps because the screen displays a missing number. One particularly revealing moment occurs when reaching the target brings the activity to an immediate

end. A second earlier, walking was absolutely essential. Three seconds after the activity ring closes, it suddenly becomes completely unnecessary. Your legs have officially been given permission to clock out.

The third warning sign appears when the absence of measurement makes you uncomfortable. You leave the house without your watch and feel as though something is being lost. Not because you need the device for navigation or safety, but because your steps won't be recorded. Sometimes people even begin regretting physical activity that their app failed to notice. As though a walk without documentation were a suspicious event requiring witness statements.

None of these signs constitutes a diagnosis. Nor do they mean that you should immediately delete every activity app you own. Instead, they're an invitation to examine the relationship between your goals and your behavior. You can begin with one simple question: if I didn't know today's result, would I judge this day differently? The answer can be more revealing than an entire week's activity graph.

The Walk That Failed Its Exam

Let's consider an ordinary afternoon. Marta works at a computer and needs a break after several hours. She goes to a nearby park. She doesn't have any particular plan. She wants to walk a little, take a break from the screen, and return feeling more willing to tackle the rest of her responsibilities. Her walk lasts twenty-five minutes. Marta comes home satisfied, but when she checks the app, she notices that she's achieved only half of her daily target. She begins wondering whether she ought to go out again that evening.

The idea of a second walk isn't inherently a problem. If Marta genuinely felt like taking another walk, she could certainly do so. But it's worth examining where the decision comes from. If it's driven entirely by the feeling that her first walk wasn't enough, an enjoyable break starts to resemble a failed attempt at passing an exam. Marta is no longer considering what she needed or what she actually got from the experience. Instead, she's wondering how to repair her statistics.

At that moment, she can make a small but important change. Before deciding whether to go out again, she can separate information from judgment. The information is: "Today, I recorded fewer steps than my target." The judgment is: "My walk wasn't good enough." The first sentence describes a result. The second attaches a meaning that doesn't necessarily follow from it. Marta can therefore ask herself whether she genuinely needs more movement or whether she mainly wants to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling of leaving a task unfinished.

This distinction is particularly helpful because it doesn't require a battle against technology. You don't have to prove that numbers are worthless. You simply need to stop automatically treating them as the most important argument. A result can suggest that you've been moving less recently. It doesn't have to determine whether a particular activity deserved to make you feel satisfied.

Who Set That Target in the First Place?

It's also worth taking a closer look at the target itself. Why is it set at that particular number? Was it chosen to match your abilities and needs, or did it simply appear on the screen when you first configured your device? Perhaps you set it several years ago, when your lifestyle was different.

Maybe you modeled it on someone who covers long distances every day. Or perhaps you accepted a nice round number because it seemed sensible and looked attractive on a graph.

Popular step-count targets can serve as general reference points, but they aren't universal health examinations. We differ in fitness, age, health, responsibilities, and physical capabilities. What's more, the number of steps alone doesn't describe every form of movement or its intensity. Automatically treating one threshold as a compulsory requirement for every single day can therefore lead to poor decisions, particularly when you're trying to reach it despite illness, pain, exhaustion, or medical advice to limit exertion.

This doesn't mean that numerical targets are always useless. For many people, they provide practical support. They help identify long periods of inactivity and encourage greater movement. What's important, however, is that a target remains a suggestion that can be adjusted, rather than an order issued for all eternity. If your circumstances or capabilities have changed, your target can change too. You don't need to submit an application in triplicate or provide supporting documentation proving that last week was difficult.

A useful test is whether you can consciously accept a day below your target. Without making up for it, explaining yourself, or promising to complete twice the usual amount tomorrow. If the very thought produces strong resistance, it may be worth treating that reaction as information about pressure you hadn't previously noticed.

The First Change Doesn't Require a Single Extra Step

To begin, try spending a few days noticing the moment when your results start influencing your decisions. You don't have to stop measuring anything or change your planned activities. Simply pay attention to what happens between looking at the screen and taking your next action. Do you see the number and calmly accept the information? Do you start feeling anxious? Do you suddenly feel compelled to do something you hadn't intended to do moments earlier?

It may help to write down one specific sentence, such as: "I wanted to rest, but I went out for another twenty minutes because I was short of steps." Don't immediately label it a mistake. Perhaps the additional walk was a sensible decision. Writing it down, however, allows you to see what genuinely motivated it. Another time, you might note: "I didn't check my result, and I didn't even think about it." Both observations are valuable because they help you distinguish a conscious choice from an automatic reaction.

You can also try describing a walk without using numbers. Instead of "I did six thousand steps," say, "I went out after work, took a relaxed walk, and came back feeling less tense." If nothing particularly remarkable happened, there's no need to invent a spiritual awakening at a pedestrian crossing. A perfectly ordinary "I took the longer route to the shop" or "I felt like going outside, so I did" is enough. This exercise helps you notice qualities of physical activity that don't appear in statistics.

Don't turn the observation process into yet another obligation, though. If you forget to write anything down, nothing terrible will happen. After all, we're not creating another system where you earn one point for not checking your step counter and lose two for checking it. That would

be a remarkably sophisticated way of replacing one source of pressure with another.

The most important thing is reclaiming the right to make your own assessment. Your device can tell you how much you moved. You can still decide what that movement meant to you. Not every walk has to be enjoyable, not every walk has to produce an obvious improvement in your mood, and not every day requires a special achievement. Movement is sometimes simply an ordinary part of life that doesn't need constant justification.

The next time you see a result that's lower than expected, don't rush to deliver a verdict. Consider what actually happened that day. Perhaps you rested because you needed to. Perhaps you had more important responsibilities. Or perhaps your walk was exactly as long as you wanted it to be. The counter has done its job by providing data. You don't have to appoint it judge as well.

After all, even the most advanced watch doesn't know whether you stopped along the way to admire the sunset. And if it does, it's definitely time for a serious conversation about the extent of its authority.

Chapter 2 - Why Does That Little Green Circle Have So Much Power Over You?

There's a particular kind of disappointment familiar to many people who use activity-tracking apps. For nineteen consecutive days, you achieve your planned target. Every evening, you receive confirmation that everything has gone according to plan. On the twentieth day, you fall asleep earlier than usual. The next morning, you discover that you missed your target by a small margin and your entire streak has been broken. You stare at the screen like someone whose decades of professional achievements have just been revoked because they forgot to sign the attendance sheet.

Of course, you understand that the previous nineteen days haven't ceased to exist. Your legs haven't received a notification informing them that all previous activity has been invalidated. The memories of your walks are still real, and the physical activity you completed hasn't been reversed by a server. Nevertheless, you feel disappointed. Sometimes the disappointment is even stronger than the satisfaction you experienced after your earlier successes. For a moment, you might feel like abandoning the entire plan. If the streak is broken, what's the point of continuing to make an effort?

To understand this reaction, it's worth looking at how goals, rewards, and the sense of continuity work. We don't need to assume that an app possesses mysterious powers of hypnosis. It's enough to recognize that people enjoy seeing progress, finishing tasks they've started, and receiving confirmation that they've done something well. Designers of digital tools can make use of these natural

tendencies by creating systems that encourage us to return regularly. Sometimes they do so very effectively. Occasionally, more effectively than we actually need.

The Pleasure of Completing the Circle

Imagine a progress bar showing that a task is ninety-eight percent complete. Most of the work is already behind you, yet your attention is instinctively drawn to the missing two percent. An unfinished progress bar can be surprisingly irritating. An activity ring with a small gap works in much the same way. You see an almost complete circle and feel the urge to finish the job. Not necessarily because your body desperately needs a few hundred more steps. Often it's simply because the incomplete symbol looks like a task left half-finished.

This mechanism can be useful. When you're struggling to find the motivation to move, visible progress may encourage you to get outside. A small goal makes it easier to start an activity, while confirmation that you've achieved it provides a pleasant sense of accomplishment. The problem begins when completing the symbol becomes more important than the walk itself. At that point, you may start making decisions not because additional movement is appropriate but because you can't tolerate the sight of an unfinished circle.

It's rather like going to a restaurant, enjoying a delicious meal, and then ordering an extra course solely because there's one empty space left on your loyalty card. Food and physical activity are obviously different things, but the similarity lies in the moment when a symbol of completion begins directing your behavior. That's when it's worth asking whether you're still meeting your own needs or merely trying to bring a graphic element to aesthetic perfection.