

How One Walk Became My Way Back to Living

One small decision, a pair of running shoes, and how movement helped me start again.



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When breathing felt like hauling stone

What do you do when even air feels heavy? I remember counting the squares on my ceiling just to keep from unraveling. The room was quiet. My head was not. Depression

had turned time into wet cement—every move slow, sticky, exhausting. If you know that weight, you know it isn't ordinary sadness. It's a dull fog that erases the edges of everything.

I kept waiting for rest to save me. Sleep more. Do less. Cancel plans. Crawl back under. Rest has a rightful place—but for me, too much of it slid into surrender. The more I did nothing, the more the nothing did me in. My world shrank until I barely existed inside it.

Then a small, almost ridiculous act cut a slit in the fog: I put on shoes and went outside.

The first hard miles

That first hike? Brutal. My breath rasped like sandpaper. My legs protested every step. Halfway up the switchbacks, I wanted to quit and go back to bed—the altar where I had been sacrificing whole days.

But something shifted. Not joy. Not a Hallmark sunrise. Just a faint stirring, a reminder that life still lived somewhere under the numbness. The trail didn't care about my resume, my failures, my private catastrophes. It asked only for one more step. So I gave it one. And then another.

The human reasons movement helps

Later I learned there was a name for what I felt: momentum. Purposeful activity—walks, chores, small goals—nudges the brain toward a healthier rhythm. Tiny completions drop little beads of dopamine into a dry well. You don't need a lab coat to verify it; your body tells you. Finish the sink of dishes. Fold two shirts. Take ten minutes outside. You feel a click. Not a cure. A click.

Nature did its own quiet work, too. Trees don't argue with your thoughts. Wind moves through you and takes a few sharp edges with it. You stand under a sky too big to hold your fears, and for a minute, your nervous system remembers how to unclench.

The lie of the overhaul

For years I tried to rebuild my life in a weekend. New diet, new routine, new personality by Monday. It never stuck. Extremes are loud and seductive; they're also fragile. What saved me wasn't a reinvention montage. It was the smallest possible promise—kept repeatedly.

I started with a single non-negotiable: move my body for five minutes. On the worst days, that meant a walk to the end of the block and back. On better days, I chased the ridge line. Five minutes became seven, then ten. The goal wasn't athletic glory. It was proof. Proof that I could still choose.

Acceptance isn't resignation

Progress wasn't a straight road. Some mornings the dark tide came back fast. I missed hikes. I said the wrong things. I disappeared from people who loved me. When I finally stopped treating setbacks like verdicts, the healing got real. Acceptance—of my imperfect brain, of other people's messy timelines—didn't lower the bar. It lowered the useless shame.

Acceptance sounds soft until you try it. It takes guts to meet yourself where you are without lying about it. It takes discipline to begin again, gently, the tenth time.

Routines that kept me here

Hiking opened the door. Other small practices kept me from drifting back into the dark:

- **Cook one simple meal.** Not for Instagram. For nourishment. Cutting an onion became meditation. Heat, salt, patience.
- **Write one true line.** No pretty metaphors required. If all I had was, "*I feel hollow today*", that was enough. The page witnessed me when I couldn't explain myself to anyone else.

- **Learn one useful thing.** I signed up for leadership workshops and energy-sustainability lectures. Growth didn't erase pain, but it gave it a direction to move.

None of this made me invincible. It made me engaged. There's a difference.

For the days when the floor wins

Some days you will not climb. Fine. Pick a smaller hill.

- Open a window and put your face in the light for sixty seconds.
- Text someone three words: *Today is heavy*.
- Step outside and touch a tree. Let something older than you carry a fraction of the weight.
- Set a two-minute timer and tidy one square foot. Stop when it buzzes. Stopping is part of the practice.

Tiny victories do not mock your pain. They make a ledge where your foot can catch.

Why activity matters when despair lies to you

Despair says you have no agency. Purposeful action argues back. You don't need a flawless plan. You need a vote. Every vote is a signal to your nervous system: *I am still participating in my own life*. Those signals accumulate. They re-introduce you to someone you thought was gone.

The point isn't to become a productivity machine. The point is to move enough that inner weather can change. Motion invites weather to pass. Stagnation traps storms.

What I would tell you if we were sitting on a curb at sunset

I would not offer certainty. I would offer company. I would say: there is no shame in needing help. Therapists, meds, hotlines, faith, friends—take every tool. I would say: don't wait for motivation; act small and let motivation catch up. I would say: choose one act that points toward life and repeat it until it becomes part of your bones.

And I'd say this, because it's true: the day I chose a trail over an ending, nothing spectacular happened. I sweated. I cursed. I kept going. Then I slept a little easier. Then I woke up with one more ounce of future in me. That's all. That's everything.

Your move

If you're in the dark right now, I'm not asking you to become a different person by Friday. Choose the smallest step that feels like care, then take it before your brain can negotiate you out of it.

Walk the block.

Write the line.

Make the egg.

Five minutes. One vote. Again tomorrow.

We don't always get miracles. We do get moments. Stack enough of them, and a life appears—imperfect, stubborn, worth staying for.

About the author

Dorian Hartwood writes about human progress, leadership, sustainability, and the quiet work of becoming whole. His work explores resilience, self-awareness, and the everyday habits that shape a meaningful life.

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If this piece moved you, share it. If it helped, pass it on. Every voice matters—especially yours. I've been gathering quieter reflections and short audio pieces elsewhere. You can find them here.

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