

HEAL YOURSELF

Feet on the Ground

HARNESS POWERFUL PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BENEFITS BY **GOING BAREFOOT.**

MICHAEL SANDLER was in-line skating when a child stepped into his path. Swerving to miss the toddler, he crashed into the concrete—breaking his hip and arm, and shattering his left femur.

“Coming back from that injury, I was told I might lose my leg and wouldn’t be able to run again,” he says. He ended up with a titanium femur and a significant leg-length discrepancy. When nothing else in his rehab worked, he tried something radical in its simplicity: he took off his shoes. Today, Sandler credits going barefoot with reducing his inflammation and swelling, and helping him to regain a sense of balance.

Sandler, the author of *Barefoot Walking* and *Barefoot Running*, says the experience changed how he thinks about his feet—not as weak things we need to coddle, fit with orthotics and inject with steroids. Instead, he suggests we should all let our feet do what they are physiologically designed to do.

Dr. Michael Zyzda, a podiatrist and podiatric surgeon, agrees that taking off shoes can be beneficial. “When barefoot, your feet move three-dimensionally,” he says, “stretching

the muscles, tendons, and ligaments in your feet, ankles, Achilles tendon, and calves.”

But in addition to the health benefits, Sandler and others think of going barefoot as spiritually

renewing—almost like a form of mindfulness practice.

“First slip off your shoes. Where are you going to place your feet?” he says. “It doesn’t take a retreat or an hour of meditation. You’re present right away.

Being Free »
Kendra Baird



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Walking barefoot is a yin connection. It’s softer and gentler than the yang of pounding around in shoes, unaware and distracted from the present moment. It’s a beautiful thing that comes out of the silence when walking barefoot.”

Ready to kick off your shoes? Sandler and other experts offer some tips for safely and comfortably transitioning from shod to shoeless. Sandler recommends going barefoot every other day, starting with short walks. Carry your shoes for 100 yards, and then put them back on.

Zyzda suggests balancing on each foot for a minute at a time, which will strengthen your core and improve your posture. Beginning barefooters should also start on something soft like carpet or grass, allowing your feet time to adapt to using different muscles.

Today, in addition to removing his own shoes, Sandler coaches others in going barefoot, including the elderly, disabled veterans, and patients recovering from limb and brain injuries, posttraumatic stress disorder, and problems with the vestibular system. For each of his clients, he says, the benefits go beyond the physical.

“There’s an intuitive side to going barefoot,” he says. “When people get out of their shoes and move, they regain their balance and connect with the earth. They grow strong again.”

—BARBARA ALBRIGHT



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