

How to Walk Silently

Whether it be for a simple practical joke or escaping from the lair of international terrorists, walking silently is a skill that may prove invaluable at some point in your life. However, it is surprising how many people cannot carry out this seemingly simple task to an adequate degree. Walking truly silently has little in common with what you see in cartoons and what you read about in stories, so the first step is to forget what you have seen before and focus on the proper technique. With practice, the steps outlined in this guide will become easy, intuitive, and will help you walk silently as fast as walking normally.

Preparing to Sneak Around

The first step is the selection of footwear. Logically, a hard-soled shoe or boot is much louder than one with a soft rubber sole. Following this train of thought leads to the conclusion that bare feet are the ideal choice for sneaking around, but in practice this is not so. The feet tend to sweat, even in cool weather, and this moisture can cause your skin to stick to the floor, resulting in unavoidable 'peeling' sounds with every step. A better choice is stockings or socks, unless you are walking outside in which case better protection may be required.

Another factor to consider is your choice of clothing. Stiff, rough cloth such as denim rubs against your skin and itself, creating a veritable cacophony of rustling and shuffling with the slightest movement. Silk, if you have it, is a decent choice, but for everyday use, a good selection is cotton sweatpants with elastic waist and ankles, paired with a loose (but not baggy) cotton T-shirt. Of course, clothes can't make noise if you aren't wearing them, so discard any extra layers you are wearing unless the weather requires them. Other more extreme measures may be taken as well. Walking in the nude is ideal, but can lead to obvious complications in the event of your discovery.

You may also want to consider your biological functions. The human body can be very loud at times. When breathing, breathe through the open mouth, rather than the nose, to reduce the noise of breathing. Try to avoid situations where you must sneak around with indigestion, as growling stomachs, burps, and various other internal difficulties can be as much of a giveaway as a footstep. If you feel the urge to sneeze, this can often be suppressed firmly pressing on your upper lip - in this rare case the cartoons got it right. Unfortunately, there is no good way to suppress coughing, so your best bet is to try and prevent it by covering your mouth and nose when breathing dusty air or other irritants. Cloth isn't necessary - even breathing through cupped hands can help.

Keep an ear out for cover noise. It is surprising how a just a little bit of expected noise can cover a lot of unexpected cacophony. A car going by on the street, rustling newspapers, pulling open a drawer, all these typically quiet sounds could disguise a small war, if timed right. Any inherently noisy activity should be timed to coincide with some natural noise in the environment - even if it means timing your footsteps to match the ticking of a clock on the wall. Doing this will vastly decrease your chances of detection.

Walking While Indoors

Now that you are properly attired, it is time to start walking. Techniques vary depending on what surface you are on, so two common scenarios will be addressed. Be sure to practice each beforehand, so you will be familiar with the steps involved.

Walking on a Hard Surface

Stand erect, with your feet shoulder-width apart, evenly balanced. Hold your arms slightly out from your body for balance and to keep your shirt from rustling.

Take your right foot and raise it straight up - try not to drag or shuffle it as you lift it.

Move your right leg forward and gently place the ball of your right foot on the floor in front of you. Keep all of your weight on your left foot - you aren't stepping forward yet, just putting your foot in place. Try to place your foot in a spot that is not dirty - dust and dirt can crunch underfoot.

Smoothly rock your weight forward onto your right foot, lowering the heel to the floor. At the same time, lift your left heel up, keeping the ball of the foot on the floor. You should now be standing with your right foot directly under you, flat on the ground, and you should be resting the ball of your left foot on the ground behind you.

Repeat steps 2-4, alternating feet.

Walking on Carpeting or Other Soft Surfaces

Walking on a soft surface is similar to walking on a hard surface, but there are a few key differences. When moving the feet, always raise or lower them vertically, all at once rather than placing the toe first and then the heel. Try to have as little sideways shuffling as possible, as this is even more important on a soft surface than a hard one. This is more difficult than walking on a hard surface. It may be easier if you take smaller steps than you would when walking on a hard surface.

Navigating Obstacles

While walking, you may encounter a number of obstacles. This does not just mean objects which physically impede you, but generally anything that may cause noise, such as creaky floors and squeaky doors. This section will address the most common obstacles you may face and what you can do to minimise or eliminate them.

Creaky Floors

Walk as close to the walls as possible, where the floor is supported better. Corners, both interior and exterior, are also quieter, especially interior corners.

When possible, lean on furniture or other objects to decrease the weight of your feet on the floor. Be careful when leaning though - try to choose large, stable furniture that will not move if you put weight on it and which is likely to have already settled the floor underneath it.

The same goes for doorways and stairs - walk with your feet to the sides, which are typically better supported and less worn. On stairs, a good technique is to walk on one side - the wall side, if there is one - and lean your weight on the railing or banister on the opposite side, assuming the railing doesn't creak too. In some places you can even reach out and lean on another opposite wall, which is even better.

Squeaky Doors

When possible, simply do not go through them. Take a different route that will not

ot require you to use the door in question. If you must use a door, lift up firmly on the doorknob as you swing it open, which will take some of the load off the hinges. Hinges usually make more noise when moved slowly, so minimise the time the door spends moving slowly. Swing the door quickly, and try to start and stop the swing as fast as possible while remaining quiet. Also, open the door just as much as necessary to slip through. With care, an opening of less than 18 inches (50 cm) can be navigated, assuming your anatomy allows for it. These techniques can also work for opening noisy drawers.

Latched Doors

Again, if possible, simply go around them. If you must unlatch a door, then the first step is not to pull or push on the door as you turn the knob. First, push or pull on the door in the opposite of the direction in which it opens. This is in case the frame is out of alignment, which can cause the latch to unexpectedly and loudly snap open. Next, carefully rotate the knob until the latch has fully retracted, then open the door, keeping the knob turned. Otherwise, the latch will snap as it abruptly opens.

Closing Doors

If you wish to close a door towards you, then once through the door, take the knob from the other side and turn it fully open, then slowly close the door. As the door closes, place one or two fingers inside the frame on the knob side, where they would be smashed if the door were closed quickly¹. Lightly close the door against your fingers, then pull on the door and gradually slide your fingers out, keeping the door in contact with them at all times. This will ensure that you close the door slowly and precisely, so that it will not bump against the frame. Once fully closed, slowly release the knob.

If you are closing the door away from you, pre-turn the knob as described above, then place one hand against the door on the knob side, so that your fingers slightly project over the edge. As you close the door, your fingers should touch the door frame before the door completely closes, and you can then judge the remaining distance to close the door by the difference between the frame and the door itself. This, too, will keep you from bumping the door when you shut it.

Walking in the Dark

If you must walk in the dark, the first advantage is to know the area beforehand. If you are in your own home or another familiar location, the chances are you can walk around purely on instinct. Just relax and try to go about normally - your brain probably knows the path, even if you don't realise it.

If you do not know the area and it is dark, things are more difficult. The first step is to move every part of your body slowly, especially your legs. Take each step carefully, to ensure that you do not trip, stub your toe, or fall head-first down a staircase. If you are following a wall, lightly trail your fingers along it, which will help you walk in a straight line and ensure you don't miss any doorways or corners. Hold one hand extended in front of you, but not at face height as is often instinctive - there aren't very many obstacles up there. Instead, hold it low, around the level of your waist or stomach. Your legs will detect any low obstacles, and with your hand in this position you will feel objects like table edges that you would otherwise miss, while remaining just as able to feel major obstacles like walls. Keep calm, and try not to be startled if any part of you touches something you weren't expecting.

Walking While Outdoors

Being able to walk silently outdoors can be a great aid to observing nature with out disturbance. When we usually walk out of doors, we make a great deal of noise, so that birds and animals are disturbed and will usually hear us long before they see us.

The trick is to slow down and walk at about a quarter of the usual walking pace. The following method is one taught by American tracker Tom Brown and is a method taught to him by an Apache elder.

The Fox Walk

The basic movement of the 'fox walk' is that the foot is placed on the ground before weight is placed on it and the stride is shorter than a 'normal' one. If you have studied Tai Chi, you will have been taught a similar way of moving. The centre of gravity for this walk should be in the hips. To get the best out of this method, it is preferable to have bare feet, or to wear very soft-soled shoes such as moccasins or canvas shoes without heels, so that the ground can be felt through the soles. The fox walk is carried out as follows:

Touch the foot lightly to the ground, with the outside edge hitting the ground first. The heel, ball and edge of the foot strike together.

Next, roll the foot inward, until the whole surface area of the foot is on the ground.

At this stage, the walker will be able to feel exactly what the foot is stepping on and be able to judge whether the foot needs to be withdrawn or if it is safe to put weight on the foot.

The benefits of fox walking include less strain on the body and less damage to the countryside. Children taught to walk using this method will be able to increase the distance they can walk.

Stalking/The Weasel Walk

Stalking is not only moving silently, but extremely slowly and done properly can enable the stalker to approach wild animals, sometimes even close enough to touch them. Each step will take typically up to a minute to complete. The movements flow and there should be no shakiness. Learning to stalk takes practice, so that you can freeze your movement if an animal looks towards you.

The walk is similar to the fox walk and is sometimes referred to as the weasel walk. The arms are kept very close in to the body and the hands can be put on the knees for support.

The back foot should be picked up and moved slowly to the front of the body. The foot should then be carefully and slowly lowered until it is a few inches away from the ground.

The toes are then turned upward and contact with the ground is made with the outside ball of the foot, which is then rolled slowly inwards.

The heel of the foot comes down and finally the toes. At this stage, weight can be put on the foot. If an object such as a stick is felt before the weight is placed on it, the foot can be removed and replaced somewhere else.

Conclusion

By following these methods, and with some practice, it is possible to move literally silently - without so much as a tap or rustle. The directions may seem awkward at first. By following these methods, and with some practice, it is possible to move literally silently - without so much as a tap or rustle. The directions may seem awkward at first, but they will become second nature with time, and you will be able to do them without thinking.