

## **Progressing Back to Barefoot**

The case studies we were going to create progressions back to barefoot for, were, 1. A 17 year old girl, 2. A 36 year old guy, and 3. A 56 year old guy. After considering this in depth, and discussing it with Charlie, I think that we can recommend the following path for people interested in progressing back to barefoot movement on a regular and continuing basis.

## **Know Where You Are Now**

First, people should assess where they're starting from. Any person of any age group can present a different path. If the 17 year old girl has never had experience with barefoot movement (since she's grown up in the age of the Marshmallow Shoe), she will be ill-prepared to get into barefooting. If the 56 year-old grew up in the 50's and 60's, he'll most likely have been barefoot quite often as a child, and actually have a better neuromuscular memory than the 17 year old girl from which to start barefoot activity.

## **Know Where You're Going**

It is important that people understand the way their feet function, and the reasons for using different footwear at different times. Also, different people will have different goals, and will require different types of footwear to meet those goals. What is the desired end-point for a particular person?

## **Know How To Get There**

That's the purpose of this paper - to know how to get there. Here is a good rationale for a progressive use of appropriate footwear and barefoot activity, assuming the worst-case scenario as a starting point:

1. Worst-case scenario - the individual appears with some foot dysfunction (though not severe/debilitating), and has had very little experience with barefoot activity since very early childhood (3-5 years of age).
2. The person is informed about the function of their feet, and the effects of different stepping styles on the foot and body. The person is also informed of the effects of different types of footwear on stepping/gait.
3. The individual is assessed for general postural dysfunctions (the body can cause dysfunction in the foot as easily as the other way around). If dysfunctions are found, corrective exercises are given to help address those issues.
4. The person is guided through a foot-camp or series of foot-camps, to physically demonstrate the effects of different stepping styles, and to reacquaint them with a fore-foot stepping style under safe conditions. A "stepping" schedule might be given.
5. Next, the person should be introduced to some basic self- and other-massage techniques for the feet (both manual, and with tools like a tennis ball). This will help them to become acquainted with their feet. A massage schedule might be given to the person.
6. The person's lifestyle is assessed. What does their lifestyle require them to wear? Some people have to wear dress-shoes to work, for instance. What do they have to have?

7. An attempt is made to find shoes that will begin to transition the individual into more natural footwear, while still meeting their needs. For instance, dress shoes like Patagonia's [Cardon](#) that have very wide toe-boxes and flatter profiles (lower heels).
  1. The use of the new (more functional) shoe should always be cycled in with the use of the person's old footwear. If the person tries to use a shoe that creates a higher demand on the feet too frequently, they might actually injure themselves, and slow the changes they're trying to make. A good pattern might be to substitute the new shoe two days per week for the first two to four weeks (or longer, depending on how they feel), and then add one day per week whenever they feel they're able. Whenever the person feels discomfort after wearing the new shoe, they should wear their old shoes the following day and until the discomfort subsides.



8. The person is advised to be barefoot as much as possible while in their house.
9. A similar recommendation to number 4 is made for shoes that the person needs for other activities. For instance, if the person works out at a gym, we might recommend a shoe like [Brooks' cross-country running flat](#). A quick glance at the profile of this shoe shows that it actually has almost a "negative" heel, and very much promotes fore-foot striking in running. These shoes can be found online for around \$30.
  1. If the person is going to wear a shoe like this, they should be instructed on fitness in general, or guided in EA sessions. The aim is to challenge their function, while keeping them within a safe range of stability/mobility as they adjust to this new footwear.
  2. Again, follow the cycle-in guidelines in section 7.1



1. The person is encouraged to continue attending foot-camps as much as possible, and in getting into natural settings where barefoot activity is comfortable, safe, and enjoyable (parks, beaches, cobblestone walkways, etc.).
2. The individual's progress is monitored, with frequent checks to see how they're doing. Are they happy with the changes occurring? Do their feet feel better, or worse? If there is a problem, it should be addressed immediately.
3. Once the person has adjusted to the recommendations above (which might take as long as a year or more), more advanced measures can be taken. The first is to introduce the [Vibram FiveFinger shoe](#). The FiveFinger shoe can be swapped in and out at first for the person's normal gym shoe, to give their feet time to get accustomed to the feeling and demands of the shoe. As they become more and more comfortable and capable, they can begin to wear the Vibrams in more and more situations (and for longer durations).
  1. The appropriateness of the Vibram should be decided on first. If the person is completely against a shoe like the Vibram (for any reason, including fashion), or if the person's anatomy isn't conducive to the shape of the Vibrams (their toes don't match the toe-shape of the Vibrams, causing discomfort), foot-focused exercises can be given to introduce the individual to toe-spreading, grasping, and individual-toe movement.
  2. As always, follow the cycle-in guidelines in section 7.1



4. It is also at this time that the person should be introduced to a shoe like [TerraPlana's Vivo Barefoot shoes](#). Again, the person should begin by switching days of use of the Vivo shoe with use of their normal footwear (which is now the Patagonia shoe). As they become more and more comfortable and capable, they can wear the Patagonia shoe less and less, per the cycle-in guidelines in section 7.1



5. The individual should be advised to begin engaging in more barefoot activity. Shoes like the [Feelmax](#), or other very minimal shoes may begin to be introduced at this point. This should always progress according to the individual's level of comfort with their feet and with the process in general, following the cycle-in guidelines in section 7.1



### **The Journey Never Ends**

Once the person reaches this point, their feet should be strong enough to sustain almost constant barefoot activity in safe environments. However, it is not practical in most cities to go barefoot all the time, and proper care should be taken to protect our feet! The human foot wasn't designed with concrete in mind - but concrete *was* designed with the shoe in mind. People running or engaging in activity on man-made surfaces should probably wear some sort of shoe to protect themselves, both from percussive forces that are much higher, and also from abrasions. Further, city streets (or parks) can frequently be littered with broken glass or other hazardous material. Caution should be exercised - a visual inspection of the field, and delicate, cautious activity should be undertaken before vigorous activity is started.

The goal is to achieve greater function, greater health, and greater fun. In other words, to become more primal, more practical, and more playful - with EXUBERANCE - and without undue risk.