

DEPRESSION & EXERCISE

Depression affects nearly 19 million adults each year, yet this common disease is often misunderstood or misdiagnosed. While depression can't simply be willed away there are many effective treatments that can bring joy back into one's life. Exercise, for example, has been shown to have tremendous benefits for mental health and is an effective but often underused treatment for mild to moderate depression. It is a magic drug for many people with depression and anxiety disorders.

The physical benefits of exercise – improving physical condition and fighting disease – have long been established, and physicians always encourage staying physically active. When related to mental health, studies show that is it very effective at reducing stress, fatigue, improving alertness and concentration, and at enhancing overall cognitive function.

When stress affects the brain the rest of the body feels the impact as well. If your body feels better, so does your mind. Exercise and other physical activity produce endorphins, chemicals in the brain that act as natural painkillers and also improve your ability to sleep, which in turn reduces stress. Some researchers suspect exercise alleviates chronic depression by increasing serotonin or brain derived neurotrophic factors which support the growth of neurons.

There are psychological explanations too. Exercise may boost a depressed person's outlook by helping a person return to meaningful activity and providing a sense of accomplishment.

Regardless of age or fitness studies show that making time for exercise provides some serious mental health benefits.

1. Reduce stress: Take a walk or head to the gym for a quick workout. Walking and/or a workout can reduce stress and boost the body's ability to deal with existing mental tension. Biking, dancing, gardening, golfing, housework, jogging, tennis, swimming, and yoga are also forms of exercise that can be considered. Because strong social support is important for those with depression, joining a group exercise class may be beneficial or one can exercise with a close friend or partner. By doing so, there are benefits from not only the physical activity but also the camaraderie and emotional comfort of knowing that others are supportive of your efforts.
2. Exercise releases endorphins. Endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain. Endorphins also trigger a positive feeling in the body. Endorphins are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals, or "neurotransmitters".
3. On a very basic level, physical fitness can boost one's self-esteem and improve

self-image. Additionally, exercise also has added other health benefits. It strengthens your heart, energy levels, and lowers blood pressure. Exercise improves muscle tone and strength, strengthens and builds bones, reduces body fat and makes you look fit and healthy.

4. Exercising in the great outdoors can increase self-esteem even more.
5. Exercise boosts the chemicals in the brain that support and prevent degeneration of the hippocampus, an important part of the brain for memory and learning.

If you haven't exercised for a while, gradually introduce physical activity into your daily routine. Any exercise is better than none. Even a 15-minute walk can clear your mind and help you to relax. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that people with mild to moderate depression take part in about three exercise sessions a week, lasting 45 minutes to one hour each.

REFERENCES, RESOURCES & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Exercise for Stress & Anxiety – Anxiety & Depression Association of America (<http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/exercise-stress-and-anxiety>)
- The Exercise Effect – American Psychological Association (<http://apa.org/monitor/2011/12/exercise.aspx>)
- Exercise & Depression – Harvard Health Publications, Harvard Medical School (<http://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exercise-and-depression-report-excerpt>)
- Physical Activity & Health – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/sgr/index.htm>)
- Science Daily (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/14/100405122311.htm>)
- WebMD – Depression Health Center (<http://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/exercise-depression>)
- Huffington Post Healthy Living – 13 Mental Health Benefits of Exercise (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/27/mental-health-benefits-exercise_n_2956099.html)
- NHS – Exercise for Depression (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Exercise-for-depression.aspx>)