



Exercise & your mood

It is a commonly held belief that exercise is good for people's health. Family doctors have long recommended exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle and it is one way of maintaining fitness and avoiding obesity. What about mental health? Does regular exercise help people manage their troubles?

Exercise and Mood

A large body of scientific research consistently finds that regular exercise is associated with better mood. Meta-analyses show that the effect size is large. That is, exercise can be an effective treatment for mild mood and anxiety

problems. In more severe cases it is also helpful in combination with other treatments.

In the short-term it can assist with both;

- Low mood
- Insomnia
- Anxiety

In the longer term there are health benefits such as a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, heart disease, type II diabetes and obesity. Each of these health problems is associated with mood disorders in later life.

Mechanism of therapeutic action

There is some debate about the mechanism by which exercise produces psychological benefits. Some researchers have argued that there may be a difference between aerobic exercise (regulated by breathing – eg cycling, running, walking, swimming) and anaerobic exercise (where breathing is less important – eg weight training, Pilates, rock-climbing). Some evidence indicates that aerobic exercise exerts more anti-anxiety effects while anaerobic exercise produces more antidepressant effects. However, more research is needed to clarify these findings.

What is clear is that exercising regularly restores a sense of control that is incompatible with feelings of hopelessness and lethargy that occur in depression. It seems to dissipate stress and anger and assists with anxiety (possibly by disrupting rumination on stressful events).



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Exercise and endogenous chemicals

It was recently discovered that a protein called Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) that helps maintain the survival of neurons (brain cells) and stimulates the growth of new neurons is depleted in cases of depression. Exercise has shown to increase the levels of this important protein which is involved in guarding against cognitive decline. BDNF is found in several areas of the brain and periphery. However, under prolonged stress or depression its depletion seems to have adverse effects on the hippocampus (an area important for memory and closely related to areas that regulate emotions).

Vigorous exercise also stimulates the production of endorphins – often known as “runner’s high”. Endorphins provide relief from pain and stress. Release of endorphins is usually associated with pleasant feeling.

Getting exercise back into your life

In summary, exercise is an effective intervention that lifts mood and reduces anxiety as well as having longer-term physical and psychological benefits. Making regular exercise a part of your lifestyle is a way of managing your own health. It is usually, cheap, safe and does not have many side effects. In spite of all this, many people start exercise programmes, experience benefits and then paradoxically stop again.

Motivational Strategies

- Formulate an exercise plan –write it down
- Make it enjoyable – pick sports or exercise forms you like
- Remember if the exercise programme is begun at a very high intensity level, the programme dropout rate is very high
- Set reasonable goals but also set a minimum target that must be achieved
- 3 sessions of 20-60 minutes exercise a week seems to be just enough to produce health benefits
- Exercise in the morning is less likely to get disturbed by things that occur unexpectedly
- Exercising in a group or with a friend is socially rewarding and facilitates adherence
- Keep a record of your goals and improvements in a diary
- Try and incorporate variety into your exercise programme

Some forms of exercise that are psychologically beneficial are:

Walking, yoga, swimming, running, weights, step classes, cycling, soccer, tennis and rock-climbing



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Which ones are for you?