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As well as the many physical benefits, exercise is also one of the easiest and most effective ways of improving your mental health. A little regular exercise can have a profound effect on all aspects of your emotional well-being. It can relieve stress, ease depression and anxiety, improve your memory, help you sleep better, and boost your overall mood. But you don't have to be a fitness fanatic to reap the benefits. No matter your age or fitness level, you can use enjoyable physical activities to improve your emotional health and change your life for the better.

The life-changing benefits of exercise

Exercise is not just about aerobic capacity and muscle size. Sure, exercise can improve your physical health and your physique, trim your waistline, improve your sex life, and even add years to your life. But that's not what motivates most people to stay active. People who exercise regularly tend to do so because it gives them an enormous sense of well-being. They feel more energetic throughout the day, sleep better at night, have sharper memories, and feel more relaxed and positive about themselves and their lives. And it doesn't take hours of pumping weights in a gym or running mile after mile to achieve those results. There are many different ways to be active—and they don't need to cost a lot of money.

The many benefits of exercise are supported by an increasing amount of research. Physical activity is even prescribed by doctors for conditions such as depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes as it can be as effective as medication, sometimes even more so. Think of exercise as free medicine, without the side effects.

By focusing on activities you enjoy and tailoring a regular mild to moderate exercise routine to your needs, you can experience the mental health benefits of exercise and improve your life by:

- **Easing stress and anxiety, reducing tension.** A twenty-minute bike ride won't sweep away all of life's troubles, but exercising regularly helps you take charge of anxiety and reduce stress, anger, and frustration. Exercise can also serve as a distraction to your worries, allowing you to find some quiet time and break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed anxiety, depression, and other mental and emotional problems.
- **Lifting your mood and relieving depression.** Exercise releases endorphins, powerful chemicals in your brain that energize your spirits and make you feel good. In fact, exercise can treat mild to moderate depression as effectively as antidepressant medication—but without the side-effects, of course. As well as relieving depression, research has shown that maintaining an exercise schedule can prevent you from relapsing.
- **Sharpening brainpower.** The same endorphins that make you feel better also help you concentrate and feel mentally sharp for tasks at hand. Exercise also stimulates the growth of new brain cells and helps prevent age-related decline.
- **Increasing self-esteem.** Regular activity is an investment in your mind, body, and soul. When it becomes habit, it can foster your sense of self-worth and make you feel strong and powerful. You'll feel better about your appearance and, by meeting even small exercise goals, you'll feel a sense of achievement.
- **Improving sleep.** Even short bursts of exercise in the morning or afternoon can help regulate your sleep patterns. If you prefer to exercise at night, relaxing exercises such as yoga or gentle stretching can help promote sleep.
- **Boosting energy.** Increasing your heart rate several times a week will give you more get-up-and-go. Start off with just a few minutes of exercise a day, and increase your workout as you feel more energized.

- **Coping better.** When faced with mental or emotional challenges in life, exercise can help you cope in a healthy way, instead of resorting to alcohol, drugs, or other negative behaviors that ultimately only make your symptoms worse. Regular exercise can also help boost your immune system and reduce the impact of stress.

How does exercise help to relieve stress and anxiety?

Ever noticed how your body feels when you're under stress? Your muscles may be tense, especially in your face, neck, and shoulders, leaving you with back or neck pain, or painful headaches. You may feel a tightness in your chest, a pounding pulse, or muscle cramps. You may also experience problems such as insomnia, heartburn, stomach ache, diarrhea, or frequent urination. The worry and discomfort of all these physical symptoms can in turn lead to even more stress, creating a vicious cycle between your mind and body.

Exercising is an effective way to break this cycle. As well as releasing endorphins in the brain, physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better so, too, will your mind.

Obstacles to exercise: What's holding you back?

Despite all the life-changing benefits, many of us still think of exercise as a chore, either something that we don't have time for, or something that's only suitable for the young or the athletic.

There are many commonly-held myths about exercise that make it seem more arduous and painful than it has to be. Overcoming obstacles to exercise starts with separating fact from fiction.

Common reasons why we don't exercise

"I don't have enough time to exercise."

Even short, low-impact intervals of exercise can act as a powerful tool to supercharge your health. If you can make time for a 15-minute walk with the dog, your body will thank you in many ways.

"Exercise is too difficult and painful."

Consider "no pain, no gain" the old fashioned way of thinking about exercise. Exercise doesn't have to hurt to be incredibly effective. You don't have to push yourself to the limit to get results. You can build your strength and fitness by walking, swimming, even playing golf, gardening, or cleaning the house.

"I'm too tired to exercise."

Regular exercise is a powerful pick-me-up that can significantly reduce fatigue and make you feel much more energetic. If you're feeling tired, try taking a brisk walk or dancing to your favorite music and see how much better you feel afterwards.

"I'm too old to start exercising," "I'm too fat," or "My health isn't good enough."

It's never too late to start building your strength and physical fitness, even if you're a senior or a self-confessed couch potato who has never exercised before. And exercise is a proven treatment for many diseases—from diabetes to arthritis. Very few health or weight problems make exercise out of the question, so talk to your doctor about a safe routine for you.

"I'm not athletic."

Do you hide your head when the tennis ball approaches? Are you stumped at the difference between a foul ball and a free throw? Join the ranks. Don't worry if you're not sporty or ultra-

coordinated. Instead, find an activity like walking, jogging, or yoga that makes you feel good to be in your body.

“Exercise is boring.”

Sure, pounding on a treadmill for an hour may not be everyone’s idea of a good time. But not all exercise has to be boring; just about everyone can find a physical activity they enjoy. Try playing ping-pong (table tennis) or activity-based video games with your kids. So-called “exergames” that are played standing up and moving around—simulating dancing, skateboarding, soccer, or tennis, for example—can burn at least as many calories as walking on a treadmill; some substantially more. Once you build up your confidence, try getting away from the TV screen and playing the real thing outside. Or use a smartphone app to keep your workouts fun and interesting—some immerse you in interactive stories to keep you motivated, such as running from hordes of zombies!

“I can never stick with an exercise routine long enough to reap the benefits.”

It’s true, the longer you stick to a consistent exercise schedule, the better you’ll feel. But remember, when it comes to exercise, a little is always better than nothing. If you exercise for 30 minutes now, you’ll feel better today. On average, it takes about 4 weeks for an activity to become habit, so commit to an exercise schedule for that long. Finding activities you enjoy will make that much easier.

Reaping the emotional benefits of exercise is easier than you think

To reap the benefits of exercise, you don’t need to devote hours out your busy day, train at the gym, sweat buckets, or run mile after monotonous mile. You can reap all the physical and mental health benefits of exercise with 30-minutes of moderate exercise five times a week. Two 15-minute or even three 10-minute exercise sessions can also work just as well.

If that still seems intimidating, don’t despair. Even just a few minutes of physical activity are better than none at all. If you don’t have time for 15 or 30 minutes of exercise, or if your body tells you to take a break after 5 or 10 minutes, for example, that’s okay, too. Start with 5- or 10-minute sessions and slowly increase your time. The more you exercise, the more energy you’ll have, so eventually you’ll feel ready for a little more. The key is to commit to do some moderate physical activity—however little—on most days. As exercising becomes habit, you can slowly add extra minutes or try different types of activities. If you keep at it, the benefits of exercise will begin to pay off.

Moderate exercise means two things:

1. That you breathe a little heavier than normal, but are not out of breath. For example, you should be able to chat with your walking partner, but not easily sing a song.
2. That your body feels warmer as you move, but not overheated or very sweaty.

Do I need different types of exercise?

While any kind of exercise offers tremendous health benefits, different types of exercise focus more on certain aspects of your health. Mixing up the different types of exercise can add variety to your workouts and broaden the health benefits.

- **Aerobic activities** like running, cycling, and swimming strengthen your heart and increase your endurance and are especially good for relieving depression, anxiety, and stress.
- **Strength training** like weight lifting or resistance training builds muscle and bone mass, improves balance and prevents falls. It’s one of the best counters to frailty in old age.
- **Flexibility exercises** like stretching and yoga help prevent injury, enhance range of motion, reduce stiffness, and limit aches and pains. As well as improving flexibility, strength, and balance, yoga is also an effective way to reduce anxiety and stress.

Exercising when you have a mental or emotional problem

Many of us find it hard enough to motivate ourselves to exercise at the best of times. When we feel depressed, anxious, stressed or have other mental or emotional problems, it can be doubly difficult. This is especially true of depression and anxiety, and it can leave you feeling trapped in a catch-22 situation. You know exercise will make you feel better, but depression has robbed you of the energy and motivation you need to exercise, or your social anxiety means you can’t bear the thought of being seen at an exercise class or running through the park.

So what should you do?

- **Start small.** When you’re under the cloud of an emotional disorder and haven’t exercised for a long time, setting yourself extravagant goals like completing a marathon or working out for an hour every morning will only leave you more despondent if you fall short. Better to set yourself achievable goals and build up from there.
- **Focus on activities you enjoy.** Any activity that gets you moving counts. That could include throwing a Frisbee with a dog or friend, walking laps of a mall window shopping, or cycling to the grocery store. If you’ve never exercised before or don’t know what you might enjoy, try a few different things. Activities such as gardening or tackling a home improvement project can be great ways to start moving more when you have a mood disorder—as well as helping you become more active, they can also leave you with a sense of purpose and accomplishment.
- **Schedule your workout at the time of day when your energy is highest.** That may be first thing in the morning before work or school, or at lunchtime before the mid-afternoon lull hits. If depression or anxiety, for example, has you feeling tired and unmotivated all day long, try dancing to some music or simply going for a walk. Even a short, 15-minute walk can help clear your mind, improve your mood, and boost your energy level. As you move and start to feel a little better, you’ll experience a greater sense of control over your well-being. You may even feel energized enough to exercise more vigorously—by walking further, breaking into a run, or adding a bike ride, for example.
- **Be comfortable.** Whatever time of day you decide to exercise, wear clothing that’s comfortable and choose a setting that you find calming or energizing. That may be a quiet corner of your home, a scenic path, or your favorite city park.
- **Reward yourself.** Part of the reward of completing an activity is how much better you’ll feel afterwards, but it always helps your motivation to promise yourself an extra treat for exercising. Reward yourself with a hot bubble bath after a workout, a delicious smoothie, or with an extra episode of your favorite TV show.
- **Make exercise a social activity.** Exercising with a friend or loved one, or even your kids will not only make exercising more fun and enjoyable, it can also help to motivate you to stick to a workout routine. It’ll also make you feel better than exercising alone. In fact, when you’re suffering from a mood disorder such as depression, the companionship can be just as important as the exercise.

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Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful:

Search: <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510329/learn-to-love-exercising>

[Get Started Exercising](#)

Understanding Trauma: How Stress and Trauma Cause Chronic Pain, Anxiety, Depression, & PTSD

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byQBP7fq5vQ>

Self-Help Corner:

Access 24/7: 780 424 2424

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868