

Depression and exercise

Regular exercise can be an effective way to treat some forms of depression. Physical activity causes brain pleasure centres to be stimulated and leads to feelings of wellbeing. Exercise can also be an effective treatment for anxiety. Some research studies indicate that regular exercise may be as effective as other treatments like medication to relieve milder depression. Generally, exercise has a place in treatment as part of a comprehensive approach to the illness.

Depression explained

Everyone feels sad from time to time, but depression is characterised by prolonged feelings of sadness, dejection and hopelessness. One in five women and one in eight men will experience depression at some point in their lives.

Depression is a complicated illness, which can involve a number of contributing factors such as genes, environment, lifestyle, brain activity, psychology and personality.

Depression, health and heart attacks

On average, depressed people only exercise about half as much as people who aren't depressed. This lack of cardiovascular fitness puts a depressed person at an increased risk of heart attack. It also seems that depression and exercise influence each other – a sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of depression and depression increases the likelihood of a sedentary lifestyle.

Exercise study

One research study compared the effects of exercise and drug therapy in treating depression in older people. 156 men and women with depression were divided into three groups. Over 16 weeks, one group took antidepressants, the second group undertook an aerobic exercise program and the third group used both medications and exercise. Selected results include:

- The participants in all three groups improved.
- The participants taking antidepressants improved the fastest.
- 68.8 per cent of participants in the combination group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.
- 60.4 per cent of participants in the exercise group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.
- 65.5 per cent in the medication group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.

However, when the research done on adolescents and young people is pooled, there are not many studies and, although some benefits are found for depression and anxiety, the benefits are relatively small.

Serotonin – the brain chemical

Serotonin is an important brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that contributes to a range of functions, including sleep and wake cycles, libido, appetite and mood. Serotonin has been linked to depression.

Some researchers have found that regular exercise, and the increase in physical fitness that results, alters serotonin levels in the brain and leads to improved mood and feelings of wellbeing. Some research indicates that regular exercise boosts body temperature, which may ease depression by influencing the brain chemicals.

Benefits of exercise

Apart from changes in brain activity, there are other things that may help explain the benefits of exercise:

- The person experiences a boost to their self-esteem because they take an active role in their own recovery.
- Some forms of exercise, such as team sports, are also social events.
- Physical activity burns up stress chemicals, like adrenaline, which promotes a more relaxed state of mind.
- An enjoyable bout of exercise may be distracting enough to break the vicious cycle of pessimistic thinking.

The physical benefits of regular exercise include:

- Improved cardiovascular fitness
- Reduced risk of premature death
- Reduced cholesterol level
- Reduced blood pressure
- Maintenance of healthy weight
- Improved muscle tone.

Exercise suggestions

Before deciding on any exercise plan, consult with your doctor, especially if you haven't exercised for some time. Some ways you can use exercise to help manage depression are:

- Choose a range of fun activities.
- Ask a family member or friend to be an exercise partner, as lack of motivation is one of the key characteristics of depression.
- Exercise two to five times per week.
- Make the length of each exercise session at least 30 minutes.
- Exercise at around 60 to 70 per cent of your maximum heart rate. To calculate your maximum heart rate, subtract your age from 220.
- Remember to thoroughly warm up and cool down.
- Try to live a more active lifestyle – walk instead of using the car for short trips, or use stairs instead of lifts and escalators when possible.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Find a GP near you who specialises in mental health issues through the [beyondblue](#) website
- [beyondblue](#) Info Line Tel. 1300 22 4636
- SANE Mental Health Information Line Tel. 1800 18 SANE (7263), weekdays 9 am to 5 pm
- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251 – for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- Research suggests that regular exercise may be effective in preventing depression and also in treating mild depression.
- A sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of depression, and depression increases the likelihood of a sedentary lifestyle.
- Regular exercise alters brain chemistry and leads to improved mood and feelings of wellbeing.
- People who suffer from anxiety also improve when they exercise regularly.

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