
Depression and exercise

Summary

- Regular exercise leads to improved wellbeing.
 - Research suggests that regular exercise may be effective in preventing depression and also in treating mild depression.
 - Regular exercise may also be effective in the prevention and treatment of anxiety conditions, but perhaps to a lesser degree than depression.
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Doing regular physical activity is a good way to help prevent or manage mild depression. There are many views on how exercise helps people with depression, although the precise reasons are not clear. It is also not yet known which kind of exercise, or how much, is best or whether the benefits are lost if exercise is stopped.

Broadly speaking, keeping active can:

- help lift mood through improved fitness
- help improve sleeping patterns
- increase energy levels
- help block negative thoughts or distract people from daily worries
- help people feel less alone if they exercise with others.

Exercise may also change levels of chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin, endorphins and stress hormones.

Depression explained

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason.

Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on both physical and mental health. One in six women and one in eight men will experience depression at some point in their lives.

While the exact cause of depression isn't known, a number of things can be associated with its development. Generally, depression does not result from a single cause, but from a combination of biological factors (such as family history, serious medical illness or drug and alcohol use), early childhood experiences, personality factors, recent stressful life events and other personal factors.

Exercise and depression evidence

Some studies have found that exercise can be a moderately helpful treatment for mild to moderate depression in adults. Exercise should therefore be considered as an important lifestyle change that is used in addition to other treatments for depression.

The benefits that can be attained from exercise depend on the amount of exercise that is undertaken. Most studies showing that exercise was helpful used aerobic exercise (such as running or walking), for at least 30 minutes, three times a week, for at least eight weeks.

More research is needed to work out the best type of exercise, how often and for how long it should be done, and whether it is better in a group or individually.

The current recommendation is at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week. People with significant heart or respiratory illnesses should seek medical advice before starting on an exercise program.

Tips to help you get started

People with depression may find it difficult to get started or get motivated, or continue to exercise on a long-term basis. Here are some tips to get you started.

- Start simple – increase your activity levels gradually to improve your self-confidence and build motivation for more energetic activities. Start with simple activities such as shopping, gardening or small household tasks.
- Do what is enjoyable – people with anxiety or depression often lose interest and pleasure in doing things they once enjoyed. Plan activities that you used to find enjoyable, interesting, relaxing or satisfying with friends or family – with time these activities will become enjoyable again.
- **Include other people** – people with anxiety or depression often withdraw from others, but continuing to socialise is an important part of recovery. Staying connected with friends and family can help increase wellbeing and confidence and provide opportunities to socialise.
- Make a plan – planning a routine can help people become more active. Make sure some form of exercise is included each day. Try to stick to the plan as closely as possible, but be flexible.
- **If you haven't exercised for a while**, see your doctor and complete an **Adult Pre-Exercise Screening Questionnaire** before starting an exercise program.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Your local community health centre
- **beyondblue** Support Service (24 hours 7 days a week). Tel. **1300 22 4636**
- **Lifeline** Tel **13 11 14**
- **Kids Helpline** Tel **1800 55 1800**
- **SuicideLine** Victoria, for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days). Tel **1300 651 251**
- **SANE Australia** Helpline Tel. **1800 187 263**

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