
Exercise and mental health

- People who exercise regularly have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and lower rates of mental illness.
 - Exercise is important for people with mental illness – it not only boosts our mood, concentration and alertness, but improves our cardiovascular and overall physical health.
 - Exercise doesn't have to be strenuous, structured or take a long time.
 - Experts suggest 30 minutes of exercise, at least five days a week, can make a big difference.
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We all know how important exercise is for keeping us physically healthy. But did you know that exercise can also help keep you mentally healthy?

Research shows that people who exercise regularly have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and lower rates of mental illness.

Taking up exercise seems to reduce the risk of developing mental illness. It also seems to help in treating some mental health conditions, like depression and anxiety. For example, for mild depression, research suggests physical activity can be as effective as antidepressants or psychological treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy.

Why does exercise make us feel better, mentally?

Often, people who exercise regularly do it simply because it makes them feel good. Exercise can boost your mood, concentration and alertness. It can even help give you a positive outlook on life.

The link between exercise and mental health is complicated. Inactivity can be both a cause and a consequence of mental illness, for example. And while we don't know exactly why or how exercise boosts mood, here are some possible explanations:

- Regular exercise can help you sleep better. And **good sleep helps you regulate your moods**.
- Exercise can improve your sense of control, coping ability and self-esteem. People who exercise regularly often report how good achieving a goal makes them feel.
- Exercise can distract you from negative thoughts and provide opportunities to try new experiences.
- It offers an opportunity to socialise and get social support if you exercise with others.
- The levels of chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin, stress hormones and endorphins, change when you exercise.
- Exercise increases your energy levels.
- Physical activity can be an outlet for your frustrations.
- Exercise can reduce skeletal muscle tension, which helps you feel more relaxed.

The physical benefits of exercise are also important for people with mental illness. It improves your cardiovascular health and overall physical health. This is important because people with mental health issues are at a higher risk of suffering from chronic physical conditions such as **heart disease**, **diabetes**, **arthritis** and **asthma**.

Exercising for your mental health

If regular exercise is not already a part of your routine, you might be wondering how much you need to do to give your mental health a boost.

The really good news is exercise doesn't have to be strenuous or take a long time. Studies show a moderate level of exercise is enough. That's roughly the equivalent of walking fast, but being able to talk to someone at the same time.

Experts suggest 30 minutes of exercise, at least five days a week, can make a big difference. It can be one 30 minute session, or several shorter 10–15 minute sessions.

How to get started with exercise

It can be intimidating to start exercising if you haven't done it in a while, but a plan can help you start and stick with it.

Your new exercise plan has a better chance of success if you:

- choose an activity you like, or have enjoyed in the past
- build up your activity gradually
- see your GP or an accredited exercise physiologist before you start, and regularly as you continue your exercise plan
- write your plan in your diary or on your calendar, so it's part of your schedule.

How to be more active every day

Make exercise part of your everyday activity. Try walking or cycling instead of using the car. Get off a tram, train or bus a stop earlier and walk the rest of the way. Or spend some time walking your kids to school. Get active around the house by doing some gardening, washing the car or cleaning the windows.

Australia's physical activity and sedentary guidelines can give you more information. The important thing to remember is to move more and sit less every day.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Registered Exercise Professional
- Exercise Physiologist
- Physiotherapist

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