Exercise and mental health

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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.

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.

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Where to get help

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

References

- Exercise, Anxiety Treatment Australia.
- Exercise used to combat mental health issues, 2015, UQ News, University of Queensland.
- Physical activity, Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government.

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Drugs

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Drugs and addiction explained
- Types of drugs
- Health effects of drugs
- Minimising harm
- Getting help for addiction

Drugs and addiction explained

- Addiction
  Addiction is a craving to use a substance or to repeat a behaviour...
- Alcohol and drugs - dependence and addiction
  Asking for help when you first suspect you have an alcohol or drug problem is important. If you think you have an addiction, speak to your local doctor or phone DirectLine...
- Drug use in Victoria
  Surveys provide information about drug use and the characteristics of people who use drugs in Victoria and Australia...

Types of drugs

- Alcohol explained
  The size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol...
- Amphetamines
  Amphetamines are psychostimulant drugs that speed up the workings of the brain...
- Anabolic steroids
  Prolonged misuse of steroids can cause liver damage and severe mood swings...
- Benzodiazepines
  Benzodiazepines (tranquillisers) are highly addictive and should only be used for certain conditions in a short-term or emergency situation...
- Caffeine
  Caffeine is a stimulant that acts on the brain and nervous system...
- Cannabis (marijuana)
  Cannabis has many harmful effects on health...

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• Cocaine
  Cocaine is a highly addictive illegal stimulant that has serious side effects.

• Ecstasy
  Ecstasy is an illegal stimulant and hallucinogenic drug that can cause stroke and heart attack.

• GHB
  GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate) is an illegal drug that acts as a nervous system depressant. It is also called grievous bodily harm (GBH) or fantasy. GHB is highly addictive. It produces feelings of...

• Hallucinogens
  Hallucinogens target specific centres of the brain to alter its understanding of sensory input.

• Heroin
  Heroin is a depressant of the central nervous system, which means it slows down brain function and particularly the control of breathing.

• Ice
  The drug ice, is a stimulant with a high risk of addiction if used regularly.

• Inhalants
  Inhalants are chemical substances that give off fumes that can be breathed in to achieve a 'high'.

• Kava
  It is dangerous to take kava in combination with alcohol or other psychoactive drugs.

• Synthetic drugs (new psychoactive substances)
  Synthetic drugs aim to mimic the effects of existing illicit drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy.

Health effects of drugs

• How drugs affect your body
  Drugs affect your body’s central nervous system. They affect how you think, feel and behave.

• Pregnancy: medication, drugs and alcohol
  Most women take a drug of some kind during pregnancy, sometimes without realising the potential for harm.

• Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem.

• Teeth and drug use
  Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage.

• Teeth and medication
  Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage.

Minimising harm

• Partying safely
  It is important to create a safe environment at parties so that everyone can have fun. Staying safe means avoiding injury or assault, not hurting anyone else, and not ruining an event or...

• Partying safely - schoolies week
  Partying at schoolies week can be fun, but you need to be aware of the risks, which can include accidents, robbery, violence and sexual assault.

• Talking to kids about drugs
  All children are eventually exposed to drugs – prescription medication, alcohol and tobacco, and sometimes illegal drugs too – or to messages about drugs.

Getting help for addiction

• Alcohol and drug treatments and programs
  Counsellors, doctors and other healthcare professionals can help if you have a problem with alcohol or drugs.

• Assessing your alcohol and drug use
If you are worried about your alcohol or drug use or, call DirectLine on 1800 888 236 for counselling, information and referral, or speak with your local doctor...

- **Heroin dependence - medication treatments**
  Medication treatments for heroin dependence include methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone...

- **Substance dependency services**
  Some people need to explore different treatment options for drug dependency before they find what works for them...

- **Talking to health professionals about drugs, alcohol or addiction**
  Talking with your doctor or healthcare professional is an important step in getting care for issues of drug or alcohol addiction or dependence...

**Related Information**

- **Monitoring your mood**
  Most people know when they are feeling ‘in a mood’. But do you know what ‘mood’ means? Or where your mood comes from? Or how to change your mood? Understanding your moods may help you work out what...

- **Work-related stress**
  Work-related stress causes an increase in sick days and absenteeism, a higher turnover of staff and a drop in productivity...

- **Look after your health at harvest time**
  Farmer health, wellbeing and safety are often neglected when facing the pressures of harvest. Simple safety measures can dramatically reduce the risk of injury and illness...

- **Mood and sleep**
  Getting enough sleep is vital. Long term sleep deficiency can affect your mood. You can improve your sleep quality...

- **Exercise and mood**
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise...

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- [Department of Health and Human services](http://betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

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