Exercise and mood

Summary

- Exercise is a great way to improve your mood.
- People who exercise regularly have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who don't.
- To increase the benefits, try exercising outside.
- Both aerobic exercise (such as walking, cycling or running) and strength training (such as weight lifting) can help treat depression.

Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. In fact, it is thought that exercise can be just as effective as anti-depressants in treating mild-to-moderate depression.

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 regimen after people get better.

We don't yet understand exercise and mood enough to know exactly which type of exercise is best - or how much - but what we do know is that it definitely has a positive effect.

Exercise can:

- increase your energy levels
- help you get a good night's sleep
- distract you from your worries and get you out of a cycle of negative thoughts that can feed anxiety and depression
- help you get out and be with people if you're feeling lonely; even a smile as you pass someone on the street can boost your mood
- help you feel more in control, and improve your self-esteem, because you are taking an active role in your own treatment
- increase your confidence as you meet challenges and reach goals, no matter how small, as well as helping you to feel good about your body
- help you to avoid less helpful approaches, such as drinking alcohol or dwelling on how you feel.

The positive link between exercise and mood

We don't understand exactly why exercise is so good for improving mood conditions yet, but we do know that it works.

This may be due to a combination of reasons, including:

- Exercise helps chronic depression by increasing serotonin (which helps your brain regulate mood, sleep and appetite) or brain-derived neurotrophic factor (which helps neurons to grow).
- Exercise reduces immune system chemicals that can make depression worse.
- Exercise increases your level of endorphins, which are natural mood lifters.
- Exercise helps by getting your sleep patterns back to normal. We know getting enough sleep can protect the brain from damage.
- Exercise gives you a focused activity that can help you feel a sense of accomplishment.
- Exercise limits the effect of stress on your brain.

What we know about exercise and mood

Many studies have been done to understand the link between exercise and mood.

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What we do know is:

- people who exercise regularly have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who don't
- moderate intensity exercise can be an effective treatment on its own for mild-to-moderate depression
- 16 weeks of regular exercise is just as effective as anti-depressant medication in treating older people who were not exercising previously
- exercise can help treat people with depression who have partially responded to anti-depressants; that is, it can help them get ever better
- both aerobic exercise (such as walking, cycling or running) and strength training (such as weight lifting) can help treat depression.

**Exercise outdoors**
For even greater benefits, try exercising outdoors.

Some recent studies have found people report a higher level of vitality, enthusiasm, pleasure and self-esteem, and a lower level of tension, depression and fatigue, after they have walked outside. People who exercise outside also say they are more likely to exercise again than those who stay indoors.

And, people who exercise outside do it more often, and for longer, than those who work out indoors.

**Vitamin D**
Research shows that vitamin D can help us to fight disease. Vitamin D is known as the sunshine vitamin because we can get our daily dose just by spending some time in the sunshine.

We are still learning about what vitamin D can do for our bodies, but studies suggest it can protect us from a range of conditions, from osteoporosis and cancer to heart attacks and depression.

The good news is that your body can make all the vitamin D you need if you expose your arms and legs to sunshine for 10 to 15 minutes a few times a week. For extra benefits, why not combine this with getting some exercise?

**Less screen time**
Being indoors, it is naturally tempting to be more sedentary than if you are outside. You might like to do your exercise in the controlled environment of a gym, but there are always plenty of opportunities to be active outside.

You might like to try to spend more time walking or cycling to work, gardening, cleaning up the yard, or doing other activities that get you moving and away from your computer or television.

Children are particularly at risk of watching excessive amounts of television, playing video games or using tablets.

**Research has found** that children are twice as active when they spend time outside.

**Light**
Natural light is known to help lift people's moods, so heading outside can help you to feel better.

**Green exercise**
Researchers in Britain have been working on the idea that exercising in nature has added benefits for mental health. They call this 'green exercise'.

These researchers have found that even five minutes exercising in nature can lift your mood. When you're feeling down, a walk through the park might be worth a try.

Other research has found that children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder can concentrate more easily after walking through a park, compared with walking through a residential neighbourhood. Although the study was done only with children, it might be worth trying a walk in the park if you're having trouble concentrating too.

A surprise benefit of green exercise is that exposing your body to plants can also improve your immune system. Scientists think that airborne chemicals from plants can also protect us against bacteria and viruses.

There are so many benefits to exercising outside. And unlike going to the gym, it's all free.
Remember...

- Exercise is a great way to improve your mood.
- To increase the benefits, try exercising outside.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

SANE Australia