

Understanding the Benefits of Exercise for Depression and Anxiety

Objective

To identify ways to add physical activity to your life to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

What to Know

While the benefits of exercise for physical health are well-documented, its positive impact on mental wellbeing, specifically in the context of depression and anxiety, is increasingly gaining recognition.

Many scientific studies have established a strong link between exercise and improved mental health. Exercise has been shown to stimulate the release of endorphins, commonly referred to as "feel-good" hormones, which can help reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. Additionally, regular physical activity increases the production of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, which play pivotal roles in regulating mood and emotions. Regular exercise also reduces inflammation in the body, which is increasingly implicated in the development and exacerbation of mental health disorders. Exercise promotes better sleep, fosters a sense of accomplishment, and increases self-esteem—all of which contributes to a more positive outlook on life.

The following are the specific benefits of exercise for depression:

- **Enhanced Mood Regulation.** Exercise acts as a natural mood stabilizer, helping you manage emotional highs and lows. Regular exercise can reduce feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and despair.
- **Increased Energy Levels.** Depression may reduce your energy and motivation, so engaging in physical activity can counteract this fatigue and increase overall vitality.
- **Improved Cognitive Function.** Exercise enhances cognitive function, including memory and problem-solving skills.
- **Social Connection.** Participating in group exercise classes or team sports can help you build social connections and combat the isolation that often accompanies depression.

The following are the specific benefits of exercise for anxiety:

- **Stress Reduction.** Exercise helps to lower the body's production of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, while simultaneously releasing endorphins, which promote relaxation and a sense of wellbeing.
- **Enhanced Relaxation.** Practices like yoga, tai chi, and mindfulness-based exercises are particularly effective in reducing anxiety by promoting relaxation and mindfulness, reducing the frequency and intensity of anxiety attacks.
- **Improved Sleep.** Regular exercise can help regulate sleep patterns and improve the quality of rest.
- **Increased Confidence.** As you engage in physical activity and set and achieve fitness goals, you may experience a boost in self-confidence.

What can you do to get started with a regular exercise routine? Here are some tips:

- Begin with manageable activities, such as short walks, gentle stretching, or low-impact exercises. Gradually increase the intensity and duration as your fitness level improves.
- Find physical activities that you genuinely enjoy, whether it is dancing, swimming, hiking, or playing a sport. Doing what you love will make it easier to stay motivated.
- Establish achievable goals that are specific, measurable, and time bound. Celebrate your successes along the way to maintain motivation.
- Aim for regular, consistent exercise. Creating a routine can help ensure that physical activity becomes a regular part of your life.
- Consider working with a personal trainer, joining a fitness class, or enlisting a friend as a workout partner to stay motivated and accountable.

The science is clear: regular physical activity can help alleviate symptoms, enhance mood, and improve overall wellbeing. By regularly engaging in physical activity, you can take an active role in managing your mental health and create a more balanced and fulfilling life.

What to Do

Circle the types of exercise you can do on a regular basis:

- | | | | |
|---------------|---------------|----------|------------|
| bike riding | baseball | football | handball |
| jogging | hiking | soccer | karate |
| walking | skateboarding | surfing | Pilates |
| weightlifting | kick boxing | skiing | yoga |
| tennis | swimming | dancing | basketball |

Write down other exercises or activities.

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____

Now choose three physical activities you would like to do over the next week.

- Exercise a) _____
- Exercise b) _____
- Exercise c) _____

Decide how much time you need for each exercise. Fifteen minutes? A half-hour? An hour?

Exercise a) _____

Exercise b) _____

Exercise c) _____

For each of the exercises, write down how often you can realistically do them in a week.

Exercise a) _____

Exercise b) _____

Exercise c) _____

For each of the exercises, write down which days are best (early in the week, on weekends, etc.), and what time of day is most realistic (before work or school, at night, and so on).

Exercise a) _____

Exercise b) _____

Exercise c) _____

Use the following chart to track your physical activity for two weeks. Try to do at least one physical activity each day. Note the date, types of activity, the effects that exercise had on your mood, and whether the exercise/activity reduced symptoms of anxiety or depression. Finally, write down any notes for each day.

Date	Types of Exercise or Activities	How did you feel?	Reduce anxiety or depression? Y / N	Notes

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Reflections on This Exercise

What was challenging about this exercise? Be specific.

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

Did you experience a reduction in depression and/or anxiety symptoms after completing this exercise?
Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
