Sheboygan Press.

LIFE

Tapping into the intimate relationship between mental health, exercise

Rachael Lewinski For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Aug. 23, 2017, 12:05 p.m. CT

We all know the benefits of physical exercise are endless, leading experts to deem it as our best wonder drug. However, we often don't prioritize our mental health, which is intimately and dramatically affected by our physical fitness.

According to the American Psychology Association, much like family physicians are now recommending exercise in primary care, therapists are now including fitness into their patient's treatment plans because of the beneficial effects it has on the brain.

Not only does exercise dramatically improve mental health but healthy cognitive functioning can also improve one's fitness, making this relationship a continuous connection. Being able to focus, think more strategically and flexibly, plan and follow through, reduce impulsivity and learn new activities will help you stay committed and disciplined in your fitness as well as supportive nutrition program.

Your mood, focus and energy levels will either make your workouts enjoyable, sustainable and successful or nonexistent, non-sustaining and/or prone to injury. The combination of both mental and physical health will lead you towards your most vibrant, fulfilling life and feeling and looking great!

MENTAL BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL FITNESS

Enhances mood by releasing feel-good chemicals endorphins and serotonin
Decreases depression and anxiety

Reduces physical, mental and emotional stress
Improves focus, learning, memory, reaction time and higher-level thinking, planning and execution
Increases brain cells and oxygen to the brain
Improves creativity, mental stamina and flexibility throughout your day

Love crosswords? Explore the Crossword page and play the new MidGrid Crossword.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

Beginners should start slow/moderate. The mood boost payoff can be delayed up to 30 minutes if you go over your respiratory threshold – the point at which you can no longer speak when exercising because you are so out of breath. While this might be good for boosting metabolism and burning more calories for intermediate to advanced fitness buffs, for brand newbies, starting more moderately will improve mood more quickly which motivates and inspires.

Focus on the positive and what you've accomplished, then tackle the challenges. When practiced fully and in depth, the practicing gratitude creates physiological changes in the body that release those feel-good neurotransmitters. This mental focus creates hope, improved energy, mental flexibility and resilience that is so needed when committing to healthful practices when we know life doesn't always make things easy for us.

Take a group class. The benefits of social interaction have positive effects on mental health including improving mood, focus, new learning and accountability.

Take it outside. Time in nature is exceptional for mental health and can also be inspiring and motivating for your fitness routine. Break up any monotony fueled by fresh air and beautiful scenery. Time in nature forces us to slow down, focus on the present, take a break from brain changing technology and in doing so also reduces depression.

Work with a trained professional that has a holistic approach and background. Learning specific exercises and types of programming beyond just traditional exercise that also helps with balance, coordination, maintaining

focus, promoting relaxation and personal enjoyment can improve mental health more in depth.

So, when life throws you an obstacle taking you off of your exercise routine or leading you into a mental rut, take a mindful moment: Pause, breathe deep, focus on the good, reset and begin again. Rinse and repeat for a long and happy life!

Rachael Lewinski is a mindfulness instructor at Mental Health America in Sheboygan County. She is also a personal trainer, corrective exercise specialist and yoga teacher at the Wisconsin Athletic Club in Milwaukee.