

The Power of Exercise for Mental Health

Move Your Body, Heal Your Mind

Discover how regular physical activity boosts your mental health and emotional resilience.

Introduction

Research shows regular exercise can reduce symptoms of many mental health disorders. It also improves other aspects of life like sleep, self-esteem, and overcoming daily challenges. While it sometimes can be hard to get out of the cycle and find motivation to exercise, the smallest movement can make a difference. Whether through structured workouts or everyday movement, staying active builds resilience and supports overall emotional balance.

Why Exercise Matters for Mental Health

- It improves **mood, self-esteem, cognition, memory, and focus**.
- To help the body better regulate stress and emotional imbalance, it enhances **hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis** and reduces **cortisol**.
- To aid brain health it boosts **brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF)**.

The Science Behind It

- Increases **blood circulation to the brain**.
- Boosting Endorphins levels (a neurotransmitter that reduces the feeling of pain and creates a feeling of euphoria and pleasure)
- Impacts brain regions like:
 - **Limbic system** (mood/motivation)
 - **Amygdala** (stress/fear)
 - **Hippocampus** (memory and mood)

How to Use Exercise for Mental Well-Being

- Distraction from Stress: An excuse to take a mental break and focus on self
- Boosting Self-efficacy: provides tangible experience of progress and achievement promoting self control and resilience
- Social interaction in group settings: increasing support and motivation

Specific Disorders

- **Alcohol Use Disorder** - Physical activity reduces **cravings** and helps manage **comorbidities**. Improves **motivation and coping** in therapy.
- **Depression and Anxiety** - Exercise boosts **endorphins**, improving mood and reducing anxiety. Comparable in effect to **antidepressants** for mild/moderate cases. Meta-analyses show **significant reductions** in depressive symptoms.

- **Sleep Disorders** - Exercise improves **REM sleep, sleep quality**, and **duration**. Especially helpful for **adolescents** and people with **mental illness**.

Types of Exercise That Help Most

- **30 minutes/day**, 3 days/week of moderate exercise (e.g., brisk walking)
- Can be broken into **three 10-minute sessions**
- WHO recommends **150 minutes/week** of moderate to vigorous exercise.
- Specific to the disorder:
 - Anxiety/stress: yoga or walking
 - Depression: Aerobic training (bike/run/swim), strength training, HIIT (high intensity interval training)
 - Boost cognitive function and focus: HIIT, enhancing coordination working memory and focus

Resources

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