

Exercise Benefits Your Mental Health Too

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It's the time of year again to try to stay motivated to keep your New Year's resolutions to lose weight, get fit or just increase your activity level. The struggle to stay motivated is part of the challenge. Perhaps the responsibilities from everyday life are threatening to get in the way of keeping to your commitment. If you are still staying on track ... congratulations! Either way, there is another reason to get back on track or maintain your motivation to keep it up. Simply put, exercise benefits your emotional health as well as all the physical benefits.

Perhaps there is a misconception that to benefit emotionally from exercise that one has to be fanatical about it. Fortunately this is not the case. Numerous abstracts of professional journal articles were found at www.medscape.com that clearly support the benefits of exercise on psychological well-being.

Several studies found that moderate and low intensity aerobic exercise performed from 15 to 30 minutes at a minimum of three times a week reduced anxiety and depression even after *one session* but had significant benefit with more long-term regimens. The studies suggest that these benefits are brought about by the changes in brain chemistry that elevate the naturally occurring "feel-good" chemicals in the brain. They also cite the possibility that the increase in body temperature and blood circulation in the brain impacts positively on the body's stress management response.

Not only can exercise be beneficial in promoting general emotional well-being, but it can also be used as a coping tool in a variety of circumstances. Regular exercise, because of the emotional benefits noted above, has been shown to be very beneficial in stress reduction and promoting relaxation.

Whenever you are experiencing strong feelings (such as anger, anxiety, depression or fear) try engaging in some form of physical exercise for at least 10 minutes, such as a brisk walk, jumping on a trampoline, jogging, going up and down a flight of stairs, putting on the music and dancing, shadow boxing, jumping jacks, riding a bike etc. If you are still stressing over the intense emotion after that, try something else for another 10 minutes and then do a relaxing "cool down" activity such as stretching exercises, walking at a slow pace, taking some deep breaths (inhaling and exhaling slowly), or even just sitting quietly and concentrating on some positive thoughts or images in your head for a few more minutes.

There is a great deal of research to support that there is one type of exercise that is especially beneficial for emotional well-being and this is the practice of yoga. It is a combination of stretching, strength and balance enhancement, and a focus on breath that acts as a meditative experience as well. There are many different types of yoga and people may be intimidated by thinking you have to twist your body in pretzel-like shapes. This is certainly not the case. If you would like to try yoga it is best to find a yoga instructor who

modifies poses for all fitness or experience levels. There are forms of yoga that can be done in a chair even. Newer research in the mental health field has even demonstrated the benefits of incorporating yoga into mental health treatment; particularly in the treatment of trauma as well as depression. You don't have to start out at the recommended level, especially when you are new to exercise or haven't been physically active for a while. Be sure to consult with your physician before beginning any exercise program so you can get recommendations on what exercises might be best for you or if there are any activities that you should avoid.

To keep yourself motivated to continue your program it is most helpful to get involved with some type of support. This could be a workout buddy, a personal trainer, a regular television program that is inspiring to you or nowadays there are online support programs available to help you with both diet and exercise lifestyle changes. There are many online support programs, some are even free, that provide exercise program guides from certified personal trainers as well as an online support community to help with questions and problems and provide motivational inspiration.

On those days where your motivation is lagging, just challenge yourself to do "a few minutes." This mental trick has helped me repeatedly. I often can get myself to start by saying I'll just do 10 minutes. Then once I get started I almost always end up doing 30 minutes or even more. Choose any physical activity that gets your heart rate up that you can really enjoy. Change things up so you can keep from getting bored and to make your workout well-rounded to benefit all your muscle groups too.

When you do start an exercise program, make a mental commitment to do it for at least 30 days. Research has shown that this amount of time will greatly increase the probability that this healthy activity will become a positive lifestyle change.

You can do it!