



Exercise and mental health

Many people are often confused when it is suggested that exercise and physical activity can help to improve their mood, ability to cope and general psychological health.

How can exercise improve my mental health?

There are many reasons why exercise and physical activity seems to help in the treatment of emotional problems like anxiety and depression. These include:

- Exercise is believed to increase the release of the brain chemicals that affect our mood and make us feel happier. E.g. endorphins and enkephalins.
- Exercise helps us to get active and meet new people. This stops us from feeling isolated and unsupported and possibly form new and healthy relationships.
- Exercise can give us new goals and a sense of purpose. We have something positive to focus on and aim for
- Exercise can boost our self-esteem – it can improve the way we look and how we feel about ourselves
- Exercise can help to distract us from the negative and anxiety inducing thoughts that often plague our mind when we are not actively doing something.

- Exercise can give us a sense of power and control over our mood and ability to cope.

In short getting active and exercising helps us to feel better – about ourselves, our body, our lives and our future.

What is an effective exercise program?

A well balanced exercise program should cater for three major domains:

Cardiovascular conditioning:

This refers to activities that are performed three times per week and engage the large muscles of the legs, chest and back.

For full benefits:

The activity must continue for at least 15 minutes at a pace that will allow you to talk comfortably through it and it must be rhythmical e.g. walking, jogging, swimming, and cycling.

Resistance training

This refers to the use of weights, gravity, or elastic bands as a means of resistance to provide changes in muscle tone and strength and minimize deterioration from aging.

For full benefits:

you need to train 2 -3 times per week per body part with a resistance that will allow only 10 -12 repetitions of the movement.

Flexibility training

This refers to stretching to elongate muscles and improve their range of motion with less restriction. Stretching can help reduce the build up of tension from stress.

For full benefits:

Flexibility training should be performed 4 -5 times per week with each stretch held gently for 20 -30 seconds withdraw, and then re commences the stretch for another 20 – 30 seconds.

Beginning an exercise program

Before starting an exercise program:

- Consider your individual needs:
 - ✓ age
 - ✓ current health status
 - ✓ injury/disability
 - ✓ transport
 - ✓ finances
 - ✓ equipment
 - ✓ coordination
 - ✓ motivation



Take up a sport ... Golf anyone?



- Decide on your commitment
- Consult your GP prior to starting if over 35 years of age and have history of medical illness or have been sedentary for 12 months or more
- Start cautiously. Use the first week to become accustomed to breaking old habits and learning new skills. Nothing extinguishes enthusiasm faster than over-involvement!
- The following week increase the duration NOT the intensity – Repetition is the mother of skill!
- In the third week increase the intensity slowly (under supervision if available) e.g. walk faster or advance to the next weight increment.
- By the fourth week consider adding either an additional day or time to your routine
- In week five reassess your needs versus your commitment and adjust accordingly.



What about incidental exercise?

Incidental exercise can be achieved via a number of different activities. This can include: house work, cycling to work, using stairs instead of the elevator, gardening and walking for leisure.

Reductions in levels of incidental activity have been identified as one of the major causes in obesity in recent times.

There are many ways in which you can increase your level of incidental activity:

- Walk short distances instead of driving
- Park or get off transport 15 minutes away from your destination and walk
- Use the stairs instead of the lift or escalator
- Get up & change the channel instead of using the remote controls!!!
- Rack up the leaves when gardening instead of using a leaf blowers
- Use a broom to sweep the floor instead of a vacuum cleaner
- Take the dog for a walk
- Create a fitness routine from house hold chores. Prepare equipment for sweeping, mopping and vacuuming and then commence – try to keep going non-stop for 20 minutes! The same can be done out in the garden - mowing, raking digging/mulching!

Other tips for increasing physical activity

- If using a fitness centre, negotiate a review of your fitness every 4 -6 weeks. Use the results to keep you motivated
- Sometimes less is more: exercising six times a week does not give you twice the benefit of exercising three times per week

- Consider hiring equipment during the winter months if it's too wet to walk.
- If walking, once you can comfortably walk for forty five minutes, consider jogging for one minute every ten minutes. Eventually reduce this to once every five minutes
- Experiment with different times of the day to find out what works well with your circumstances
- Create a positive relationship with exercise
- Try to choose an activity that you feel you can commit to and don't feel pressured to do too much too soon. Make exercise part of a personal commitment to a healthy lifestyle change.

Walk to work & work exercise into your day



Exercise & Lifestyle Management Program

The Marian Centre runs an Exercise & Lifestyle Management Program that aims to use exercise as part of a fully comprehensive & integrated approach to the treatment of mental health problems.

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