Exercise for Mental Health

Mental health is on the rise, and while the stigma is nothing like it used to be, there is still a big occurrence of stress, anxiety, and depression.

According to the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics), approximately 40 million adults in the U.S. alone have some form of anxiety, and 16 million adults have major depressive order.

Chances are, either you or someone you know and love struggles with their mental health. One of many ways you can improve your own mental health is through regular physical activity.

The following information is not about curing your mental health disorders, but using exercise as a way to help manage your symptoms. It should not replace medical treatments or keep you from seeing a mental health professional.

**1. Benefits of Exercise for Mental Health**

Health experts have known for decades that physical exercise is not only good for your body but is good for your mind as well. Exercise really is good medicine.  
  
There are tons of ways that exercise helps you feel better emotionally, and scientists are learning more every day about the benefits of exercise for relieving symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. Below are just five of the many ways that physical exercise can make you feel healthier and happier.

*Increases Norepinephrine Levels for Stress Reduction*

On a physiological level, scientists have observed that norepinephrine, a neurotransmitter that helps regulate the body’s response to stress, receives a boost in production during exercise. This contributes to reduced stress levels and overall feelings of calmness.  
  
So if you’re dealing with high levels of stress at work or in your social life, going for a daily run or hitting the gym after work or school can help melt the stress away.

*Boosts Your Mood During Exercise*

Long-distance runners have long known that long runs can produce a euphoric feeling known as “runner’s high". Long runs - or other prolonged aerobic exercise sessions - stimulate the release of endorphins into the body.  
  
These natural pain killers ease the aches and pains of intense exercise while making you feel like a million bucks. In fact, many studies have found that a regular exercise plan like running four to six times per week can be just as effective at combating depression as taking antidepressants.

*Helps You Get More Sleep and Have More Energy*

Health researchers have demonstrated that people who don’t get a good night’s sleep on a regular basis are at higher risk for developing anxiety and depression. Insomnia and mental health problems go hand-in-hand, but reducing one can go a long way toward improving the other.  
  
Sleep is good for both your mind and body, rejuvenating your cells and giving you increased energy and motivation for the day ahead. But when your sleep patterns are interrupted or total sleep is cut short, you short-circuit your body’s natural rhythms and growth cycles. But exercise can fix that.  
  
Have you ever put in a hard session at the gym or spent the day running around on the beach and then slept like a baby all night long? Intense exercise sessions deplete the body’s energy reserves and temporarily break down muscle and joint tissues, stimulating long, deep, restful sleep.  
  
So by committing to a regular exercise routine, you actually end up getting more sleep and having more energy every day, rather than less.

*Improves Confidence and Self-Esteem*

Daily exercise also gives you more confidence and boost your self-esteem. But surprisingly, these results are not necessarily linked to weight loss or physical appearance, as one might expect. Boost in confidence and self-esteem may actually have more to do with a sense of taking control over one’s life, increased personal power and sense of accomplishment, overcoming physical challenges and achieving goals.

*Boosts Brain Power and Productivity*

Exercise has also been shown to boost creativity, clear thinking and productivity.  
  
Intense exercise drives blood and oxygen into your brain, stimulating growth and healthy mental functioning. And when you engage in exercise on a regular basis, you further strengthen your cardiovascular system, which makes it even easier for your heart to pump blood, oxygen and nutrients throughout every part of your body - including your brain.  
  
So how does this boost your mental health? Well, since everything that is psychological is at the same time physiological, it means that improving your physical health simultaneously improves your brain function and mental health.  
  
But beside that, being more productive in your life also makes you feel good about yourself. When you get more work accomplished at your job or in your business, that makes you feel pretty good. And when improved productivity leads to higher income and career success, that feels pretty good too.

**2. Exercises for Mental Health: Cardio**

So what kinds of exercise should you engage in if you suffer from mental health issues like stress, depression and anxiety? Well, according to the experts - everything helps. Any physical activity that gets you out there moving around, raises your heart rate and gets your blood flowing is going to provide physical and mental health benefits.  
  
The key is consistency. And the best way to make daily exercise a habit is to engage in a variety of activities that you enjoy. If you’ve never been very active in sports and exercise, then you might not know what activities you’ll enjoy. And just thinking about going to a gym might seem intimidating.  
  
But there’s really nothing to worry about. Everyone started somewhere. Everyone was a beginner at one point. And honestly, most people barely even notice that you’re there because they are focusing on their own workout.  
  
If you are a total beginner and are still nervous about how to start, try hiring a personal trainer to show you around the gym. You’ll learn how to perform different exercises properly and how to work all the major muscles of your body safely and effectively.  
  
Or if you prefer to exercise outside, ask a friend to join you for a walk or jog every weekend, or check out a local meetup group for beginning hikers or something similar. There are plenty of beginners just like you out there who would be happy to have someone to exercise with once or twice a week.  
  
Here are a few more ideas about what types of exercises you can do to improve your mental health.

**Cardio**

Cardiovascular exercises are those that cause your heart to pump more blood and oxygen throughout your body. Also called aerobics, these exercises rely heavily on oxygen to burn up both carbs and fats for fuel over extended periods of time.  
  
There are tons of possible cardio exercises you could choose from:

Walking  
Running  
Cycling  
Swimming  
Hiking  
Dancing  
  
You can also use cardio machines at home or at the gym:

Treadmill

Stationary Bike

Elliptical

Rowing Machine  
  
A good rule of thumb is to start out at an easy level for just 5-10 minutes per workout and then add about 10 percent to your workout time every week. You can also alternate between short intervals of intense exercise and restful exercise. For example, jog for one minute and then walk for two minutes - then repeat for several cycles throughout your workout.  
  
While your heart and lungs will adapt quickly to the exercise and tempt you to increase your training volume more quickly, you should resist this temptation and increase gradually, because your muscles and joints generally need more time to adapt without increased risk of injury.  
  
But in just a few weeks, you’ll find that you can engage in long aerobic workouts that make you feel great both during and after exercise.

**3. Exercises for Mental Health: Weight Training**

Lifting weights at the gym is another excellent choice for many people.  
  
The feeling you get after a hard workout in the gym is difficult to explain, but you know it when it happens. The burn and soreness that you feel in your muscles the day after a hard weight-training session hurts but also feels really good at the same time. And it’s really motivating to see your strength improve week after week as you add more reps or more weight to the bar over time.  
  
A full-body weight training routine should involve 3-5 sets of 8-12 reps each of basic exercises that work all the major muscles of the body, such as the following:

Squat or leg press

Leg extension

Leg curl

Calf raise

Bench press

Shoulder press

Triceps pushdown

Biceps curl

Deadlifts

And many more  
  
Split the exercises up into two or three sessions and spread your workouts throughout the week. For instance, perform upper body exercises in one workout and leg and core exercises in the next workout.  
  
Warm up your muscles with light weights for the first one or two sets of each exercise, and then gradually increase the weights in small increments as you build strength over time. Progressively overload the muscles and work each set close to the point of exhaustion.

**4. Exercises for Mental Health: Yoga and Stretching**

While yoga and meditation are not always thought of as strenuous physical exercises, they definitely have their place in a balanced exercise routine. And many studies have shown that these exercises themselves consistently help relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety.

*Why Yoga?*

Yoga provides a wide range of amazing benefits for your mental health and emotional wellbeing. Through deep breathing exercises, stretching, and moving your body, you get into a relaxed mental state, but also tone and strengthen your muscles at the same time.

Another great reason for yoga is that it can be done anywhere, alone or with others, and in many different environment. There are videos you can do at home, you can involve friends or family, do it at a local gym or yoga studio, or even at the park or beach.

**5. Exercises for Mental Health: Exploring Other Exercises**

Most team sports programs bring together a balanced program of exercise that includes cardio exercise, explosive bursts of strength training and flexibility training all in one. But these activities also offer something that few of the other exercise options above can give you - a competitive team environment with built-in social interaction.  
  
It’s difficult to measure which aspect of participating in team sports can benefit you more: the physical exercises, the mental aspects of the game or the social interaction and camaraderie of playing with like-minded individuals who also enjoy the game. But it really doesn’t matter which of these affects you more. You will get many mental and emotional benefits from participating in group sports with friends, family, neighbors, coworkers or fellow students.  
  
It’s actually pretty easy to put together an exercise routine that boosts your mood, alleviates your anxiety and gives you a reason to get outside every day. Just pick any one of the ideas above that appeals to you and stick with it for a few weeks.  
  
It might seem difficult at first, but if you keep showing up four or five times per week, your body will adapt very quickly. And you mind will love the fun experiences, the stimulating workouts and the new lifestyle that you are creating.