

Finding joy in Movement

FIVE WAYS EXERCISE CAN FIGHT DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND LONELINESS

Known as much for her storytelling as her work in health psychology, Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., is translating the neuroscience behind fitness into practical strategies for health and happiness. In her new book, *The Joy of Movement*, McGonigal inspires readers to move—and love it. Here, she talks about some surprising ways that fitness boosts our bodies and minds.

It's a stress-buster

"Exercise has always been my go-to strategy for dealing with stress,"

McGonigal says. She points to a landmark 25-year-old study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that found physical activity to be the most effective way to improve your mood. It beat eating, sleeping and talking with friends. "While it doesn't eliminate stress, it does help us handle it with greater hope and calm. Plus, it tends to shift our mood toward a more positive outlook." Psychologists call this the feel-better

effect, she says, and it can be triggered by any type of exercise, even low-intensity activities like walking and stretching. "What matters is that you move."

It helps us connect

When exercising, the brain releases chemicals, such as endorphins and endocannabinoids, which "increase the pleasure we take from connecting with others," McGonigal says. "If you

want to strengthen a relationship, take a walk together. If you want to form new friendships, find a place where you can move with others. If you struggle with social anxiety, regular exercise can make it easier and more enjoyable to spend time with others."

It offers hope

In *The Joy of Movement*, McGonigal writes about the science behind "hope molecules"—chemicals released by the muscles into the bloodstream during exercise to protect the brain from stress. "These chemicals can [actually] help people recover from trauma," she says. "Every time you move, you are giving yourself an intravenous dose of hope."

It boosts your brain

Physical activity is already linked to better brain health, and McGonigal says that regular exercise can not only protect against Alzheimer's disease but also strengthen the brain's reward system. "This can relieve depression and make you better able to experience everyday pleasures," she says.

It can make you happier

Because community enhances the joy of movement, McGonigal (who has also been a group yoga, dance and strength-training instructor for 20 years) suggests group fitness classes. "We can take strength from seeing others' efforts," she says. "You get a stronger endorphin rush than when exercising alone, and there is even a specific feel-good effect of moving with others that psychologists call 'collective joy.' After being physically active with a group, people feel more optimistic, more hopeful and more connected to others."

Move With Music

"When you listen to music, the brain activates the motor system, which is why it's used for stroke survivors and those with Parkinson's disease. By listening to tunes you've previously exercised to, you can tap into the same feelings of strength, energy or happiness."