

Exercise: An Effective Treatment for Depression and Anxiety

EHC Patient Education Module

Improved self-esteem is a key psychological benefit of regular physical activity. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain. Endorphins also trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine. For example, the feeling that follows a run or workout is often described as "euphoric." That feeling, known as a "runner's high," can be accompanied by a positive and energizing outlook on life.

Endorphins act as analgesics, which means they diminish the perception of pain. They also act as sedatives. They are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The neuron receptors endorphins bind to are the same ones that bind some pain medicines. However, unlike with morphine, the activation of these receptors by the body's endorphins does not lead to addiction or dependence.

Regular exercise has been proven to:

Reduce Stress

Ward off anxiety and feelings of depression

Improve Sleep

Boost self-esteem

Exercise also has these added health benefits:

It increases energy levels.

It lowers blood pressure.

It helps reduce body fat.

It makes you look fit and healthy.

It strengthens your heart.

It improves muscle tone and strength.

It strengthens and builds bones.

Is Exercise a Treatment for Clinical Depression and Anxiety?

Research has shown that exercise is an effective but often underused treatment for mild to moderate depression and anxiety.

Are there Types of Exercises That Are Better for Depression and Anxiety?

It appears that any form of exercise can help depression. Some examples of moderate exercise include:

Walking

Biking

Housework, especially sweeping, mopping, or vacuuming

Yard work, especially mowing or raking

Yoga

Low-impact aerobics

Gardening

Dancing

Golf (walking instead of using the cart)

Jogging at a moderate pace

Playing tennis

Swimming

Because strong social support is important for those with depression, joining a group exercise class may be beneficial. Or you can exercise with a close friend or your partner. In doing so, you will benefit from the physical activity and emotional comfort, knowing that others are supportive of you.

Should I Talk to my Doctor Before Exercising?

For most people, it is OK to start an exercise program without checking with a health care provider. However, if you have not exercised in a while, are over age 50, or have a medical condition such as diabetes or heart disease, contact your health care provider before starting an exercise program.

How Can I Decide What Types of Exercise to Do?

Before you begin an exercise program for depression, here are some questions you should consider:

What physical activities do I enjoy?

Do I prefer group or individual activities?

What goals do I have in mind? (For example: weight loss, strengthening muscles, improving flexibility, or mood enhancement)

What programs best fit my schedule?

Do I have physical conditions that limit my choice of exercise?

How Often Should I Exercise to Ease Depression and Anxiety?

Try to exercise at least 20 to 30 minutes, three times a week. Studies indicate that exercising four or five times a week is even better. Take it easy if you are just beginning. Start exercising for 20 minutes. Then you can build up to 30 minutes.

What Are Some Tips for Getting Started Exercising?

When you first start your exercise program, you should plan a routine that is easy to follow and maintain. When you start feeling comfortable with your routine, then you can start varying your exercise times and activities.

Here are some tips to help you get started:

Choose an activity you enjoy

Put your exercise routine into your schedule

Exercising should be fun

If you need reminding, put it on your calendar

Variety is the spice of life. Make sure you vary your exercises so that you don't get bored. Check your local gymnasium or community center for an assortment of exercise programs. Don't let exercise programs break the bank. Unless you are going to be using them regularly, avoid buying health club memberships or expensive equipment. Stick with it. If you exercise regularly, it will soon become part of your lifestyle and will help reduce your depression.

What Should I Do if Exercise Is Painful?

Never ignore pain. You may cause stress and damage to your joints and muscles if you continue exercising through pain. If you still feel pain a couple hours after exercising, you have probably overexerted yourself and need to decrease your activity level. If your pain persists or is severe, or if you suspect you have injured yourself, contact your doctor. If you are unable to regularly participate in exercise or athletics, you can also try other tools to help boost your mood. Studies of meditation and massage therapy have demonstrated that these techniques can stimulate endorphin secretion, increase relaxation, and aid in boosting mood.