

Physical Exercise

For decades there has been a suspected link between physical fitness and emotional health. It is no longer a suspicion. In the last 15 years, a huge body of research has confirmed this relationship. Consider:

- Inactive people have generally lower mood and more symptoms of anxiety and depression than active people.
- Poor fitness in nondepressed people is a significant risk factor for the subsequent development of depression.
- Studies have compared depressed individuals who are randomly assigned to either exercise or no-exercise treatments. Those in the exercise groups improve more than those in no-exercise conditions. The strength of the effect is approximately equivalent to psychotherapy or medication.
- Exercise may result in lower risk for relapse than treatment with antidepressant medication.
- Exercise has also been found to be helpful with anxiety-related conditions such as generalized anxiety, post-traumatic stress, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and social anxiety. Although seldom a complete treatment, exercise can be a major help for individuals with such difficulties.
- Regular physical exercise has been found to help people manage stressful life events more effectively and with less distress.

In short, regular physical activity may be the single cheapest and most effective physical treatment for depression and anxiety available, medications included.

Some people wonder if they can afford the time to exercise regularly. This concern becomes a justification for inactivity. In fact, the time that it takes to exercise is usually made up in reduced need for sleep, reduced time spent tossing in bed trying to get to sleep, increased alertness during the day, improved energy, and an increased ability to get things done. Exercise becomes a time saver in the long run.

Aerobic or nonaerobic?

Exercise is considered aerobic if it raises your heart rate into a specified “target range” for a specified period of time (the range depends on your age). Exercises capable of doing this include running, swimming, cross-country skiing, and, not surprisingly, aerobics. Exercises that do not raise your heart rate as much, or that do not sustain a high heart rate for as long, are called “anaerobic” or nonaerobic, and include activities such as yoga, tai chi, and walking.

Initially, it was thought that exercise had to be aerobic in order to produce beneficial effects on mood. Research comparing aerobic and nonaerobic exercise, however, has failed to support this idea. Consequently, it does not seem to matter whether your fitness activity is aerobic or not. That said, most of the research examining the effect of exercise on mood has focused on aerobic exercise. Further, aerobic exercise has better evidence for positive effects on other aspects of health, including cardiovascular fitness.

Recommendation: don't worry too much whether an exercise is aerobic or not. If your health allows you to engage in aerobic exercise, however, and if you can tolerate it as easily as nonaerobic exercise, then choose aerobic.

How does exercise affect mood?

Exercise has four main effects on mood:

1. **Exhilaration.** During and immediately after moderate to strenuous cardiovascular exercise many people experience a sense of exhilaration or euphoria ("runner's high"). This is related to the release of endorphins (a type of neurotransmitter) in the body. It's a nice reward for exercising, but during depression you may not experience it. Don't despair. This is the least important of the effects of exercise on mood, and it will probably come back as you get well.
2. **Mood Improvement.** A more general improvement in mood and reduction of anxiety tends to take place after at least a few weeks of regular exercise (three to four times a week, 30 minutes at a time). Again, it does not seem to matter whether the exercise is aerobic or not. What counts is the regular participation in physical activity.
3. **Energy.** Improvements in physical fitness are also associated with increased energy, which has a positive reverberation effect: It helps you to do more, which helps you to feel better, which raises your energy further, which helps you to do even more.
4. **Stress Reduction.** The "fight or flight response" is designed to prepare you for vigorous physical activity (hence its name). If you feel stressed and don't actually do anything, the increased tension can stay with you for a long while. Getting some exercise can be a good way of "burning off" stress when you are tense.

What to do...

The important thing is to pick activities you like. Put a checkmark beside any that you might enjoy doing. If you can't find one you enjoy, put a check by the ones that you hate doing the *least*. Activities that can often be aerobic are marked with a star (*).

<input type="checkbox"/> Aerobics*	<input type="checkbox"/> Kayaking
<input type="checkbox"/> Aquabics* (aerobics in the water)	<input type="checkbox"/> Racquetball*
<input type="checkbox"/> Calisthenics	<input type="checkbox"/> Rollerblading*
<input type="checkbox"/> Canoeing	<input type="checkbox"/> Rowing*
<input type="checkbox"/> Cycling*	<input type="checkbox"/> Running*
<input type="checkbox"/> Cross-country skiing*	<input type="checkbox"/> Squash*
<input type="checkbox"/> Dancing	<input type="checkbox"/> Stretching exercises
<input type="checkbox"/> Downhill skiing	<input type="checkbox"/> Swimming*
<input type="checkbox"/> Gardening	<input type="checkbox"/> Tai chi
<input type="checkbox"/> Golf	<input type="checkbox"/> Tennis
<input type="checkbox"/> Hiking	<input type="checkbox"/> Walking
<input type="checkbox"/> Ice skating*	<input type="checkbox"/> Weight training
<input type="checkbox"/> Jogging*	<input type="checkbox"/> Yoga

Any other ideas of your own?

Tips for developing an exercise program

When most people think about starting an exercise program they imagine they have to bring about a total revolution in their lifestyle, or do an exercise they hate, or spend hundreds of dollars on equipment or gym memberships, or exercise every day. All of these ideas set up barriers against exercising. Here are some ideas to help tear down those barriers:

- **Get a physical.** Before starting, ask your physician about any limitations on your activity, and any special considerations given the status of your health.
- **Pick the right activities.** The biggest challenge is keeping at it. Pick activities that you really enjoy (or that you dislike the least). Also pick activities that you can do without a lot of preparation or a long drive. Think convenience.
- **Variety helps.** Pick more than one activity and alternate them. Include at least one thing you can do when the weather is poor, and have ideas for both summer and winter. Experiment. If you haven't tried something before, give it a shot (but use caution to avoid beginner injuries). If you don't like it you can switch to something else.

- **Stretch and warm up first.** Learn how to do stretching exercises properly, then make sure to do them before each exercise session. Ease into exercise with some low-intensity warm-up techniques (e.g., walk briskly for a bit before breaking into a jog). This can help reduce the likelihood of exercise-related pain or injury.
- **Frequency is more important than duration.** Regular short periods of exercise (three to four times a week) are better than irregular long periods.
- **Focus on enjoyment.** People who exercise for enjoyment and challenge seem to show stronger mood improvements than people who exercise mainly to look better. Try to emphasize how you will feel rather than how you want to look.
- **Monitor if bipolar.** The effect of exercise on bipolar (manic-depressive) mood problems is less clear than for other forms of depression, mainly because the research has not yet been done. Some people report that strenuous exercise (particularly aerobic exercise) during a manic upswing seems to make it worse, and that gentler exercise works better at these times. If you or others notice an upward swing in your mood, move to nonaerobic exercise.
- **Nothing changes overnight.** Use goal-setting when developing a fitness program, and be sure to pick something achievable. For example, aim to swim once for five minutes rather than starting off by committing yourself to a daily 70 laps of the pool.

Like most interventions, exercise can have a number of side effects. In the case of exercise the side effects are mostly positive – such as increased health and longevity, greater energy, better sleep and appetite, and reduced susceptibility to injury.

An adequate level of fitness can be achieved with as little as twenty minutes of exercise three times a week. Based on this, what do you think about your own fitness level?

Check one:

____ Probably adequate ____ Could be better ____ Could be a *lot* better

How much exercise would you like to get? What would have to change for this to happen? (Don't say you'd have to feel better: This may be *how* you get to feel better.)

What are the first two steps that you could take toward a healthier role for exercise in your life? For example, maybe you need to visit your local community center to see the facilities, or see if your bicycle needs to be tuned up. Make the steps small enough that you can actually do them, even with a depressed mood.

1. _____

2. _____

Get started. Give yourself credit when you've done these steps; don't wait until you're on the Olympic podium to reward yourself. To get yourself going, keep your eye on

- 1) The very next step; and
- 2) What you've already accomplished.

Make exercise part of your ongoing goal-setting.