

Exercise: a Prozac for life?



Whether you fear that you might be depressed or you just feel unhappy, lacking in motivation and vitality, exercise can help you.

In a synopsis on “Exercise, Fitness and Mental Health” (1990) sports psychologist D.R Brown summarised the possible beneficial effects that exercise has on mental health. These are:

- Exercise may act as a temporary diversion to daily stresses.
- Exercise provides an opportunity for social interaction that may otherwise be lacking in an individual’s life. Exercise provides an opportunity for self-mastery.
- Increasing fitness or improving body composition and other health parameters may improve an individual’s self-esteem. Increased core temperature during exercise may lead to a reduced muscle tension or alterations to brain neurotransmitters.
- Mood improvements may occur due to the increased secretion of endogenous (internal) opiates e.g. endorphins
- Psychological changes may occur due to alterations in norepinephrine, dopamine, or serotonin, which are all hormones which can affect mood and level of anxiety.

There are people who train too much and this too can have negative repercussions. Overtraining in athletes such as swimmers and runners has been shown to cause mood disturbances and depression – so the concept of “everything in moderation” needs to be implemented.

How much is enough?

On a more practical level, how much exercise should you do to derive the optimal psychological effects and what should you do?

Well, people usually feel good for about 2-6 hours after an exercise bout, which also helps to decrease anxiety, tension and depression. However, to have the best effects, try to incorporate the following seven tips into your physical activity.

- Make it something you enjoy; an activity that doesn't require mastery, otherwise you could be put off because:
- it is too much of an effort to
- you feel like a failure if you can't master it successfully.

The activity should be very accessible, otherwise when you feel down and tired you might feel it is not worth the effort.

Ideally exercise for those who are "down" should be group-based; most of us benefit from the support and encouragement of others. Not only will it lift flagging spirits; it might also see the beginning of new, healthy friendships.

The activity should be regular: I would recommend no fewer than three sessions per week, more if possible.

Keep in mind the immediate uplifting effects of exercise – therefore, if you can incorporate even a short walk into each day, you will benefit psychologically.

Exercise for long enough. Start with a 20 minute session but extend this to 45 minutes to an hour (where possible) for maximal psychological benefits.

Think long-term – you will be amazed at how the wonderful benefits encourage you to make a life-long commitment to regular exercise.

Use the outdoor option whenever possible. It is amazing how effective outdoor exercise is in helping you to gain perspective on troubling issues (particularly if you select a beautiful area in which to exercise i.e. a forest walk, a clamber up the mountains, a walk along a stunning beach). Fortunately the positive psychological benefits of regular exercise certainly aren't limited to those who are feeling below par. Everyone can benefit by improving their sense of well-being, their degree of vigour and vitality and by decreasing a sense of confusion, lethargy, anxiety and anger. And all you have to do is to put on your gear and DO IT! Don't delay this vital decision – why deprive your body any longer?

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