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Self-Help for Mental Health: Part 3

By Tory Masters

The scientific evidence regarding the benefits of exercise on physical health has been well known for decades. It helps with weight control, lowering blood pressure and cholesterol, preventing diabetes, heart disease and **some** cancers, just for starters.

Now there is **scientific** proof that regular, physical activity can have a major impact in reducing the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD and PTSD.

Here is some of the evidence that “getting moving” greatly enhances mental health:

Depression and anxiety: Physical movement enhances endorphin levels, the chemical produced by the brain and spinal cord that produces feelings of happiness and euphoria. Exercise **is** also a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment because it reduces physical and mental tension. Doctors will in some cases recommend trying it to reduce depression and anxiety before turning to medication. And they encourage clients who are already on medication to add exercise to their routine in order to maintain wellness and prevent setbacks.

Decreased stress: The higher our level of stress, the higher our risk for developing symptoms of mental illness. Increasing heart rate can actually reverse stress-induced brain damage by stimulating the increase in brain chemicals such as norepinephrine. These chemicals improve mood and reduce the negative thoughts - that pesky “stinkin-thinkin”- that arises following a stressful event. Exercise forces the body’s central and sympathetic nervous systems to communicate with one another, improving the body’s ability to handle stress.

Decreased symptoms of ADHD: Exercising regularly is one of the most effective ways to reduce symptoms of ADHD and improve concentration, motivation and memory. Physical activity immediately boosts the brain’s dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin levels,

which directly affect focus and attention. It works in a natural way the same way ADHD medications do.

Decreased levels of PTSD and trauma: The evidence shows that by directly focusing on the physical sensations and how you are feeling as you exercise, you can actually help your nervous system get “unstuck” and move it out of the immobilizing stress response of PTSD.

Better sleep: Physical activity increases body temperature which can have calming effects on the mind. It also helps regulate our circadian rhythm - our natural sleep and wake cycles.

Enhanced brain power: Physical activity improves brain power and prevents cognitive decline and memory loss. That’s because by getting in the habit of moving and raising our heart rate we are actually producing new brain cells all the time. This process is called neurogenesis. Exercise strengthens the hippocampus, area of the brain responsible for memory and learning. Studies also prove that it also boosts creativity and mental energy.

Overall sense of wellbeing: Those who exercise regularly say that it gives them a strong feeling of well-being. They describe feeling more relaxed, having higher self-esteem and sharper minds.

Getting moving requires taking only one step at a time
You can choose how you want “to move” whether you like to walk, do yoga, take your dog for a run, bike, clean your house, garden or dance the jitterbug! The key is to commit to some moderate physical activity on most days for a minimum of 15-30 minutes. Moderate means: 1. That you breathe a little heavier than normal, but are not out of breath. For example: you should be able to chat with your walking partner but not easily sing a song. 2. Your body should feel warmer as you move, but not overheated. As exercising becomes

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Items of Interest

Nestor, James. Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art. Riverhead, 2020. 304p.

There is an art and science to breathing correctly that the author explores via experiments, research, and interviews with experts. An appendix covers many breathing techniques..

Bonair, Andrea. Detox Your Thoughts: Quit Negative Self-Talk for Good & Discover the Life You've Always Wanted. Chronicle Press, 2020. 256p.

The author, a licensed clinical psychologist, writes how negative thoughts interfere with moods, relationships, and work.

Healthy Place. "Quotes on Mental Health and Mental Illness" <https://www.healthyplace.com/insight/quotes/quotes-on-mental-health-and-mental-illness>

PsychCentral. "Sleep Disturbance and Bipolar Disorder" <https://www.healthyplace.com/insight/quotes/quotes-on-mental-health-and-mental-illness>

National Institute of Mental Health. "Depression in Women: 5 Things You Should Know" <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-in-women/index.shtml>

PsychCentral. "How To Set Boundaries with Toxic People" https://blogs.psychcentral.com/imperfect/2020/04/how-to-set-boundaries-with-toxic-people/?utm_source=Psych+Central+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=1abb4fb833-GEN_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c648d0eafd-1abb4fb833-30398969

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a habit, you can start to add extra minutes or other types of activity. And the good news is during quarantine by COVID-19 is no gym or equipment is required.

But I can't even get out of bed! How am I supposed to exercise?

You are thinking. This is too tall an order! Who's kidding who! *Not if you make it manageable.* Commit to a 5-minute exercise at first. Then 10 minutes. And so on.

When you feel overwhelmed: Put physical activity at the top of your priority list anyway. You will be surprised to find that by *adding exercise you will actually lessen those overwhelming feelings that come up during the day.*

When you feel hopeless: With every small exercise step you take, a

sense of hopelessness will begin to turn into flickers of hope. Feelings of pride and accomplishment aren't far behind.

When you are anxious and depressed: Some physical activity will start to produce results that prove that you have more control over your depression and anxiety than you think.

Schedule physical activity at a time of day when you have the most energy. As you start to move on a daily basis you will find a clearer mind, greater emotional resilience and sense of well-being, higher energy, and increased self-esteem. Before too long you will be wondering why you put exercise off for so long. So get a move on!

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