

Exercise and mental health

Exercise has many benefits, not only for your physical health but also your mental health. Exercise stimulates chemicals in your brain that improve your mood and the parts of the brain responsible for memory and learning.

Exercise is thought to be beneficial for mental wellbeing in a variety of ways including:

- Increasing the level of endorphins in the brain, which are thought to have “mood-lifting” effects
- Increasing serotonin, a neurotransmitter in the brain which is thought to be closely linked to depression
- Increasing the sense of control over people’s own lives and health, which is generally lost in individuals with disorders such as depression

Although the focus for exercise is usually on the physical outcomes (such as losing weight), it is important to consider the positive effects it has on mental health. Although physical aspects may not be noticed until months to years down the track, the positive boost to your mood and emotional well-being can be noticed as soon as 5 minutes (after a 30 minute workout) after an exercise session.

Regular exercise has a range of benefits on:

Anxiety/stress- as little as a single session of exercise has been shown to produce low to moderate anxiety and stress reduction

Depression- a decreased risk of developing clinical depression. Exercise, especially that which is aerobic (cardio training) and resistance-based (strength training) is useful for people with moderate to severe depression as part of their treatment.

Emotion and mood- exercise has been proven to have a small to moderate effect on increasing vigour while decreasing fatigue, confusion, and anger.

Self-esteem- exercise can help to promote physical self-worth and body image.

Sleep- exercise may promote better sleep schedules, in both people with good or disturbed sleep.

Drug and alcohol addiction- low to moderate intensity exercise has been shown to help with withdrawal symptoms and nicotine cravings.

Unlike other forms of conventional treatment such as medication, exercise has no harmful outcomes if carried out safely and doesn’t have to cost a lot. The motivation to exercise is one of the biggest challenges to overcome!

Tips for increasing motivation:

- Going on daily walks/runs to catch up with friends instead of staying in
- Get into the habit of exercising by coming up with a routine. For example you could have a specific water bottle just for when you exercise and have a reward after each session. Once you start exercising frequently, your body will learn to associate the exercise you do with the release of mood boosting chemicals so that you won't need the end reward as much.
- Invest in exercise gear so that you are more motivated to keep exercising to make use of the gear
- Walking/running/cycling as much as possible to commute instead of driving or catching public transport. If it is difficult to make the full distance, you might want to try parking a short walk away or getting off the bus a couple stops earlier, so that you walk some of the distance.
- Getting an app that helps organise and track your daily exercise
- Joining a local sporting team (like a netball team!) with friends so that you have more motivation to attend training and games, as well as the benefits of social interaction

The suggested amount of exercise by the Australian Government is 30 minutes of moderate to intensive physical exercise most or all days of the week. This time recommendation doesn't have to be continuous and can be broken down into shorter chunks of exercise.