



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH

**PRESENTED BY YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE
AND WORKLIFE PROGRAMS**

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OBJECTIVES

- Describe the difference between mental health and mental illness
- Review the physical and mental benefits of exercise
- Highlight types and frequency of exercise that work best for mental health
- Explore practical strategies to get moving

MENTAL HEALTH VS. MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental health

Your psychological, emotional, and social well-being

- Is always present in everyone
- Normal mix of good and challenging days
- Exists on a continuum

Mental illness

Conditions affecting thinking, feeling, mood, behavior, and physiology

- Affects daily functioning
- Persists over extended periods
- Examples:
 - Anxiety
 - Bipolar disorder
 - Depression
 - Schizophrenia
 - Personality disorders

WHAT EXERCISE DOES FOR YOUR BRAIN

- **Increases blood flow**
 - Dilates arteries and enhances oxygen delivery to brain tissue
- **Maintains brain volume**
 - Prevents shrinkage in memory centers
 - Increases hippocampus size, generating new brain cells and plasticity
- **Reduces neuroinflammation**
 - Protects against dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and Multiple Sclerosis



MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXERCISE



- **Increased endorphin and neurotransmitter release**
 - Floods your system with natural feel-good chemicals, like dopamine, serotonin, and endocannabinoids
- **Decreased stress**
 - Reduces stress hormones, like cortisol
- **Less anxiety and depression**
 - Proven therapeutic effects on mood disorders
- **Enhanced social connection**
 - Improves social pleasures and actions
- **Added confidence**
 - Boosts self-esteem and self-worth

PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

- Supports weight management
- Strengthens bones and muscles
- Reduces chronic disease risks
- Increases longevity and vitality



BEST EXERCISES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

- **Team sports**
 - Rank at the top for mental health benefits through social connection
- **Cycling and aerobic workouts**
 - Excellent cardiovascular workouts with proven mood benefits
- **Gym activities**
 - Resistance training and structured workouts build strength and confidence, while reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression
- **Meditative practices**
 - Yoga, tai chi, and mindful movement calm the nervous system through breath, movement, and mindfulness

Bottom line: Do what you like. It's just important to do something!

IS OUTDOOR EXERCISE BETTER?

- **Natural stress reducer**

- Being outdoors has powerful positive effects on mental wellness

- **Cardiovascular benefits**

- Studies show outdoor activity lowers blood pressure and heart rate

- **Vitamin D absorption**

- Sunshine is essential for vitamin D production, supporting bone health and immunity



DURATION AND FREQUENCY RECOMMENDATIONS



– Ideal frequency:

- 30 to 60 minutes, three to five times per week at moderate intensity

– Shorter duration benefits

- Even 10- to 15-minute sessions positively affect mental health

– Long-term effects

- 10 to 12 weeks of regular exercise shows significant benefits
- Making it an ongoing routine maximizes impact

DANGERS OF AN INACTIVE LIFESTYLE

Those who lead more sedentary lives have a:

- **25% higher risk of depression**
 - Loss of self-worth and increased negative self-talk
- **50% greater chance of chronic disease**
 - Increased risk of obesity, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and metabolic syndrome
- **35% elevation in stress levels**
 - A lack of physical activity hinders the release of cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone

“Physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality.”

— World Health Organization

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED



- **Set a small step goal**
 - Put on sneakers, open your door, and walk for five minutes, then turn around and walk back. You did it!
 - Add one to two minutes every few days
- **Sign up for a class**
 - When you've paid for or committed to something, you're more likely to follow through
- **Join or start a walking group**
 - Working out with others keeps you accountable
- **Attach exercise to audiobooks or podcasts**
 - Allowing yourself to listen only during workouts increases your odds of returning for the next chapter!

BUILD IN MORE MOTIVATION

- **Choose scenic routes**
 - Give yourself permission to stop and appreciate the view or take photos
- **Make it fun**
 - Use your imagination: Hold a solo dance party, play soccer or frisbee with your kids, or join a sports team
- **Create incentives**
 - Link exercise to activities you enjoy
- **Set goals**
 - Challenge yourself and track your progress
- **Reward your success**
 - Celebrate milestones with meaningful rewards



SUMMARY



- **Exercise transforms mental health**
 - Physical activity boosts mood, reduces anxiety and depression, and builds resilience
- **Your brain benefits**
 - Exercise increases blood flow, grows new brain cells, and protects against cognitive decline
- **All movement counts**
 - Consistency matters more than intensity
 - Start small and build up
- **Inactivity has consequences**
 - Sedentary lifestyles increase the risk of mental and physical health challenges
 - It's never too late to start moving

RESOURCES

Books

- Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain
 - John J. Ratey and Eric Hagerman
- The Joy of Movement
 - Kelly McGonigal

Videos

- [The Brain-Changing Benefits of Exercise](#)
- [Fitness Blender](#)
(free workout videos for all levels)

Apps

- [Headspace](#)
- [Calm](#)

Websites

- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health America](#)

Web Articles

- [Exercise is an All-Natural Treatment to Fight Depression](#)
- [Depression and Anxiety: Exercise Eases Symptoms](#)

Podcasts

- [The Psychology Podcast](#)
- [The Mental Illness Happy Hour](#)

THANK YOU



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