

Can Exercise Really Make You Happy?

Who wouldn't like to do something that could help you feel a little happier? We all can use a little pick-me-up from time to time. Health experts are unanimous in recommending exercise for health and well-being. It is easy to see that exercise is good for the health of your body: heart, lungs and muscles. It is a little less obvious to see how physical exercise could be good for the health of your mind. Is vigorous physical activity really good for your mood and confidence? Can regular intense exercise reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and be an alternative treatment to anti-depressant medication?

"Runner's High" is that the euphoric, calm clear state of mind one experiences after or during a long period of aerobic exercise such as long distance running. Many know this feeling from personal experience. It is what keeps many motivated to keep working out. Vigorous exercise seems to reduce stress and sharpen mental focus and alertness.

Recent scientific advances have led researchers to be able to identify the natural bio-chemical changes in the brain that seem to be associated with this euphoric state. To over-simplify very complex neurological processes, it seems to come down to three chemicals: endorphins, serotonin, and phenylethylamine. Incidentally, these are some of the same chemicals which are associated with the sexual orgasm. The precise nature of how physical activity stimulates the release of these chemicals is still not fully understood. However, the effect of exercise on mood is.

A growing body of research shows the beneficial effect of physical activity on reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety. Studies show that regular rigorous exercise can make the same significant difference anti-depressant medication after four months. It was also shown that those who continued to engage in exercise 6 months after the study ended were less likely to relapse into depression.

What level of exercise intensity and frequency are ideal?

So how much exercise is ideal for your mental health? Take a deep breath now. The answer seems to be that 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity everyday is good for your health and mood. This translates into walking about 2.5 km. or some equivalent. More rigorous aerobic exercise, flexibility stretching like yoga and resistance training such as weight training can give additional health and mood benefits. Thirty minutes several times a week is considered a minimum requirement.

The psychological benefits of exercise may also be explained by improved self-image and self-esteem that comes with weight loss and improved muscle tone. Negative self evaluation is often associated with depression. Being able to look good, receive compliments from friends and wear clothes that you like can be a real boost to the ego.

Being active improves body, mind, and spirit. Yet, a quarter of Canadians get absolutely no exercise and nearly two-thirds get less than the recommended minimum amount of physical activity of 30 minutes, several times a week. Only 40 percent maintain an "acceptable weight".

If exercise is so good for us, why don't we do it?

"No time" is the reason most people offer when asked why they don't exercise. And its true; most of our lives are busier than ever before. But the fact is, when something is important, when we are committed, when we really want something, we find the time for it. Look beneath the easy and ready excuse and you may find more complex reasons why people won't start or can't seem to stay with a regular exercise routine.

- Impatience: People want to get in great shape Right Now!
- Unrealistic Expectations: Looking for the "perfect body" is a guaranteed set-up for failure.
- Denial: Many people are in denial that they need to improve their health.
- Intimidation: The idea of failure or looking foolish or being a beginner intimidates many people into never starting an exercise program.
- Bad experiences or painful memories: Experiences such as humiliation or old feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment can cause resistance to the idea of exercise.

Tips to your Start or Increase Your Exercise Routine

If any of these reasons lay beneath the surface of your "not enough time" excuse, consider these suggestions:

- Find an activity you like.
- Start slowly. Try a few minutes daily until you reach 30 minutes each day.
- Find a buddy. It can be more enjoyable and more encouraging when with friends or your spouse.
- Go for progress not perfection.

- Realize that it may hurt before it feels good. No pain, no gain.
- Remember healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes.
- Be patient. All good things take time. Your fitness will improve 15-30% in 3-6 months when you persist.
- Congratulate yourself on your hard work.
- Remember how good you feel ("the runner's high") when you are done your routine.
- Remind yourself of this good feeling when you don't feel like exercising.
- Persist. Don't give up. If you miss a day, begin again the next day.