



WHY EXERCISE NEEDS TO BE A PART OF THE MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION



The physical benefits of regular exercise are undeniable — improved strength and stamina, lower risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease, etc., but its impact on our mental health may be even more substantial, particularly in the current moment.

Consider your reasons to stay active. They might include maintaining your waistline, improving your sex life or avoiding the chronic conditions that influence so many of your peers, but perhaps more important it the way it makes you feel: more energy throughout the day, better sleep, sharper memories, improved self-confidence, elevated mood, etc.

In fact, study after study shows that regular exercise is one of the best ways to improve and maintain our mental health. For example, regular exercise has shown to:

- Prevent depression and anxiety disorders. Just 15 minutes a day reduced the risk of major depression by 26%.
- Reduce day-to-day stress.
- Reduce the risk of cognitive decline, via measures such as attention, memory and concentration.
- Improve cognitive ability and academic performance.
- Lower the risk of developing neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease. It can also make the symptoms of these diseases less severe.
- Increase self-reported happiness and lower levels of sadness and loneliness, both in the short-term and later in life.
- Reduce feelings of fatigue, improve sleep quality and lower the risk of insomnia.
- Enhance the impact of the treatment of addictions.
- Boost self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Assist in the treatment of eating disorders, chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and body dysmorphic disorders.

Because the mental health benefits of regular exercise are thought to stem from physiological (e.g., endorphins), psychological (e.g., self-efficacy), social (e.g., relationships) and neurological (e.g., brain function) effects, there are many ways to both get started and stay motivated in the long term. Effective strategies include:

- Exercise frequently, but in short bursts (5-10 minutes)
- Exercise when you have the most energy (if possible)
- Schedule physical activity into your day
- Find activities you enjoy
- Choose environments where you feel comfortable and/or motivated
- Celebrate small wins and focus on your progress and accomplishments
- Practice self-compassion, we all have “off days”
- Be active with others (in person or virtually). It is important to stay connected.