



TIP SHEET: EXERCISE

Exercise improves mental health

Aerobic exercise is one of the fastest ways to reduce stress/anxiety and improve mood. It also helps reduce fatigue, improve sleep, improve concentration and focus, and even help our brains function more effectively in general.

Just 5 minutes of exercise has anti-anxiety effects for several hours, similar to taking ibuprofen for a headache. People who exercise regularly are 25% less likely to develop anxiety or depressive disorders, because exercise helps the brain cope better with stress.

Researchers have examined the relative effectiveness of exercise versus medications versus therapy for people who are anxious or depressed. They have found that exercise works as well as medication for at least some people, and in general is moderately effective in improving depressed mood. Like anything else, exercise won't help everyone, but it is effective for enough people that it is worth a try.

How does exercise help?

There are a couple of reasons why aerobic exercise helps improve mood and reduce stress/anxiety:

- There is actually little evidence that exercise produces endorphins (chemicals in the brain that act as natural pain killers). Instead, it seems more likely that exercise improves the body's ability to manage stress by increasing norepinephrine in brain areas related to the stress response. Norepinephrine is the same chemical that some antidepressants target.
- Exercise improves sleep, which in turn reduces stress/anxiety and improves mood. In general, exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime.

Starting to Exercise

- Contact your doctor before beginning an exercise program.
- Current exercise guidelines recommend working towards approximately 2.5 hours a week of brisk walking (or other moderate-intensity activity), or 1¼ hours of a running or swimming (or other vigorous-intensity activity) or a combination of the two.
- Start small. Like anything else, it is easiest to succeed when a task is broken into small steps. Start with just 5 or 10 minutes of exercise a day, and work up to exercising more. For some people, just 10 minutes a day of brisk walking is as effective in reducing anxiety as 45 minutes of vigorous activity (like running)!
- Find something you enjoy. Not enjoying the activity (or even hating it) is a major factor that predicts people dropping out of exercise programs.
- Enlisting social support is important for some people (but not everyone). This generally involves having someone who exercises with you and helps you stay committed to your exercise program.
- Some people enjoy listening to music or books on tape while exercising--if this applies to you, purchase an inexpensive MP3 player; there are many free podcasts available.
- Be patient. It takes awhile to get into shape, just like it takes awhile to get out of shape. In general, people take at least 8 weeks to build enough stamina that an activity like brisk walking becomes easier.
- Exercise at a conversational pace--enough that your heart is beating faster, but you can still carry on a conversation without being out of breath (if you are out of breath and unable to talk, you are exercising at an anaerobic level and will not experience as many mental health benefits).
- Many people feel embarrassed when they exercise--they aren't as fit as "fast people," they feel uncomfortable with their body weight or body image, and so on. Try not to compare yourself to others or let fear of what others might think get in the way (fewer people will notice you in the first place than you might think) and remember that exercising makes you more active than about 85% of the US population, which is certainly nothing to be embarrassed about.
- Finally, keep in mind that the single best thing you can do for your health is to move from a sedentary (i.e., no exercise) to somewhat active lifestyle. There is no other "increase in exercise level" that is as beneficial for your health as this one--moving from somewhat active to very active, for example, is not as beneficial to your health as moving from a sedentary to somewhat active lifestyle.