

Exercising to improve mental health

The benefits of regular exercise to your physical health are well-known, but did you know studies have shown exercise can also improve your mental health?

Exercising regularly is important if you want to stay healthy – it can help you to manage your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease and strengthen your bones, joints and muscles.¹ The Australian government guidelines recommend adults get around two and a half hours of moderate intensity exercise each week, and one and a quarter hours of high intensity exercise.²

But exercise can also have important benefits for your mental health. The hormones released in your brain during exercise – dopamine and serotonin, also known as ‘happy hormones’ – to get fit can help you to better deal with stress. Research also suggests there are lower levels of stress hormones such as cortisol in people who regularly exercise.³

Regular exercise can also improve another key factor when it comes to your mental health – your sleep. By helping you to be more physically tired and sleep better, exercise can help lower a range of negative emotions that come with poor sleep and reduce the severity of mental health problems like anxiety and depression.⁴

There are other indirect mental health benefits of exercise too. Regular physical exercise may also be associated with higher levels of self-esteem, as we begin to feel proud of ourselves for achieving a certain fitness goal or sticking to a workout schedule. This can lead to better emotional stability, resilience and motivation to achieve in other areas of our lives.⁵

Exercise can also provide a ‘circuit breaker’ from negative thoughts if you are feeling anxious or depressed, by forcing your brain to focus on what it needs to do to get you through the workout, like coordinating your muscles and breathing. Further, because exercise often involves interacting with other

people, whether it's a personal trainer or a team, it can help reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation that sometimes worsen your mental health.⁶

How do I get started?

If you don't exercise regularly at the moment, you could take a look at the government guidelines as a good place to start.⁷ You may not want to start with too much of a punishing routine – exercise can be as simple as walking or cycling to work or the shops, or doing the gardening in your backyard.

If you're new to exercise or are re-starting a routine after a long break, illness or injury, you may also want to consult a health professional, like your GP or an exercise physiologist. They can help you to come up with a plan that works for your fitness level, goals and health history.

1 Benefits of physical activity. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 August 2023

2 Physical activity: Guidelines for adults 18-64. Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, May 2021

3 Working out boosts brain health. American Psychological Association, 4 March 2020

4 How sleep deprivation impacts mental health. Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, 16 March 2022

5 4 ways physical activity improves our mental health. University of Queensland School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, 25 May 2020

6 Exercise and mental health. Healthdirect.gov.au, March 2023

7 Physical activity: Guidelines for adults 18-64. Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, May 2021

