Can Exercise Really Improve Depression Symptoms?

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Exercise and Depression: Can It Really Help?

When depression comes into your life, you begin searching for solutions and methods to produce a quick resolution. You reach for medications that provide minimal benefits combined with side effects that range from mildly uncomfortable to seriously dangerous. You head to your weekly counseling, and although your therapist means well, she has been unable to alleviate your symptoms. Chiropractic, acupuncture and aromatherapy all start promising, but the improvements plateau and begin to decline. You have tried multiple modalities with no success. Where do you turn now?

For thousands of years people have known that you need a healthy body to achieve a healthy mind and a healthy mind to manage a healthy body. Forget about moving in directions that seem less intuitive and more complex. Instead, choose the universal simplicity of exercise to improve your depressive symptoms.

Five Exercise Theories

So many conditions improve with exercise and depression is no different. Why does exercise improve mental health? No one knows for sure, but many people have spent many hours working to figure it out and they have some really good ideas. They include:

- **Endorphins:** Phrases like “endorphin calm” and “runners high” describe the euphoric feeling many people experience during and after periods of exercise, when endorphin levels increase.
- **Serotonin:** Psychotropic drugs target serotonin receptors in the brain because more serotonin leads to less depression. Research has shown that exercise increases the amount of serotonin in the body.
- **Tryptophan:** Tryptophan is a precursor to the neurotransmitter serotonin. Tryptophan makes you feel peaceful and sleepy, like after eating a turkey dinner. Because tryptophan works like serotonin, exercise produces the same effect medications for depression do.
- **Norepinephrine:** Similar to serotonin, norepinephrine is released in the body during exercise. With increased norepinephrine, symptoms of depression decrease. Norepinephrine is different because of the range of positives it brings, including allowing your heart to beat faster, providing more oxygen to reach your brain and muscles. This enables you to think clearer and have improve strength and coordination.

- **Thermogenic:** The ancient Greeks used bathhouses to become refreshed and recuperated. Soaking in a hot bath, sitting in a sauna and vacationing somewhere warm all make you feel better. This theory suggests exercise helps you feel less depressed or anxious simply because it warms your body. For thousands of years, people have been seeking out natural hot springs claiming they have healing properties.

No one is sure which of these ideas is correct, but consider combinations of several or all are accurate. Regardless of why it happens, the benefits have been proven time and time again; your brain and body gain so much from even moderate exercise.

Next page: breaking barriers and finding exercises that work.

Five Reasons to Try Exercise

Are you hesitant to try exercise? The risk is very low, and the potential benefits are huge. Consider the following:

1. **Low cost:** Exercise is very often free. You could spend thousands of dollars on the latest fitness equipment or gym memberships, or you could lace up your shoes and go for a walk outside.
2. **Independence:** Once you learn how to exercise safely and effectively, you can continue on your own, giving you feelings of independence and control.
3. **Availability:** Exercise is endlessly available due to the ability you have to modify it for your needs. The only limit is your creativity.
4. **Side effects:** Exercise has no side effects, except perhaps sore muscles when you get started. Side effects of psychotropic drugs are long, scary and sometimes worse than the depression.
5. **Physical benefits:** The positive physical benefits of exercise make it worth trying even if it doesn't do much to improve your depression. The holistic approach cannot be overstated here. Lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, improved heart and lung health, and reduced chance of obesity and diabetes are all possible through exercise.

Breaking the Five Biggest Barriers

You are probably sick and tired of hearing about exercise. You family, friends, doctors and therapists love talking about how great exercise is, but you arm yourself with a solid dose of skepticism. Do you want to find the ways to break the most stubborn barriers? Here's how:

- **I don't have the time.** It's true; your life is busy. Work, family commitments, appointments and other obligations take up most of your day. But how many status updates do you read through and how many Youtube videos of cats or car accidents do you watch? Many people shun exercise in the name of relaxation, but exercises is one of the best things you can do to relax. Sitting on the couch is a negative coping skill. Trade it in for a positive one.

- **It hurts too much.** Start very slowly and increase the amount and intensity of exercise from there. Trying too much too soon will leave you sore and demotivated.
- **I have no energy.** Depression leaves you feeling exhausted and run down. But instead of waiting until you have enough energy to exercise, exercise to boost your energy. Most people report feeling more alert, focused and energized following exercise.
- **It's no fun.** Expand your idea of what exercise is. Anything that increases your heart rate, breathing rate and exerts your muscles counts as exercise. If you enjoy sex, then you enjoy exercising. Approach the situation with the mindset that any exercise is better than no exercise. As long as you do something that you enjoy and find appealing, it is a success.
- **I'm all alone.** Working out with other people boosts motivation and accountability, but you may not have a group of friends who want to exercise at the same time and in the same way you do. If you do not have a partner, learn new ways to hold yourself responsible. Establish rewards for yourself to be your own motivation.

Next page: five exercises that work.

Five Exercises That Work

Deciding how to exercise to do can be a challenge in itself. Some good options for beginners include:

1. **Stretching:** Stretching improves flexibility and range of motion by loosening tight muscles. This is a great

starting point because it's low impact and will help improve your performance in other exercises.

2. **Chores:** You could be exercising already without even knowing it. Vacuuming or cleaning the tub involve aspects of exercise. Making these activities a priority will give you physical benefits as well as the pride associated with maintaining a clean home.
3. **Aerobic –** If you are looking for the best balance between high benefit and low impact, look no further than walking. Dozens of studies confirm that walking for 20 minutes four times a week has the same antidepressive influence as medications. Don’t like walking? Think biking, swimming or seek out low impact options like elliptical trainers. These exercises help with energy, stamina and reduce pain, and the repetitive movements help induce meditative states that limit depression and anxiety.

4. **Circuit training –** Stronger muscles don’t need to work as hard as weaker muscles, which will leave you with more energy. Start with light weights and lower repetitions while moving quickly from exercise to exercise to maintain a high heart rate.
5. **Yoga –** The yoga trend is perfect for someone with depression. Yoga helps build endurance and strength while improving sleep and concentration. Search for gentle yoga classes, videos or lists of poses online that seem possible for your skill level.

Conclusion

Do not make the mistake of waiting for your depression to alleviate before you try exercise. Take a lesson from physics. An object at rest tends to stay at rest while an object in motion stays in motion. Once you gain the inertia you need, you will be a less-depressed force to be reckoned with.