

Improve Your Mental Health With Exercise

Did you know even two minutes of exercise prompts your body to release “feel-good” endorphins? Physical activity boosts your spirits and helps you overcome the inertia that so often accompanies depression. If you’re feeling stressed and anxious, exercise can have a calming effect. Like meditation, it moves your attention away from your woes and into the present moment.



How exercise affects your brain

Exercise increases blood flow to your brain, boosting activity in the brain’s frontal lobes and hippocampus. Frontal lobes support analytical thinking and problem-solving, and the hippocampus plays a key role in memory.

Exercise can:

Reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol

Increase your body temperature, which can have calming effects

Release tension in your muscles, helping you relax

Improve mood-enhancing brain chemicals such as serotonin and other neurotransmitters that have been associated with elevated mood



How exercise affects your mental health

Exercise increases confidence by giving you a sense of accomplishment to meet the goals you set for yourself. It also can make you feel better about your appearance and self-worth.

- It creates a distraction, giving you the opportunity to interact with others, even brief exchanges, as you walk or run around your neighborhood or park
- Exercise can help you cope, giving you a good substitute for poor or unhealthy coping strategies, such as overeating or drinking
- Exercise improves sleep

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Stay motivated to exercise

The hardest part for some of us is staying motivated to exercise. Here are some tips for staying motivated:

Identify what you enjoy doing. You might enjoy walking or running, but some of your other interests can increase your heart rate and benefit your mental health too, such as gardening or playing basketball with your children or grandchildren.

Find an exercise buddy. When you're feeling down, a friend can help you stay motivated or be a listening ear for whatever is on your mind. You may meet a new walking or running buddy at First Strides.

Set reasonable goals. Don't overdo it. As you accomplish small goals, you'll be ready to tackle larger ones, like a 5K walk or run.

Don't think of exercise as a burden. If you feel exercise is something you "should" do and you're not living up to it, then you'll associate it with failure. Instead, look at exercise as a tool to help you stay healthy.

Vary your workouts. To prevent boredom, try a variety of walking or running routes. Explore parks and neighborhoods to keep things interesting.