

By Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D.

The Psychological Benefits of Your Exercise Program

Losing weight, preventing obesity, and reducing the risk of disorders like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and osteoporosis are great reasons to work out regularly. But, did you know that exercise can help to preserve your emotional health, as well?

We take both our physical and mental health for granted until something goes wrong. We overlook symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression until we feel totally overwhelmed or are stuck in a deep depression. As with physical health problems, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure when it comes to depression or stress-related illness.

Psychological benefits of exercise

Regular physical activity can help you maintain your emotional well-being, and prevent many stress-related illnesses. Here are some of the benefits of an exercise program.

Reduces feelings of anxiety. Anxiety includes feelings of worry, self-doubt and fearful uncertainty about the future. Research suggests that worriers may benefit most from exercise of moderate intensity.

Reduces feelings of stress. People experiencing stress may report physical symptoms, such as muscle tension and stomach aches. Others feel emotional upset: feeling overwhelmed, pressured and out of control. Regular physical activity helps to reduce both physical and emotional stress symptoms.

Enjoying the emotional health benefits of your exercise program can help you become a lifelong exerciser.

Especially important is that many people report feeling less angry and irritable when they exercise regularly. Feeling angry is the stress factor most often associated with harmful health effects, such as increased risk of hypertension and heart disease.

Reduces symptoms of depression. Depression is characterized by a negative mood and feelings of hopelessness. While everyone feels depressed from time to time, depression is diagnosed when symptoms last for a relatively long period of time, or become so severe that they interfere with daily life. Several studies have found that regular exercise of moderate intensity is as effective as other forms of treatment for mild to moderate depression. Exercise is often used in conjunction with medication and talk therapy.

Energizes you and promotes a positive mood. Not only does exercise reduce bad feelings, it gives you good feelings. Many people report positive changes in mood after a workout. These changes include feeling more energized, along with generally positive feelings of well-being.

Improves sleep quality. Good sleep quality improves resistance to stress-related illness, and helps you to start the day feeling invigorated and refreshed.

Improves self-confidence and body image. People experiencing more positive mood and fewer feelings of stress, depression and anxiety tend to feel better about themselves and their lives. Feeling good about what you are accomplishing with your exercise program can help you feel good about yourself. You feel better about your body, as well. Even if it is not perfect, you appreciate all it can do.

Emotional health benefits of exercise

Enjoying the emotional health benefits of your exercise program can help you become a lifelong exerciser. When you feel too tired to exercise, remind yourself you will feel invigorated and refreshed after your workout. Too stressed to make time to exercise? Remember that exercise will reduce feelings of stress, and help you feel more relaxed, yet alert and focused.

Maximizing the psychological benefits

To get the most from your exercise program, choose activities that you enjoy the most, or from which you experience the most stress relief. Highly fit people might enjoy the way they feel after a fairly intense workout. Others may benefit from activities of a more moderate intensity.

Think creatively. Do you enjoy getting outdoors? Exercising with a friend? Or do you need time alone? Would you like to find an activity that offers competition, such as tennis? Or one that requires concentration, such as rock climbing? Look for recreational activities that provide enjoyable opportunities to work out and have fun at the same time. **FM**

