

CENTER STAGE

(formerly TRIPLEPOINT) September/October 2016 Volume 1, Number 3

Physical Activity and Mental Health

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Physical activity or exercise has been found to be a tried-and-true method of alleviating both anxiety and depression. Physical activity can be described as any movement that involves contracture of the muscles; this can be gardening, walking, climbing stairs, and housework. Exercise is described as purposeful work: planned physical exertion for the sake of achieving health benefits or other fitness goals.

It is no surprise that, in recent years, research has shown that physical activity benefits not only our physical well-being but also our mental well-being. Those who engage in physical activity or exercise for at least thirty minutes four times a week reap the benefits of improved sleep, higher resilience to stress, decreased anxiety, bettered mood, and heightened cognition (Robb, 2009). It can be an alternative or adjunct to mental health treatment, and in some cases may be able to replace medication.

Have you ever experienced the “runner’s high” after working out? This has been attributed to the release of endorphins, particularly beta endorphins, the most powerful endorphins in the body, which are typically found in the hypothalamus and pituitary gland. Research has also pointed to an increase in central serotonin, a neurotransmitter that plays a crucial role in mood, and in 5-hydroxy-tryptophan, an essential building block to serotonin itself. It is no wonder that many individuals make it a habit to start their days with physical activity, as they feel that a gentle mood lift is a prerequisite to tackling the unknown stressors of a typical work day.

exercise had a beneficial effect on working memory, as compared to a control group. They also found that exercise increased levels of high-arousal positive affect and decreased levels of low-arousal positive affect in relation to controls (Hogan, Mata & Carstensen, 2013). To break this down:

affect is the experience or feeling of emotion, and is key to processing stimuli. *Arousal* is a basic physiological response to the presentation of a stimulus. Combine positive affect with high arousal, and you have a setup for success.

Who would not want to respond as quickly, appropriately, and favorably to any given stimulus he or she encounters? This might result in responding to a partner’s request for help with a smile, more efficiently tackling that complicated project at work, or simply enjoying a sunset out the window of the car, even while sitting in traffic.

In relation to anxiety, researchers have conducted trials determining the effect of exercise on anxiety about public speaking and other psychological stressors (Fox, 1999). Fifty percent of trials found that participants had lower anxiety following a physical workout.

If someone you care about shows social anxiety or difficulty in public speaking events, it may be helpful to suggest that they exercise before mingling socially or giving that important talk. They may find, to their relief, that the time they took to do yoga at home before they left allowed them to stay at that party where they

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A study conducted by researchers at Stanford University in 2013 found that, independent of age,

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knew only one person, and even to make some conversation. Or perhaps, they were able to give a full speech to their volunteer group without stuttering or feeling as if they wanted to run from the stage.

To keep exercise as a priority, here are some helpful tips:

1. Include it in a daily planner. Schedule physical activity as you would any other important event.
2. Join your local health club or YMCA (check for rebates you might get through your health insurance plan in order to save a few dollars).
3. Use your local recreation department or town/city website to find softball, soccer, kickball, and other sporting events for your age group; not only is this a fun way to stay active but you'll meet others at the same time.
4. Involve family members or work colleagues -- perhaps your co-worker next door might want to do lunch break walks once a week, or your sibling may want to try a pilates class with you.

The mental health benefits of exercise have been shown to extend to both clinical and nonclinical populations. However you do it, if you haven't yet, make finding the time to exercise a priority for yourself. It will benefit not only your physical and mental well-being but also your relationships with family members and friends.

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