

EXERCISE AND DEPRESSION

SOURCE: AMERICAN COLLEGE OF SPORTS MEDICINE, RESOURCE GUIDELINES FOR EXERCISE TESTING AND PRESCRIPTION, LEA AND FEBIGER, PHILADELPHIA, 1988

"A vigorous five-mile walk will do better for unhappy, but other-wise healthy adults than all the medicine and psychology in the world." - Dr. Paul Dudley White

Over-working, over-stressing, expectations of perfection, a critical and complaining cynical spirit, focusing on the negatives in life, feeding a sense of hopelessness through what you read and listen to; all this and more spins many of us out of control and into a depression. Exercise and depression has been the focus of many scientific studies and research has repeatedly shown that exercise really does help.

The book, *The Healing Power of Exercise: Your Guide to Prevention and Treating Diabetes, Depression, Heart Disease, High Blood Pressure, Arthritis, and More states, "A universal finding in exercise studies is that people experience a greater sense of wellbeing."*

In the book, it is explained, **"Our cardiovascular system, endocrine glands, muscles, and bones still function best when the body is challenged by regular bouts of exertion."**

Exercise enhances your mood in many ways

Although exercisers exercise for a wide variety of reasons, the most powerful reasons are psychological, not physical. Exercisers have found exercise makes them:

- 🧠 feel good.
- 🧠 more optimistic.
- 🧠 more mentally alert.

- 🧠 feel an enhanced sense of well-being.
- 🧠 feel more confident.
- 🧠 better able to cope with stress.
- 🧠 more energetic.

Moreover, some people report they overeat because they are depressed. For many, moderate depression tends to cause overeating while severe depression tends to cause undereating. One large study of overweight individuals found depression was the number one reason for overeating, ahead of stress.

How exercise works

Exercise is an excellent way to alleviate mild to moderate depression. By exercising you can expect:

- 🧠 about a 50% drop in your depression.
- 🧠 an immediate impact (unlike medication which takes many weeks to take effect).
- 🧠 no unpleasant side effects.

Almost any exercise will do if you maintain it for at least 20 to 30 minutes and exercise at 69% or more of your Maximum Heart Rate Capacity (i.e., at least moderate intensity). Exercising outdoors seems to be even more effective.

Exercise seems to give you a better sense of control of yourself that in turn gives you more confidence to deal with other aspects of your life. It also seems to alter your brain neurotransmitters (dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine) in some complex and yet not well-understood way.





Of course, like Prozac and St. John's wort, exercise doesn't work for everybody. The only way to know is to try it. You'll probably feel better.

What kind of exercise helps depression?

Depression and exercise don't like to share the same life space. If you move exercise into your life, depression will move out. This is true for many kinds of exercise.

Depression and exercise research confirms that one of the best exercises to help depression is walking.

As Mark Fenton points out in his book, *The Complete Guide to Walking for Health, Weight Loss, and Fitness*, **"... even if you're an accomplished athlete who has taught aerobic classes or run marathons, vigorous walking can give you the same total energetic high and cardiovascular fitness as any other single activity, with far less damage to your body. And no matter what type of walker you become, know that it will give you self-confidence, balance, and even emotional calm in your life."**

Depression and exercise research has shown that other types of aerobic exercise are also effective. Kenneth Cooper wrote in his book, *The Aerobics Program for Total Well Being: Exercise, Diet, Emotional Balance*, **"... the achievement of total well-being can completely transform your life and make you a happier, more productive person."**

Aerobic exercises include any of which increase your rate of breathing and your heart rate. They improve the fitness of your lungs, heart, and vascular system. These

exercises include walking, biking, jogging, swimming, and sporting activities such as racquetball, weightlifting, sprinting, softball, and football.

Depression and exercise research has found that weight-bearing exercises can help depression. This was pointed out by Marcos Salazar's book, *Feeling Good for Life: The Clinically Proven Exercise and Diet System That Will Help You Burn Fat, Build Muscle, Boost Your Mood, and Conquer Depression*.

One depression and exercise study demonstrated that Taekwondo reduces depressive symptoms. In this study participants experienced increased vigor, less anxiety, less depression, less anger, less fatigue, less confusion, and less total mood disturbance after only one 75-minute session.

Modern Taekwondo: The Official Training Manual states, **" ... not only does Taekwondo encompass physical movements - it is also a system that trains the mind... As a result, in addition to providing good health and physical fitness, Taekwondo improves concentration, self-confidence, discipline, and patience."**

Another depression and exercise research project found yoga to help depression. In the study, participants practiced yoga exercises for ten months. They experienced improvement in depression, anxiety, and mental functions.

In *Yoga for Dummies*, it is explained that yoga **"can help you become or stay fit and trim, control your weight, and reduce your stress level Yoga also offers a whole range of meditation practices, including**





breathing techniques that exercise your lungs and calm your nervous system or charge your brain and the rest of your body with delicious energy."

So, it does not really seem to matter what kind of exercise you engage in. As we have learned from the depression and exercise research, the important thing is that you exercise.

Nevertheless, as Kate Hays, PhD, author of, *Move Your Body, Tone Your Mood: The Workout Therapy Workbook*, recommends that whatever exercise you choose, it should be one you enjoy. If you are using an exercise that you enjoy, you are more likely to follow through with your depression and exercise program.

Runner's high is euphoric

The popular notion of runner's high is a more intense mood-altering experience. It is more than that. One runner describes his own experience with runner's high:

"Then, sometime into the second hour, comes the spooky time. Colors are bright and beautiful, water sparkles, clouds breathe, and my body, swimming, detaches from the earth. A loving contentment invades the basement of my mind, and thoughts bubble up without trails. I find the place I need to live if I'm going to live. The running literature says that if you run six miles a day for two months, you are addicted forever. I understand. A cosmic view and peace are located between six and ten miles of running. I've found it so everywhere."






"After the run I can't use my mind, it's empty. Then a filling begins. By afternoon I'm back into life with long and soothing energy, a quiet feeling of strength, the kind of wisdom afforded those without fear, those detached yet full. The most delicious part is the night's sleep. Long and illusive, fickle, dealer with me ... Father Sandman now stands ready whenever I want."

Runner's high is typically experienced by well-conditioned runners after a 30- to 60-minute session. Various reports show that 10% to 78% of runners experience this high and it may occur either during or after the run. Those runners who have experienced runner's high only experience it about 29% of the time.

At present, there are no well-proven explanations for runner's high. The popular notion that runner's high is caused by release of the body's own endorphins seems to be too simple an explanation and other more complex neurochemical processes are probably taking place.

Take this test to gauge your own depression level

Symptoms of depression can include:

-  Persistent sad or 'empty' mood
-  Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including 'sex'
-  Decreased energy, fatigue, being 'slowed down'
-  Sleep disturbances (insomnia, early-morning waking, or oversleeping)
-  Eating disturbances (loss of appetite and weight, or weight gain)





- 🧠 Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- 🧠 Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- 🧠 Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- 🧠 Irritability
- 🧠 Excessive crying
- 🧠 Chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment

If 5 or more of these symptoms persist for more than 2 weeks or are interfering with work or family life, you should see your physician.

There is about a 23% chance that someone will suffer some depressive symptoms in his or her lifetime and for those with such symptoms there is a good chance they will reoccur again. Fortunately, for most, these symptoms last for very short periods of time and usually clear up.

"The relation is very close between our capacity to act at all and our conviction that the action we are taking is right."

"Just do it."

