

Managing Stress with Exercise

Stress can make you feel drained, anxious, even depressed. And while there are several ways to manage runaway stress, none is as enjoyable and effective as a regular exercise routine.

“Numerous studies have shown exercise provides excellent stress-relieving benefits,” says Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise (ACE). “And let’s face it, we all could do with less stress in our lives.”

How it works

Exercise causes the brain to release endorphins, opium-like substances that ease pain and produce a sense of comfort and euphoria. It also encourages the nerve cells in the brain to secrete other neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine, which improve mood.

Deficiencies of these substances, particularly serotonin, have been linked to symptoms of depression, anxiety, impulsiveness, aggression and increased appetite. According to a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, when depressed people exercise, they increase their levels of these natural antidepressants.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), exercise also improves people’s ability to relax and sleep, promotes self-esteem and enhances energy, concentration and memory. Exercise also provides an outlet for negative emotions, such as frustration, anger and irritability, thereby promoting a more positive mood and outlook.

Moderate exercise done regularly interrupts the cyclic thinking process associated with depression. A person who is worried about a particular problem may dwell at length on the problem, bringing on more worry. Depression deepens the worry, in a descending cycle. Exercise can break the cycle.

Finally, exercise helps you take time for yourself.

“Whether you exercise alone or with a friend, it’s important to take time for yourself during stressful periods,” says Mr. Bryant. “In this way, exercise functions as a positive distraction from the problems of the day that are causing your stress.”

Stress-reduction moves

Almost any exercise can provide stress relief, but the following guidelines can help you find those likely to be more effective for you.

Choose an exercise you enjoy. The kinds of activities you choose depend on your physical ability as well as your preferences.

"It's important to choose activities that are accessible and feasible for you to do regularly," says Mr. Bryant. "You also need to determine if you want to play competitive sports, such as basketball or tennis, or if you'd rather do noncompetitive activities, such as walking, bicycling or taking an aerobics class."

You also should consider whether you want to do your exercise routine on your own or with others.

Exercise every day if you can. The U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health recommends 30 minutes of activity on most, if not all, days of the week.

"You'll benefit from exercising three to five times a week, but you'll see more consistent stress reduction if you can be physically active every day," says Mr. Bryant.

Consider mind/body activities. In yoga and tai chi, your mind relaxes progressively as your body increases its amount of muscular work. "If you're attracted to a spiritual component, these forms of exercise are effective for honing stress-management and relaxation skills," says Mr. Bryant. Controlling stress ultimately comes down to making time to exercise. Physical activity provides an enjoyable and effective way to cope with life's troubles as it promotes lasting strength and empowerment.