

During the COVID-19 pandemic, your EAP is available for counseling sessions using video or phone

Balanced Living – February 2021

Managing Stress with Exercise

Stress can make you feel drained, anxious, and even depressed. 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. "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, 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 level 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.

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Overview: Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a depression that occurs during a particular season of the year. Most people with SAD are depressed during the fall and winter, when the days are shortest. Their depression disappears in the spring and summer. A less common type begins in late spring or early summer. Changes in the amount of daylight may be the cause of SAD.

Although many people say they get the "blues" in the winter, a person with SAD has much more difficulty coping during this season. Like other forms of depression, SAD interferes with daily life. Overcast days can make a person with SAD feel worse. People with SAD have mild to moderate depression.

SAD can affect anyone, but women and adolescents seem to be more susceptible; older adults are less likely to develop it. It is more common in northern latitudes. SAD sufferers also tend to have a family member with mental illness, such as depression or alcohol abuse.

Varying levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin are believed to play a role in SAD. The sleep hormone melatonin, which has been linked to depression, also may play a role. The body makes more melatonin in the dark. So, the shorter, grayer days of winter boost levels of melatonin.

The symptoms of SAD can be confused with symptoms of other illnesses, including hypothyroidism and viral infections such as mononucleosis.

Someone with a mild case of SAD can ease symptoms by adding more daylight to daily activities. Spending time outdoors each day and getting regular outdoor exercise are two effective methods to combat SAD. For more severe cases, doctors may prescribe light therapy and possibly antidepressants. Light therapy involves using a full-spectrum fluorescent light for a certain amount of time each morning.



Signs/Symptoms: Winter SAD

- Symptoms of depression or feeling "blue" only during fall and winter
- Craving for sugary or starchy foods
- Oversleeping
- Weight gain

Spring/Summer SAD:

- Decreased need for sleep
- Weight loss
- Poor appetite

Consult Your Doctor or EAP If:

- You have signs or symptoms above significant enough to interfere with daily life. Your doctor can refer you to a mental health professional trained to treat patients with SAD.

Home Care Ideas:

- During the fall and winter, try to spend time outside each day.
- Get regular exercise -- outdoors, if possible.
- Rearrange your furniture at home and your workspace to take advantage of as much sunlight in fall and winter as possible.