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How Can Exercise Improve Your Mental Health?

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 Posted by: admin

October 10th is World Mental Health Day! It's pretty hard to imagine that there was a time not too long ago when talking openly about mental health could be considered a social faux pas. Thankfully, this is all in the past.

This change may have stemmed from a shift in society's attitudes (<https://digital.nhs.uk/blog/transformation-blog/2018/the-past-present-and-future-of-innovation-in-mental-health>), with people now more accepting of mental health issues and more supportive of people with these issues. It's a welcome change; after all, mental health is integral to overall health. As the World Health Organisation puts it, there is no health without mental health.

Let's dive into how mental health can be improved with exercise and physical activity...

The topic of mental health is highly relevant as statistics estimate that 2 out of 5 Australians (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/mental-illness>) from the ages of 16 to 85 have experienced mental disorders that include social phobia, affective disorders such as depression, and substance abuse.

Current scientific evidence suggests that physical activity can help improve your mental well-being. In this regard, it's alarming to note that 75% of Australian adults aged 18 to 64 are not sufficiently active (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity>) and do not meet the physical activity guidelines. Clearly, there is a need to get off the couch, sit less, and start moving more if we want to reap the mental benefits of exercise.



(<https://exerciseright.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/elena-kloppenburgerUC4fTtCuo-unsplash-scaled.jpg>)

What are the mental health benefits of exercise?

Remember a time when you worked out during the day and slept soundly all night? Then you woke up full of energy, eager to face the day's tasks. Those are just two of the many mental health benefits of exercise. Regular physical activity offers profound merits that include the following:

- Improved stamina and endurance that can translate to better self-confidence.
- Stress relief.
- Decreased tiredness and increased mental alertness.
- Improvement in mood, easing the symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Some studies show that people who exercise regularly have better mental health and lower levels of mental illness.
- Some studies even suggest that exercise can significantly help prevent the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

(<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/risk-factors-and-prevention/physical-exercise>)

- Research also reports that regular exercise can affect the brain's neuroplasticity or the brain's ability to reorganise synaptic connections due to learning, experience, or in the aftermath of an injury.

How does exercise help mental health?

At the very least, exercise can provide a healthy distraction from our worries. It can improve our moods through exercise-induced blood circulation (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470658/>) to the brain.

Biologically, physical activity can also help release chemicals in the brain, including the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins.

- Serotonin helps regulate our moods and sleep patterns and controls our sexual desires.
- Dopamine lets us feel pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation.
- Endorphins interact with receptors in the brain that can trigger positive feelings and reduce our perception of pain.

There are also studies suggesting that physical exercise may be able to influence the production of neurotrophic factors (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7752270/>) that provide improved brain functionality.

'Neurotrophic factor' is a term that points to the ability of a factor to support or nourish the growth of neurons. This is related to the ability of exercise to improve the brain's neuroplasticity.

What's the best way to exercise?

Exercise doesn't have to be strenuous to benefit your mental well-being! Remember – any physical activity is better than none at all.

The physical activity guidelines for Australians 16 to 64 years of age call for activity on most days or preferably on a daily basis.

- For moderate intensity aerobic/cardiovascular activity such as taking a brisk walk, dancing, or mowing your lawn, the recommendation is a total of 2.5 to 5 hours weekly.
- For vigorous physical aerobic activity such as jogging, swimming, land or water aerobics (<https://www.healthstin.com.au/hydrotherapy/>), cycling, or

sports like soccer, the recommendation calls for 1.25 to 2.5 hours every week.

- You can combine moderate- and vigorous-intensity exercises in equal measure.
- You may also break down your workouts into 10- or 15-minute chunks if you can't find the time for a single 30-minute training session or if you have a lower fitness level.

The guidelines also recommend including resistance/strengthening exercises to build muscle strength and endurance which in turn, can translate to improved self-confidence and esteem.

- Do strength-building exercises at least twice per week.
- You can use free weights, machines, resistance bands, or bodyweight for strength training.
- Do movements that train all the muscle groups. Include such exercises as squats for the legs, push-ups for the chest, and pull-ups for the back.
- Household tasks that include carrying or lifting count as strength training activities.



(<https://exerciseright.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/victor-freitas-WvDYdXDzkhs-unsplash-scaled.jpg>)

How do i be more active every day?

Exercise doesn't have to be structured, complicated, or overly long to provide benefits. Here are some helpful strategies on how to be more active every day:

- Park your car further away from the mall entrance so you can add more steps to your daily total.
- Take your lunch to the park or use your break to walk around the block.
- Skip the lift and use the stairs when going up or down a few floors.
- Commuting to work? Get off a stop or two earlier and take a walk.
- Have a pet? Take the dog an extra mile for that daily walk.
- Running an errand to somewhere nearby? Walk or ride your bike instead of taking the car.

Getting started on a more active life

If you're not already exercising, it's important that you incorporate physical activity into your life as soon as possible.

If you don't know where to start or you've been sedentary for a long while, it's best to ask an Accredited Exercise Physiologist (<https://exerciseright.com.au/what-is-an-accredited-exercise-physiologist/>) first what exercise or activity is appropriate to your health condition. Your AEP will assess your functional capacity before collaborating with you on a program that best suits your specific needs. Your health expert can also teach you the proper techniques, so you don't end up injuring yourself. Click here to find an AEP near you! (<https://www.essa.org.au/find-aep>)

If you have a lower fitness level or haven't exercised in a while, take it slow at the start before cranking up the intensity. You may end up too sore the following day and swear off exercise for good. Reminder: exercise doesn't have to hurt to be effective.

Remember that everything adds up! Even little things like taking a ten-minute brisk walk after dinner or climbing the stairs at work can go a long way toward physical and mental wellness. Choose an activity you really enjoy so you can keep doing it over the long haul. Your mental health will thank you for it.

Written by Rachelle Sultana. *Rachelle is the Team Allied Health Coordinator at Healthstin (<https://www.healthstin.com.au/>) and has been an Exercise Physiologist for almost 10 years. She has completed her PhD in the effects of exercise on diabetes and obesity and uses the combination of her research background and patient-centred approach to develop safe and suitable exercise programs and advice for her patients.*

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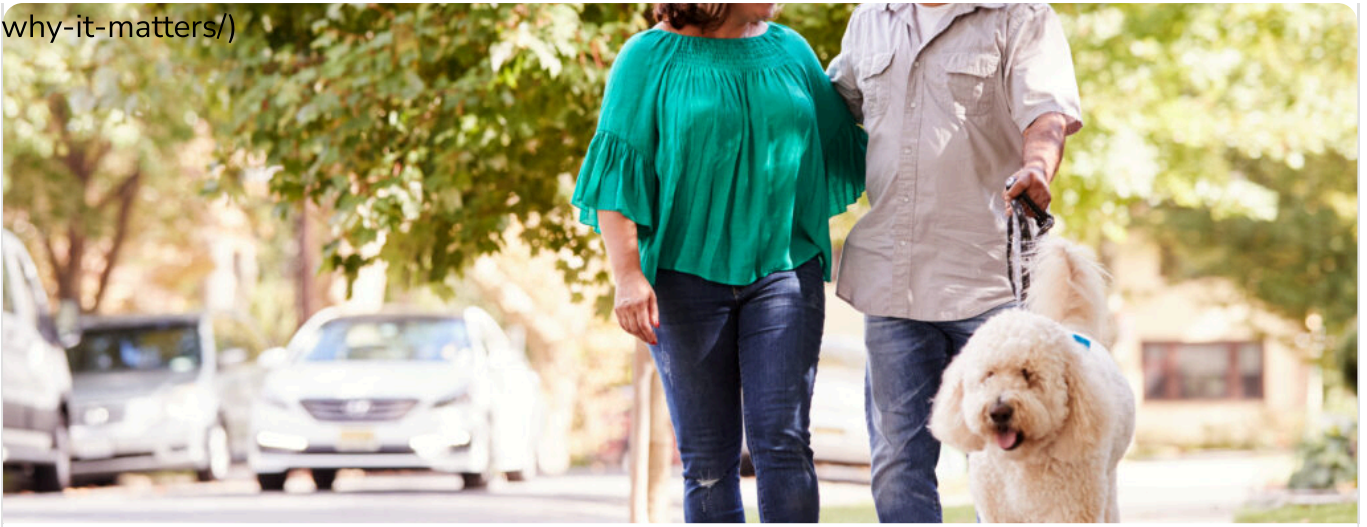
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