

Exercise Your Depression Away

Feel blue and low-down? Get moving. Physical activity is one of the best things you can do if you are battling depression.

Are you running from depression? How about walking, swimming or biking? If not, try it. Physical activity is one of the best things you can do for yourself if you are battling depression.

Research has shown that:

- **Exercise can ease symptoms of depression.** It can help anyone, at any age or fitness level, but it has the most dramatic effects on those who are the most unhealthy.
- **Exercise is as good as antidepressants at reducing depression.** If your depression is mild, exercise alone may be enough to help lift your mood. If you have major depression, the greatest benefit comes from combining exercise with antidepressants and psychotherapy.
- **Almost any type of physical activity can improve mood.** People often choose walking or running, but even non-aerobic activities such as weightlifting can help. The main thing is to get up and get moving and keep at it.

Exercise and mood: what's the connection?

Research suggests that exercise increases the level of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is a chemical that affects mood, sleep, appetite and sex drive. Low levels of it have been linked to depression. Exercise also stimulates the production of endorphins, "feel-good" chemicals in the brain, and helps reduce the level of cortisol, a stress hormone.

Physical activity can help you:

- Sleep better
- Feel better about yourself
- Gain a sense of accomplishment
- Take an active role in your mental and physical health
- Keep depression at bay after your recovery

Taking the first step

By its nature, depression makes it tough to get motivated to take care of yourself. If you hardly feel like getting out of bed, you may wonder where you'll get the energy to exercise.

The first step is to talk with your doctor. This is especially important if you haven't been exercising or have a chronic health problem. A doctor can tell you what type and level of exercise is safe for you. If you're not taking an antidepressant, your doctor may prescribe one or recommend a counselor.

Next, try these strategies to help you get started and be successful:

- **Pick an activity you like.** You're more likely to stick with it if you enjoy it.
- **Identify your roadblocks.** Think about the things that get in the way of exercise, and make a plan for how you will overcome them. Can't afford a gym? Walk or ride a bike. Too cold or wet outside? Walk at a mall. Too tired in the morning? Exercise over the lunch hour. If you anticipate the problems, you can find ways around them.
- **Enlist a workout buddy.** Having a companion to exercise with often helps people stay motivated. If you're walking, a dog can be an eager and supportive partner.
- **Start out slowly.** At first just aim for 10 minutes a session. Over time increase activity to 30 or more minutes most days of the week.
- **Cut yourself some slack.** There may be days you just don't feel up to exercising. If you miss a day or can only do 10 minutes, that's fine. Just get back on track the next day.
- **Remember the benefits.** Physical activity can improve your mood, and it can also strengthen your heart and bones, help control your weight and cut your risk for many diseases. Each time you exercise, you're doing something positive for your health.
- **Be patient.** It may take a few weeks to see an improvement in your mood. If you don't notice any change in this time, talk to your doctor about increasing the intensity or trying another activity.