

Exercise Benefits Mental Health Too!

“Exercise more” appears on many lists of New Year’s resolutions. We all know the benefits of regular exercise for our physical health. Studies also show that exercise reduces the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The mechanism is thought to be:

- A release of endorphins (chemicals in the brain that provide a sense of well-being)
- A distraction from negative thoughts

Recommendations from the NIH are to strive for 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every week. Moderate intensity is a level that increases your heart rate and breathing while still being able to talk, but not sing a song. We often see this described as 30 minutes for 5 days each week; but studies have shown that benefits are seen no matter how you break it down or even if you achieve it as a “weekend warrior.”

Exercise is considered a planned and structured event. However, even basic levels of physical activity can improve some symptoms. The important point is to get up and move, whether taking a walk or just sweeping the floor. For people with depression the hardest part is often just getting started.

Tips to help with a plan for success:

1. Think about what you enjoy and when you can do it – walking, dancing, taking a fitness class, riding a bike, going for a run, playing outdoors with your children or grandchildren, meeting a friend for a walk, even gardening. There are many options.
2. Set reasonable goals – Think realistically about what you can do based on your current abilities and schedule. With time you will be able to physically do more and mentally motivated to do more after being successful.
3. Think of it as another part of your treatment regimen – don’t treat it as a chore.
4. Identify potential obstacles before you begin

No time? Break it down into time segments that work for you, even 10 minutes at a time will count. Look for opportunities like taking the stairs, taking a parking place farther from the door, cleaning out that closet, or another task that has been on your list.

No money? Explore some of the walking trails, mall walking, and You Tube exercise videos that can be done at home with no equipment. Come early or stay after a church event and utilize the gym or walking deck. Low-cost fitness classes can also be found. (Central Baptist Church in Fountain City has a great fitness program that is open to the public.)

Self-Conscious? Exercising at home may be the best place to start or with a very good friend.

Pain or other limitations? Check with your doctor about how to begin. Modifications can be made for any condition!

5. Prepare for setbacks – don’t give up on your goals when you miss a day. Instead, resolve to get back on track and continue to work at it. Baby steps are better than none at all!

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