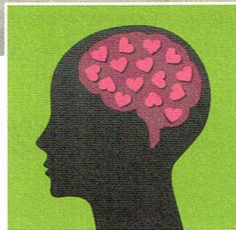


EXERCISING YOUR WAY TO LESS STRESS AND DEPRESSION AND MORE HAPPINESS

BY JENNIFER HAMMERSMARK, RCC



EXERCISE CAN CHANGE YOUR BRAIN

Regular exercise releases feel-good brain chemicals (neurotransmitters, endorphins, and endocannabinoids), reduces immune system chemicals, and increases body temperature, which may have calming effects. A brief workout also releases the stress hormone norepinephrine, a chemical messenger in the brain, which scientists have long known plays a strong role in memory.⁴

According to a post by Gretchen Reynolds in the *New York Times*, research has found that our muscles produce a protein called PCG-1alpha during exercise. PCG-1alpha helps to break down kynurenine, a metabolite that accumulates in the body during stress and is known to contribute to depression and burnout. Less kynurenine, means less chance of burnout.⁵

"Exercise." I tell my clients, "will really help you with your recovery."

Most of the time I feel like the teacher in Charlie Brown: I am pretty sure all they hear after the word "exercise" is "waaa, waaa, waaa." Occasionally, I get a positive response, especially if the client has experienced the benefits of exercise before. And sometimes, the client puts it into practice.

Exercise really can help clients — and it also helps counsellors. After all, counsellors are human beings who suffer from bouts of depression and anxiety, not to mention the pitfalls of vicarious trauma, stress, and burnout. Finding time for exercise reduces the impact of the work we love.

THE BENEFITS

In a study cited in Shawn Achor's book, *The Happiness Advantage*, three groups of patients treated their depression with medication, exercise, or a combination of the two. Surprisingly, all three groups experienced similar improvements in their happiness levels early on. The groups were tested six months later to assess their relapse rate. Of those who had taken medication alone, 38 per cent had slipped back into depression. Those in the combination group did slightly better: 31 per cent had relapsed. The biggest shock came from the exercise group: their relapse rate was only nine per cent.¹

Exercise is also effective in reducing anxiety, increasing self-esteem and confidence, and even increasing brainpower. It boosts our mood and enhances our work performance by improving motivation and feelings of mastery, reducing stress, and helping us get into flow — that "locked in" feeling of total engagement when we're most productive.²

There's more. Other benefits include gaining confidence, taking your mind off worries, getting more social interaction, and coping in a healthy way that is readily available almost anytime, anywhere.

Yes, anywhere. Going to the gym is not the only way to exercise. In fact, if going to the gym isn't your thing, making yourself go may cause more stress. While

running, lifting weights, playing sports, and other fitness activities certainly get your heart pumping, so can gardening, washing your car, walking the dog, and walking to work. Options like yoga and swimming offer the simultaneous benefits of exercise and relaxation. Combining exercise with outside time gives you the benefits of fresh air and vitamin D.

Any activity that gets you off the couch and moving can help improve your mood. Once you realize the importance of some form of movement every day, the ideas and opportunities will come to you.

Jeff Haden's online article *10 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Incredibly Happy*³ is an excellent, well-researched, comprehensive resource — and exercise is in the #1 spot!

You may even want to pass it along to your clients, because once we have incorporated exercise into our own lives and are experiencing the benefits, it is a much easier sell to our clients.

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