



Whisk Those Blues Away

Scrubbing the tub and other forms of housework may clean your house *and* boost your mood.

In fact, as little as 20 minutes of **any** kind of physical activity a week helped mental health, although the more vigorous the activity, the greater the benefit, said the authors of a study in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

Daily physical activity of any kind -- including housework, gardening, walking, and sports -- was associated with a 41 percent lower risk of psychological distress. But vigorous activity reduced the risk of mood lows the most -- by 33 percent.

"It's not a magic bullet, but increasing physical activity is a positive and active strategy to help manage depression and anxiety," says Kristin Vickers-Douglas, Ph.D., a psychologist at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

"There's such a pervasive feeling in this country that, if there's a problem, there's always a pill to fix it," said Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, director of Women and Heart Disease at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. "This study is just reminding us that it doesn't take much to actually have an effect even on your mood."

How Exercise Helps Your Mental Health

The physical benefits of exercise are well known: It reduces the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and even some cancers, among other things.

The mental benefits are less clear, although exercise is thought to improve blood flow and reduce inflammation, which have been related to depression and dementia. Exercise might also improve mood by reducing stress levels. Some evidence suggests that exercise raises the levels of certain mood-enhancing neurotransmitters in the brain. Exercise may also boost feel-good endorphins, release muscle tension, help you sleep better, and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol. It also increases body temperature, which may have calming effects. All of these changes in your mind and body can improve such symptoms as sadness, anxiety, irritability, stress, fatigue, anger, self-doubt and hopelessness.

In addition, being physically active gives you a sense of accomplishment. Meeting goals or challenges, no matter how small, can boost self-confidence at times when you need it most. Exercise can also make you feel better about your appearance and self-worth. And doing something positive to manage depression or anxiety is a healthy coping strategy!

In another study, researchers divided 74 heart failure patients with clinical depression into four groups: One group received a 12-week, home-based program of exercise and psychological counseling; one received counseling alone; another did only exercise; and the last received only standard care.

"By combining exercise with psychological counseling, these depressed patients do better in all parameters compared to the other groups," according to study author Rebecca Gary, an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at Emory University in Atlanta. "This may be the best method for improving their depression, symptom severity and quality of life."

Patients who exercised followed a progressive program of low-to-moderate intensity in which they were encouraged to walk outdoors three times a week for at least 30 minutes. They received heart rate monitors and training in how to track their exertion level and when to stop exercising. All patients achieved these goals, even though some were quite debilitated at the start of the sessions.

Those receiving counseling had weekly one-on-one cognitive therapy sessions in their homes with psychiatric nurse specialists and doctoral students trained in counseling techniques for 12 weeks.

Oddly, even though the patients in the counseling-only group had fewer depressive symptoms after therapy, they believed their quality of life was worse than those of the combined group or exercise-only group.

Important Note: If you exercise regularly but depression or anxiety symptoms still interfere with your daily living, seek professional help. Exercise isn't meant to replace medical treatment of depression or anxiety.

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Tips to start getting more activity when you have depression or anxiety

Of course, knowing that something's good for you doesn't make it easier to actually do it. With depression or anxiety, you may have a hard enough time just doing the dishes, showering or getting out of the house. How can you possibly consider getting in some physical activity?

Here are some steps that can help you become more physically active when you have depression or anxiety. As always, check with your health care provider before starting a new exercise program to make sure it's safe for you.

- **If you are being treated for depression or anxiety, get your mental health provider's support.** Some, but not all, mental health providers encourage exercise as a part of their treatment plan. Talk to your doctor or therapist for guidance and support. Discuss concerns about an exercise program and how it fits into your overall treatment plan.
- **Identify what you enjoy doing.** Figure out what type of exercise or activities you're most likely to do. And think about when and how you'd be most likely to follow through. For instance, would you be more likely to do some gardening in the evening or go for a brisk walk in the pre-dawn hours? Go for a hike in the woods or play tennis? Do what you enjoy to help you stick with it.
- **Set reasonable goals.** Your mission doesn't have to be walking for an hour five days a week. Think about what you may be able to do in reality. Twenty minutes? Ten minutes? Start there and build up. Tailor your plan to your own needs and abilities rather than trying to meet idealistic guidelines that could just add to your pressure.
- **Don't think of exercise as a burden.** If exercise is just another "should" in your life that you don't think you're living up to, you'll associate it with failure. Rather, look at your exercise schedule the same way you look at counseling sessions or antidepressant medication — as one of the tools to help you get better.
- **Address your barriers.** Figure out what's stopping you from exercising. If you feel intimidated by others or are self-conscious, for instance, you may want to exercise in the privacy of your own home. If you stick to goals better with a partner, exercise with a friend. If you don't have extra money to spend on exercise gear, do something that's virtually cost-free — walk. If you think about what's stopping you from exercising, you can probably find an alternative solution.
- **Prepare for setbacks and obstacles.** Exercise isn't always easy or fun. And it's tempting to blame yourself for that. People with depression are especially likely to feel shame over perceived failures. Don't fall into that trap. Give yourself credit for every step in the right direction, no matter how small. If you skip exercise one day, that doesn't mean you're a failure and may as well quit entirely. Just try again the next day.

Sticking with exercise when you have depression or anxiety

Launching an exercise program is hard. Sticking with it can be even harder. One key is problem solving your way through when it seems like you can't or don't want to exercise.

"What would happen if you went out to your car and it wouldn't start?" Dr. Vickers-Douglas asks. "You'd probably be able to very quickly list several strategies for dealing with that barrier, such as calling an auto service, taking the bus, or calling your partner or friend for help. You instantly start problem solving."

But most people don't approach exercise that way. What happens if you want to go for a walk but it's raining? Most people decide against the walk and don't even try to explore alternatives. "With exercise, we often hit a barrier and say, 'That's it. I can't do it, forget it,' " Dr. Vickers-Douglas says.

Instead, problem solve your way through the exercise barrier, just as you would other obstacles in your life. Figure out your options — walking in the rain, going to a gym, exercising indoors, for instance.

"Some people think they need to wait until they somehow generate enough willpower to exercise," Dr. Vickers-Douglas says. "But waiting for willpower or motivation to exercise is a passive approach, and when someone has depression and is unmotivated, waiting passively for change is unlikely to help at all. Focusing on a lack of motivation and willpower can make you feel like a failure. Instead, identify your strengths and skills and apply those to taking some first steps toward exercise."

Sources: www.mayoclinic.com, www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus