



SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

## WORDS ABOUT WELLNESS

Today's "Words about Wellness" is brought to you by:

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*The information below is adapted from **HelpGuide**, a nonprofit mental health and wellness website.*

### The Mental Health Benefits of Exercise

Most of us are well aware of the potential physical health benefits of regular exercise. Exercise helps us maintain a healthy weight, reduces risk for conditions like hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis, promotes good circulation, supports immune function, increases energy, and improves sleep. Some people may be less familiar with the mental health benefits of exercise. For example, exercise stimulates the development of new brain cells (neurogenesis) and helps reduce risk for age-related cognitive decline. It can also be a powerful tool for dealing with mental health challenges.

Studies show that exercise can treat mild to moderate depression as effectively as antidepressant medication. A recent study done by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that running for 15 minutes a day or walking for an hour reduces the risk of major depression by 26%. In addition to relieving depression symptoms, research also shows that maintaining an exercise schedule can prevent you from relapsing.

Exercise is also an effective treatment for anxiety. It relieves tension and stress, boosts physical and mental energy, and enhances well-being through the release of endorphins. Physical activity also helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension throughout the body and is one of the easiest and most effective ways to reduce the symptoms of ADHD.

How does it work? Exercise promotes neural growth, reduces inflammation, and releases endorphins. It also immediately boosts the brain's dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin levels—all of which affect focus, attention, and mood. Anything that gets you moving can help, but you'll get a bigger benefit if you **pay attention** instead of zoning out. Try to pay attention to the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the wind on your skin. By adding this mindfulness element—really focusing on your body and how it feels as you exercise—you'll not only improve your physical condition faster, but you may also be able to interrupt the flow of constant worries and negative thoughts.

running through your head.

Research shows that moderate levels of exercise are best for most people. Moderate means (1) that you breathe a little heavier than normal, but are not out of breath. For example, you should be able to chat with your walking partner, but not easily sing a song, and (2) That your body feels warmer as you move, but not overheated or very sweaty.

You can reap all the physical and mental health benefits of exercise with 30-minutes of moderate exercise five times a week. Two 15-minute or even three 10-minute exercise sessions can also work just as well. Even just a few minutes of physical activity are better than none at all.

For more information about overcoming mental health **obstacles to exercise**, visit the **HelpGuide** website:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm>