



Mental Health and Exercise

Fitness Handout:

Want to alleviate stress or cope with depression? Exercise may help. Increasingly, there is evidence from researchers that certain levels of physical activity can positively affect mental health. Len Kravitz, PhD, researcher and program coordinator of exercise science at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, takes a look at what research has discovered about the connection between exercise and mental health.

Stress

A growing body of research over the last 10 years shows that physical activity and exercise also improve psychological well-being (Dubbert 2002). Published data show that people with higher levels of fitness are capable of managing stress more effectively than those who are less fit (Hassmen, Koivula & Uutela 2000). It appears that cardiovascular exercise is the method that most benefits stress reduction. The research indicates that moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, performed three times a week (sessions lasting over 20 minutes) for up to 12 weeks, has the most influence on stress management.

Depression

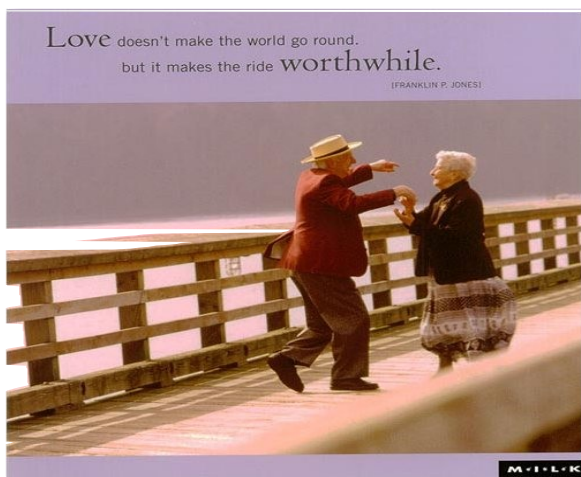
The antidepressant action is one of the most commonly accepted psychological benefits of exercise. Patients diagnosed with depression have credited exercise as being an important element in comprehensive treatment programs for depression (Dunn et al. 2002). Cardiovascular and resistance exercise seem to be equally effective in producing antidepressive effects (Brosse et al. 2002). It also appears that both a one-time exercise session and chronic exercise training programs have a positive effect on people with clinical depression (Dunn et al. 2002). Research does imply, though, that the greatest antidepressive effects occur after 17 weeks of exercise, although you can observe improvements after 4 weeks (Scully et al. 1998). The effects of exercise on depression seem the same for men and women.

Anxiety

The results of over 30 published papers show a link between acute and chronic exercise and the reduction of anxiety (Scully et al. 1998). There appears to be much debate about whether low-intensity, moderate-intensity or high-intensity aerobic exercise is most beneficial. (If you're not sure at what intensity you should exercise, consult with a personal trainer.) It appears that even short bursts of 5 minutes of cardiovascular exercise stimulate anti-anxiety effects. The research also indicates that people who train for periods of 10–15 weeks receive the greatest beneficial effects.

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SIDEBAR: Get in a Better Mood



It appears that cardiovascular and resistance exercise can positively affect various mood states, including tension, fatigue, anger and vigor (a psychological variable defining vitality or energy) in normal and clinical populations (Lane & Lovejoy 2001; Fox 1999). Plus, it has been shown that even a single session of 25–60 minutes of

aerobic exercise (at low, moderate or high intensities) increases positive mood feelings while also decreasing negative mood feelings.

Researchers need to further research resistance training to learn more about the connection between it and mood state.

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