

The Benefits of Exercise

The NHS recommends adults undertake 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity exercise each week due to the health benefits associated with regular exercise. Most of us know of the physical benefits of exercise, including better cardiovascular health, but an often underappreciated benefit of exercise is the proven impact it has on our mental wellbeing. In this article, we will explore some of those benefits, and how they can improve our overall wellbeing

Exercise improves mood

Physical activity has been shown to have a positive impact on our mood. A recent study asked people to rate their mood immediately after periods of physical activity (such as going for a walk or doing housework), and periods of inactivity (reading a book or watching television for example). The researchers found that participants felt more content, more awake and calmer after being physically active compared to after periods of inactivity. They also found that the effect of physical activity on mood was greatest when mood was initially low.

...and reduces stress levels

When things happen which make us feel threatened or upset our balance in some way, our body's defences tend to cut in and evoke a stress response, which may make us feel a variety of uncomfortable physical symptoms and make us behave differently. We may also experience emotions more intensely. The most common physical signs of stress include sleeping problems, sweating, and loss of appetite. Symptoms like these are triggered by a rush of stress hormones in our body – otherwise known as the 'fight or flight' response. It is these hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which raise our blood pressure, increase our heart rate and increase the rate at which we sweat, preparing our body for an emergency response. They can also reduce blood flow to our skin and can reduce our stomach activity; while cortisol, another stress hormone, releases fat and sugar into the system to boost our energy. Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress. Research on employed adults has found that highly active individuals tend to have lower stress rates compared to individuals who are less active.

Exercise improves self-esteem

Exercise not only has a positive impact on our physical health, but it can also increase our self-esteem. Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves and how we perceive our self-worth. It is seen as a key indicator of our mental wellbeing and our ability to cope with life stressors. People with higher perceived levels of self-esteem tend to be able to cope better in stressful life situations.

Physical activity has been shown to have a positive influence on our self-esteem and self-worth. This relationship has been found in children, adolescents, young adults, adults and older people, and across both males and females. This can be linked to perceived improvements in our own body image, but also through developing new skills learned in sports for example.

Impact on depression and anxiety

Physical activity can be an effective treatment for depression. In some cases it may be used as a standalone treatment, or in combination with medication and/or psychological therapy. It has few side effects and does not have the stigma that some people perceive to be attached to taking antidepressants or attending psychotherapy and counselling. Many people living with depression find taking daily exercise, such as a walk around the block helps to improve the severity of the symptoms of their depression.

Information Sources and Useful Links –

This article references information and studies hosted at the following web addresses. If you would like to access this and more information in more detail please follow the links below –

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-using-exercise>

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/>

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.