In addition to building strength, exercise benefits mental health

By E.J. Mundell
HEALTH DAY

What if one therapy could help ward off addiction, depression, stress and even Alzheimer's, all the while keeping you slim and feeling great?

That mental-health "treatment" is as close as your own two feet - exercise.

"Exercise improves blood flow to the brain, it helps the body detoxify, it puts you on a better cycle of physical behavior, and it leads to decreased stress. It also improves thinking and mental function and decreases your tendency toward addiction," said Dr. Marc Siegel, an internist at New York University Medical Center and an associate professor of medicine at the NYU School of Medicine in New York City.

With each new study, experts are getting a better understanding of the intimate connection between health of the body and that of the mind. And exercise - the body's key method of staying healthy - appears to be crucial to mental health, too.

For example, "there's evidence that exercise is maybe the best non-pharmacological antidepressant we have - studies have shown that it works better than some drugs. It's also a great anti-anxiety intervention," said James Maddux, a professor of psychology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and an expert on the mind-body health connection.

Aerobic exercise such as running or swimming can lead to a healthy release of the body's natural opiates, neurochemicals called endorphins. These are natural stress-busters, Siegel said, but exercise's impact on stress goes "way beyond endorphins."

"Exercise is a ritualistic activity that redirects your energy," said Siegel, who is also the author of a book on worry and stress called "False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear." "Stress is a build-up of inactivity, of over-thinking without release," he said. "But exercise gives you a physical release that diminishes that psychic frustration."

Regaining control

For many people, exercise also provides a valuable sense of control over their physical health. "It's that sense of a loss of control that can lead to stress," Siegel said. And physical activity - especially when individuals join sports clubs, teams or have workout partners - also increases socialization, which has been proven to boost mental and physical health and increase lifespan.

Regular workouts even can help smokers beat their addiction, researchers say.

For example, one study from Brown University found that women looking to quit smoking who engaged in a vigorous exercise program were more than twice as likely to have stayed away from cigarettes for at least one year, compared to women who simply took part in a smoking-cessation program without exercise.

The Brown team thinks that exercise may have helped smokers deal with the stress of quitting. As an added bonus, the study also found that exercising ex-smokers were able to stave off much of the weight gain typically associated with quitting smoking.

A fit, active body may even help reduce risks for Alzheimer's disease by improving cerebrovascular blood flow, experts say.
"There's no question that exercise improves blood flow to the brain," Siegel explained. One recent U.S. study found that seniors who engaged in some form of minimal exercise at least three days a week cut their risk of developing Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia by as much as 30 percent to 40 percent.

So, the advice from experts: Get out there, and get active.

"Exercise is clearly a discipline or ritualistic activity that you can use to break your cycle of worry and get on a path toward better health," Siegel said

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**Exercise enhances the brain, one’s mood and mental clarity.**

Chris Christian
Feature writer – suite101.com

Did you know that exercise creates mental alertness, a sharper mind and the ability to learn? Not only that, but exercise is a powerful anti-depressant.

We are all aware of the benefits attributed to exercising, and there are many, but let’s look closer at how exercise affects the brain. Numerous studies have been conducted on the effects of exercise on the brain and one’s mood. Research suggests it doesn’t even have to be a highly intense bout of activity to stimulate the chemicals associated with altering your mood and mental alertness. Movement as simple as a brisk walk can deliver a powerful dose of mind-altering hormones to the brain.

Studies show that you can remain in an altered state for up to four hours from a single bout of light to moderate exercise such as walking, bike-riding or swimming. John J. Ratey, MD., associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, suggests eight to ten minutes of mild exercise (60% of maximum heart rate) to enhance learning ability. As a matter of fact, researchers at Duke University Medical Center found that an aerobic exercise program decreased depression and improved the cognitive abilities of middle-aged and elderly men and women.

They followed 156 patients between 50 and 77 years old who had been diagnosed with major depressive disorder. They were assigned to one of three groups: exercise, medication, or both medication and exercise. The exercise group spent 30 minutes doing aerobics three times a week. After 16 weeks, all three groups showed statistically significant and identical improvement in standard measurements of depression, implying exercise was just as effective as medication in treating major depression.

Researchers at the University of California at San Francisco measured the brain function of nearly 6,000 elderly women during an eight-year period. The results were correlated with the women’s normal activity level, including their routine walking and stair-climbing. Those who walked regularly were less likely to experience age-related memory loss and other declines in mental function. It was also determined that those who walked more gained more benefit, but all who walked gained positive results. Chief of Geriatric Psychiatry at the San Francisco Veterans Administration Medical Center Kristine Yaffe, MD stated: “you don’t need to be running marathons, a little is good but more is better."

These studies show that exercise not only improves physical fitness, but mental wellness also. So remember: a good workout enhances you from head to toe.