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Get Exercise to Improve Your Mental Health

By Julie Wood M.D., Optum Idaho Behavioral Medical Director

Physical activity is critical to living a longer, healthier life. But some studies suggest that physical activity can have mental health benefits as well, like relieving depression and maintaining cognitive abilities as you age. While none of these benefits can replace prescribed medication or counseling, they can help to improve mental health in tandem with them.

Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better, so too will your mind.

Depression | Exercise is a powerful depression fighter for several reasons. Most importantly, it promotes all kinds of changes in the brain, including neural growth, reduced inflammation, and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being.

Anxiety | Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment. It relieves tension and stress, boosts physical and mental energy, and enhances well-being through the release of endorphins.

Stress | Physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better, so too will your mind.

Sharper Memory | The same endorphins that make you feel better also help you concentrate and feel mentally sharp. Exercise also stimulates the growth of new brain cells and helps prevent age-related decline.

Exercise can also help with higher self-esteem, better sleep, and more energy.

However, most Americans don't meet even the minimum recommended amounts of physical activity. That's at least 30 minutes of brisk walking or other moderate activity, five days a week. Lack of time plays a big factor, but so does our location. For the past year, many of us have been stuck inside. Also, some communities don't have safe playgrounds or sidewalks, so kids tend to spend their free time indoors. Also, sitting instead of moving makes it hard to maintain a healthy weight. Many adults sit behind the wheel driving to work and then sit most of the day at a computer, taking few breaks to stand up and move around. In suburban neighborhoods, people often have to drive rather than walk to get to grocery stores, shops and even public transportation. Our environments have become less friendly to being active.

Minimum recommended physical activity:

30 minutes of brisk walking or other moderate activity, five days a week.

Hello Idaho!

Promoting health and hope across Idaho.

Ideas to get you and your community moving!

One of the answers lies in all of us finding new ways to use the world around us to add some movement to your day. Like...

- Get up from your chair and move around at least once an hour.
- Stand up and walk to a colleague's office instead of sending an email.
- Try standing instead of sitting when you're on the phone.
- Have "walking" meetings with co-workers instead of sitting in a conference room.
- Take a brisk walk on your lunch break to get some activity in.

You can also make your entire community more active by...

- Starting a walking group with friends, neighbors or co-workers.
- Making the streets safer for walking by driving the speed limit and yielding to walkers.
- Participating in local planning efforts to develop walking paths, sidewalks, and bike paths.
- Working with parents and schools to encourage kids to safely walk or ride bikes to school.
- Trying different activities to find the ones you really enjoy and having fun while being active!

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