

Exercise: Rev up your routine to reduce stress

Physical activity — whether it's a relaxing walk, bicycle racing or meditative tai chi — helps relieve stress.

By now, you should know that exercise does your body good. But did you also know that virtually any form of exercise can decrease the production of stress hormones and counteract your body's natural stress response? It's true. The same regular exercise routine that helps prevent disease and builds muscle can also help you better manage stress.

How does exercise reduce stress?

Exercise increases your overall health and your sense of well-being, which puts more pep in your steps every day. But exercise also has some direct stress-busting benefits.

- **It pumps up your endorphins.** Physical activity helps to bump up the production of your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, called endorphins. Although this function is often referred to as a runner's high, a rousing game of tennis or a nature hike also can contribute to this same feeling.
- **It's meditation in movement.** After a fast-paced game of racquetball or several laps in the pool, you'll often find that you've forgotten the day's dilemmas and irritations and concentrated only on your body's movements. As you begin to regularly shed your daily tensions through movement and physical activity, you may find that this focus on a single task, and the resulting energy and optimism, can help you remain calm and clear in everything that you do.
- **It improves your mood.** Regular exercise can increase self-confidence and lower the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety. This can ease your stress levels and give you a sense of command over your body and your life.

How to get started

Every successful exercise program begins with a few simple steps.

- **Consult with your doctor.** Begin any new fitness program by consulting with your health care provider, especially if you have a history of heart disease or other risk factors.
- **Walk before you run.** Build up your fitness level gradually. Excitement about a new program can lead to overdoing it and possibly even injury. Plus, if you begin your program slowly, chances are better you'll stick with it.
- **Do what you love.** Don't train for a marathon if you dislike running. All forms of movement — from horseback riding to swimming — can increase your fitness level while decreasing your stress. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy.
- **Pick a time and stick to it.** Although your schedule may necessitate morning workouts some days and evening activities the next, carving out some time to move every day helps you make

your exercise program an ongoing priority.

Motivation to keep moving

Starting an exercise program is just the first step. Here are some tips for sticking with a new routine or reinvigorating a tired workout:

- **Set some goals.** It's always a good idea to begin or modify a workout program with a goal in mind. If your primary goal is to reduce stress in your life and recharge your batteries, your specific goals might include committing to walking during your lunch hour three times a week or, if needed, finding a baby sitter to watch your children so that you can slip away to attend a spinning class.
- **Find a friend.** Knowing that someone is waiting for you to show up at the gym or the park can be a powerful incentive. Working out with a friend, co-worker or family member often brings a new level of motivation to your workouts.
- **Change up your routine.** If you've always been a competitive runner, take a look at other less competitive options that may help with stress reduction, such as Pilates classes or yoga. As an added bonus, these kinder, gentler workouts may enhance your running while also decreasing your stress.

Exercise = less stress

Whatever you do, don't think of exercise as just one more thing on your to-do list. Find an activity you enjoy — whether it's an active tennis match or a meditative meander down to a local park and back — and make it part of your regular routine. Any form of physical activity can help you unwind and become an important part of your approach to easing stress.

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