

Exercise:

an Antidote for Stress



According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, only 30 minutes a day spent in moderately strenuous activities can improve your health. You can do 30 minutes all at once, or 10 minutes at a time, three times a day.

Regular exercise, especially aerobic exercise, is one of the best ways to reduce stress. This type of exercise can:

- strengthen your heart and lungs
- help you control your weight
- improve physical appearance
- enhance self-confidence and self-esteem
- elevate your mood and help ward off depression
- improve the quality of your sleep
- reduce stress reactivity
- improve your ability to concentrate

Aerobic exercise that produces and sustains cardiovascular elevation for 15 to 30 minutes, three to four times a week has been proven effective as a stress relief technique. For *optimal* fitness and stress management, 20 to 60 minutes of aerobic exercise three to five times per week is recommended. Examples of aerobic exercise include brisk walking, running, swimming, in-line skating, biking, and cross-country skiing.

Tips for beginning an exercise program

Look at your daily life for natural opportunities to get your body moving. The key is to pick things that you can easily incorporate into your every day routine.

Please note: Talk to your physician before beginning an exercise program.

Starting and sticking to a regular exercise program can be a challenge. Here are some things you can do to avoid becoming a fitness program dropout.

- Find out what works for you and make it fun. What would be the most enjoyable type of exercise for you? Do you enjoy competitive sports? Walking with a friend? In-line skating? Using exercise equipment? Do you have more fun exercising with a friend, a group, or by yourself? Do you like to listen to music while you exercise?
- If you have not been exercising regularly, start slowly. Try 10 to 15 minutes of aerobic exercise twice a week and increase from there.
- Plan for your workouts and make them a priority. Schedule them in your calendar.
- Consider finding a workout partner or role model who can help keep you motivated.
- If you miss a few days or even a few weeks of exercise, don't quit! Just go back to your routine and eventually it will become a habit.

Making it work

Perhaps it seems that you are too busy with work and family and do not have any time or opportunities to be active. With a little creativity, you can find ways to work activity into your day.

At work

Wear or bring comfortable clothes and keep a pair of comfortable walking or running shoes in your car or office. Create opportunities to walk by parking further from the office or by getting off the train or bus one stop earlier. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Instead of using the phone or e-mail, stroll over to see your co-worker in person. Use break times or part of your lunch hour to take a walk. If you go out to lunch, consider parking several blocks away from the restaurant.

Before or after work

Exercise is a great way to start the day feeling energized, especially if you feel too tired to work out when you get home from work. Or try exercising after work to relieve the stress and tensions that can build up during the day. Family bonding and exercise come together when you take walks or play with your children in the evening.

At home

What do you do with your free time? Again, you can incorporate physical activity into your other social and household activities. Take up dancing. Take your family on a hike, play frisbee in the park, or go to the zoo. Schedule regular walks with your family on weekends and while you are doing errands. If possible, walk to your church, synagogue, or other place of worship.

Doing household chores is a great way to get moderate physical activity while tidying up. Scrub the bathtub, sweep the floor, wash the windows, and reorganize your closet. If you want some fresh air and sunshine but do not feel like sitting around, mow the grass, trim the bushes, work in your garden, or wash the car.

Whether at work or home, when you are feeling stressed, even a few minutes of exercise can provide some relief. Get up and take a walk to clear your head. Walk up and down the stairs. Get away from that tense or tedious situation. Taking a few breaks during hectic days can enhance your well-being.