Harnessing the Power of Movement: Exercise Could Beat Medication in Treating Depression

We often focus on physical fitness and track steps or gym hours, while mental health is a less visible, quieter consideration. But could exercise benefit our mental health more than we realize?

About 280 million people live with depression worldwide. While medications have long been the cornerstone of therapy, new data suggests that regular exercise is just as effective as medications and counseling in reducing the symptoms of depression. Exercise is well-recognized as beneficial to mood and health, but it is often overlooked in the initial management of these conditions.

The Prescription Gap

Why aren't more doctors prescribing exercise to help with depression and anxiety symptoms? Researchers say that exercise, diet, and sleep changes are considered "complementary alternative treatment" in the United States if drugs and therapy don't help. Although the term "alternative" is used in many ways, it generally implies that it falls outside of conventional medicine or has no clear evidence, which in this case, does not appear to be true.

Physical activity helps release endorphins (often referred to as the "feel-good hormones"). In the short term, this release of endorphins helps to boost mood, reduce stress, and improve our sense of well-being. In the long term, the release of neurotransmitters as a result of exercise promotes brain changes that improve mood, cognition, and immune function.

“Physical activity is a safe and effective way to improve mental health, and it is a treatment that should be considered alongside other treatments, such as therapy and medication,” says researcher Dr. Ben Singh from the University of South Australia.

Many studies have shown that exercise is beneficial for treating mental health disorders. However, they have all examined different types of physical activities, intensities, and populations. It is not surprising that despite much talk about the benefits, clinicians may have a difficult time understanding the research.

Elevate Your Well-Being through Exercise

Dr. Ben Singh and his colleagues at the University of South Australia recently conducted a broader type of study called an umbrella review to evaluate how all kinds of physical activity affect depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adults.

According to their investigation, exercise is 1.5 times more effective than counseling and medications. They found doing 150 minutes each week of various types of physical activity

(such as brisk walking, lifting weights and yoga) significantly reduces symptoms. Some types of exercise seemed to help in different ways. For example, yoga and other mind-body activities helped reduce anxiety the most, while resistance exercise helped the most with depression. More intense exercises appeared to be more beneficial.

"Importantly, the research shows that it doesn't take much for exercise to make a positive change to your mental health," says lead author, Dr. Singh.

The Dynamic Duo – Medication and Exercise

Experts are quick to recognize potential barriers we all have such as lack of motivation, issues with accessibility, and physical limitations when addressing concerns about exercise-based treatment. But innovative solutions to these problems have appeared: customized exercise plans tailored to an individual's specific needs, preferences, and lifestyle have become a popular trend, making exercise accessible and accommodating to various lifestyles.

As mental health providers recognize exercise's therapeutic value, more are incorporating physical activity into treatment plans. Collaborative approaches that combine psychotherapy, medication, and exercise are becoming the hallmark of comprehensive care - recognizing that each person's path toward healing may vary significantly.

5 easy ways to add exercise to your life

1. **Go for a walk**. Take an early morning or evening walk. Walk the dog. Take your kids (or spouse) and make it a scavenger hunt.
2. **Try the 10 minute workout.** If you're stuck at home try this quick workout to boost your heart rate and brain power.
3. **Take the stairs.** Take the stairs, even if just for a floor or two to boost your heart rate.
4. **Multi-task.** Walk or jog in place, do yoga or lift weights, or walk on the treadmill at the gym while you watch your must-see TV shows.
5. **Plan outings around more than just food and drink.** Try changing it up and go to the park, hit the gym together, take a group

"Exercise shouldn't be viewed as a "nice to have" option. It is a powerful and accessible tool for managing mental health conditions – and the best part is, it's free and comes with plenty of additional health benefits", adds Dr. Singh.