

Is Exercise The New Antidepressant?

Exercise has been shown repeatedly to be beneficial for our physical health, but did you know that it can improve your mental wellbeing as well? With mental health concerns on the rise, it's important now more than ever to be aware of tools to help prevent them and manage them. A recent study published in 2023 in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* emphasized how physical activity is a powerful tool for improving symptoms of depression and anxiety. This study reviewed data from more than 1,000 clinical trials and included more than 120,000 participants, making it one of the strongest pieces of evidence that we should keep moving daily!

The study looked at patients having depression, anxiety and psychological distress. Patients with depression and anxiety seemed to benefit the most from increasing their physical activity. In fact, the effects of physical activity for some individuals were just as effective as medication (don't stop your medication without talking to your doctor). Regular exercise can also improve symptoms among individuals who continue their medication.

While there still is no clear-cut answer as to how exercise has such wonderful effects, it is likely due to a combination of psychosocial, neurological, and social factors. For instance, mind-body activities, like yoga, have been found to be particularly effective for patients with anxiety while resistance training was most effective for patients with depression. Neurologically, exercise influences neurotrophic factors, increases serotonin and norepinephrine availability, and regulates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. One of the most interesting parts of this study is that it compared different types and intensities of exercise! It found that all forms of physical activity are efficient for improving mood. Higher intensities of exercise, such as vigorous circuit training and aerobic exercises, were associated with greater improvements in patients with depression and anxiety. Additionally, shorter weekly workouts were associated with better outcomes than longer ones, possibly due to better adherence. So, the next time you are worried about not having time for a long workout, just remember that any movement counts towards your mental health!

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