

## **Exercise Your Way To Mental Health!**

By Dr. Jim Browning  
For the CMHA – North and West Vancouver Branch

Your doctor is always nagging you to exercise. That's because it has been well-established for years that regular exercise is good for your health. It helps lower blood pressure and heart rate, keeps your weight in check and increases "good" cholesterol. As a result, it protects you against cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers. People who exercise regularly tend to be physically stronger, more energetic and have a better sex life. So, if you exercise, chances are you will live longer and be physically more functional.

Less well known are the positive effects of exercise on mental health. Several studies have demonstrated that for people who are mildly to moderately depressed or anxious, regular cardiovascular exercise can be as effective as medication or psychotherapy at reducing symptoms. In studies of non-clinical populations, even a 30 minute walk can improve mood for up to one hour following exercise.

Why does exercise improve mental health? The answer to this question is multi-faceted. First, aerobic exercise affects the hormones that play a role in governing mood. During higher levels of exercise, endorphins are released in the body, which produce a euphoric feeling, known as "runner's high". The body strengthens and energy levels increase. Your body just feels better. Second, your body becomes more resistant to stress. Your heart and blood pressure are likely to elevate less in response to stress, so your body feels calmer. Third, the psychological feedback from having a regular goal-directed routine, having a stronger body and having a more stress-resistant body compounds the positive effect on mood. You just feel better about yourself when you are fit.

So, it seems obvious that people with depression or anxiety should exercise. However, this often isn't the case. What are some of the barriers to exercise? Some people just don't like it. They hate sweating, they feel overweight and embarrassed, they don't like gyms, it's raining every day, etc. Further, if you are feeling depressed, you will tend to have less energy and the last thing you feel like doing is going for a run! You'd rather pull the cover up over your head and stay in bed all day!

Here are some tips to get you going:

1. Pick the kind of exercise you are most likely to enjoy
2. Start small – remember even a 30 minute walk can have a positive effect on mood.
3. Enlist an exercise buddy – if someone else is expecting you to be there at a certain time to exercise with them, this can overcome the initial resistance to get going.

4. If you have the money, a personal trainer can help get you started and into an exercise routine.
5. Join a running or hiking group – this has the added benefit of a social component.
6. Set small goals for yourself, so you can chart your progress.
7. If you miss a day, don't let that derail your entire program. Get back at it the next day.

It's drug-free, it's cheap and it's fun. An exercise program can make a huge difference in your life!

*Dr. Jim Browning is a Registered Psychologist in West Vancouver - <http://www.jimbrowning.ca/>*

*The CMHA, North and West Vancouver Branch is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering, supporting and improving the quality of life of mental health consumers and increasing the overall wellness of the North Shore community - <http://northwestvancouver.cmha.bc.ca/>*