Exercise and stress: Get moving to combat stress
By Mayo Clinic staff

One way to take control of the stress in your life is through physical activity. Being active can boost your feel-good endorphins and distract you from daily worries.

You know that exercise does your body good, but you're too busy and stressed to fit it into your routine. Hold on a second — there's good news when it comes to exercise and stress.

Virtually any form of exercise, from aerobics to weightlifting, can act as a stress reliever. If you're not an athlete or even if you're downright out of shape, you can still make a little exercise go a long way toward stress management. Discover the connection between exercise and stress relief — and why exercise should be part of your stress management plan.

Exercise and stress relief

Exercise increases your overall health and your sense of well-being, which puts more pep in your step 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 motion.** After a fast-paced game of racquetball or several laps in the pool, you'll often find that you've forgotten the day's 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. Exercise also can improve your sleep, which is often disrupted by stress, depression and anxiety. All this can ease your stress levels and give you a sense of command over your body and your life.

Put exercise and stress relief to work for you

A successful exercise program begins with a few simple steps.

- **Consult with your doctor.** Begin any new fitness program by consulting with your health care professional, especially if you have any medical conditions or are obese.
- **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. If you're new to exercise, aim for about 20 to 30 minutes of exercise three to four days a week and increase gradually. For most healthy adults, the Department of Health and Human Services recommends getting at least two
hours and 30 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity (think brisk walking or swimming) or one hour and 15 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity (such as running) — preferably spread throughout the week. It also recommends strength training exercises at least twice a week.

**Do what you love, and love what you do.** Don't train for a marathon if you dislike running. Virtually any form of exercise or movement can increase your fitness level while decreasing your stress. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy. Examples include walking, stair climbing, jogging, bicycling, yoga, tai chi, gardening, weightlifting and swimming.

**Pencil it in.** Although your schedule may necessitate a morning workout one day and an evening activity the next, carving out some time to move every day helps you make your exercise program an on-going priority.

### Sticking with it

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 cycling 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 and commitment 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 or yoga classes. As an added bonus, these kinder, gentler workouts may enhance your running while also decreasing your 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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