

What is mental health?

Mental illness can have an impact on a person's cognitive, behavioural and social functioning. Those with a mental illness often struggle to engage in their regular work, social and physical activities to full extent which further impacts the illness as social isolation then often occurs. Mental illness includes anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and personality disorders.

How does exercise help with mental health?

There is mounting evidence that suggests exercise is an effective treatment method for people suffering from acute and chronic mental illness, with some studies suggesting that exercise is just as effective, if not more effective than pharmacological intervention in alleviating depressive symptoms.

Exercise can make a big difference in mood and needs to be a fundamental part of mental health treatment. Even one workout a week is known to have great benefits.

Exercise can also counteract the side effects of some medications such as reducing the risk of falling by strengthening muscles and helping control body weight and blood pressure.

Things to remember

- Higher doses of exercise may be more effective at improving mental illness but people may be less likely to stick to them. As such, start slowly and build up gradually e.g. if you have not been exercising at all, start with a 10-15 minute walk each morning, and gradually increase this to 30 minutes per day.
- Set short-term realistic goals for exercising each week (e.g. 3 x 20 minute walks per week); plan to exercise at specific times of the day that fit in with your lifestyle and write your plan down.
- Remember that it can take time for the benefits of exercise to occur. Most exercise studies have shown a significant reduction in depression after eight weeks or more.
- It can be helpful to work with an appropriately educated professional such as an Accredited Exercise Physiologist who understands the complexity of the challenges faced with mental health conditions, and has the skills and knowledge to help individuals manage their condition and any barriers they may come up against.

What type of exercise is best for patients with mental health issues?

Exercise Right recommends trying a variety of different types of activities and choosing one that you enjoy the most.

- Aerobic exercise and weight lifting have been shown to be effective in treating mental conditions such as major depression.
- You don't have to join a gym –activities such as swimming, walking the dog, jogging whilst listening to music, riding a bike, gardening, bushwalking, yoga and weight-lifting can all be beneficial.
- Thirty minutes brisk walking a few times a week is a good general starting point, and can be built on from there.

Always seek professional advice from an Accredited Exercise Physiologist. Find one here: www.essa.org.au/find-aep