Live Well, Work Well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home and life—brought to you by the insurance professionals at National Insurance Services

THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

While physical exercise is known to be good for your body, it also can help your mind. Research continues to validate that exercise can improve mental health by reducing anxiety, depression and a negative mood. When you include exercise as part of your everyday routine, you'll be reaping both physical and mental well-being benefits.

This article explores the connection between your body and mind and the mental health benefits of physical activity.

The Connection Between Body and Mind

People who exercise regularly often report having better mental and emotional well-being. Consider the following mental health benefits of exercise:

- **Mood boost**—Exercise triggers the production of endorphins, serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin, mood-boosting chemicals in the brain. Those four chemicals are responsible for feelings of happiness.

- **More energy**—Increasing your heart rate and boosting oxygen circulation in your body can make you feel more energized. It may seem counterintuitive, but expending energy can actually provide a spark of vitality you may need to get through the day.

- **Better sleep**—Exercise can help regulate your sleep patterns and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep. The more active you are, the more your body pushes you to sleep and reset at night. Try to exercise for at least one to two hours before bed so your brain has enough time to wind down.

- **Reduced stress**—Physical activity reduces the levels of your body's stress hormones (e.g., adrenaline and cortisol). It's also linked to lower physiological reactivity toward stress, so exercise can also be a coping strategy for stress.

- **Improved memory**—Endorphins can help you concentrate and feel mentally sharp for work or other tasks.

- **Higher self-esteem**—When exercise becomes a habit, you may feel more powerful or confident. You may also feel accomplished when you meet your fitness goals.

- **Stronger resilience**—Exercise is a healthy way to build resilience and cope with mental or emotional challenges instead of turning to negative behaviors, alcohol or other substances.

Any movement helps since physical activity is what can be beneficial to mental well-being. Exercise can take your mind off problems or negative thoughts by redirecting them to the activity at hand.

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Getting Started

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that adults get moderate-intensity aerobic activity for at least 150 minutes each week and muscle-strengthening activities two times per week. It may seem like a lot at first, but if you break it down, that's 30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week.

Even if you don't have time for 30 minutes to exercise, find something that works for you. Any physical activity is better than none. Understandably, motivating yourself for a workout can seem more challenging if you're battling depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. Consider these tips for incorporating exercise into your routine:

- Start with short exercise sessions and slowly increase your time. The goal is to commit to moderate physical activity and build it into your daily routine.
- Find an activity you enjoy and incorporate it into your routine for a body and mind boost.
- Schedule workouts when your energy is the highest.
- Exercise with a friend. Companionship can make it more fun, so work out with a friend or loved one to make it more enjoyable or help you stick to the routine.

It comes down to making exercise a fun part of your everyday life so you can gain both physical and mental health benefits. Talk to your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about incorporating exercise into your day.