

# Active Living

Staying active is essential to keep your body and brain functioning well. Mental health struggles can impact our physical activity by making it difficult to find motivation or energy to get moving. In the same way, implementing physical activity back into your routine can be a tool to combat feelings of depression and anxiety. Always consult a healthcare provider before starting a new exercise regimen.



## Mental Health Benefits of Exercise

- Treats mild to moderate symptoms of, and helps prevent, anxiety and depression
- Interrupts cycles of troubling thoughts
- Relieves physical pain and tension through the release of endorphins
- Boosts mental energy and academic performance
- Enhances self-esteem
- Increases feelings of happiness and lowers those of sadness
- Relieves the sense of loneliness
- Reduces feelings of fatigue and improves sleep
- Reduces day-to-day stress
- Helps to increase resilience and ability to cope with mental and emotional challenges

## Enhance mental health benefits

Rather than zoning out while being active, zoning in is an effective way to get more out of your work outs. Notice the sensations of your feet hitting the ground, the rhythm of your breathing, the wind and clothes on your skin, or your muscles moving. By adding this mindfulness element and focusing on what you are feeling physically, you can interrupt the flow of worries in your mind and improve your physical condition faster.



## **Create your plan**

We all have different ways of staying active based on our physical abilities, personalities, and goals. Consider which activities would work best for you. Creating a concrete plan is essential in helping yourself develop a habit. When you're starting out, be realistic in committing to an exercise routine, even a little bit of exercise is better than none.

## **Start small**

It can be tempting to set an extravagant workout schedule, but make sure to be realistic in choosing your exercise routine. If you've never worked out before, try starting out with 5 to 10-minute sessions and slowly increase your time being active.

If you don't know what works for you, test out several types of physical activity that interest you and then set your schedule. Eventually you can work your way up to physical activity recommendations of 2-3 hours of moderate physical activity per week, which can always be split up into multiple shorter sessions throughout the week.

## **Track your progress and set regular goals**

Being able to reflect on the progress you have made over time is essential for recognizing your improvements. Set small goals and celebrate the gains you've made, such as being able to exercise five extra minutes, doing five more repetitions, adapting your sleep or eating schedule to boost your physical activity, and more. While this is an important tool, remember to be kind to yourself if you are struggling to meet a goal. Everyone has off days or weeks, recognize that you can still get yourself back on track.

## **Sticking with it**

When you hit bumps in the road along the way to implementing physical activity in your daily life, it is important to develop methods for overcoming obstacles you may face.

## **Find your "why"**

To help yourself find motivation for initiating physical activity every day, define the reasons that active living is important to you. If you end up feeling discouraged, exhausted, or hopeless about the progress you're making (or lack thereof), it is essential to remind yourself of your "why". One example includes the mental or physical health benefits of exercise.

# Solutions to common reasons for not exercising

## Feel uncomfortable physically?

When you're starting out, you don't need to push yourself too hard. If you get 5 minutes in and you're too exhausted, know that it's okay to stop today and start again tomorrow.

## Don't have enough time?

Exercise frequently, but in short bursts (e.g., for 10 minutes)

## Don't have enough energy?

Schedule your exercise when your energy is highest. This time could be the morning, midday before the afternoon crash, or when you have more time on the weekends.

If you feel unenergized all day, then try to do something simple, like stretching or going for a walk, and work toward more vigorous exercise as you gain energy through sticking to that habit.

## Feel uncomfortable mentally?

Find an environment where you feel comfortable and motivated (e.g., at home, outdoors, your bedroom, etc).

## Not feeling motivated?

Making exercise a social activity can help motivate you to stick to your routine. In addition, the companionship can be just as beneficial as exercise if you are struggling mentally. Try working out with a housemate, family member, etc.



# Acknowledge how challenging exercise may be for you

When you're struggling with your mental health, simple tasks may be exceptionally difficult. On more challenging days, if you've managed to make yourself food, take a shower, get out of bed, or simply make it through a tough day, recognize that you've accomplished something. Try to use these small accomplishments as momentum toward working on your next small task. Practice self-compassion on the challenging days and recognize that not every day will be easy.

**Evaluate your plan:** If you are struggling to meet your original goals, that is okay. Take a moment to consider what aspects are more challenging to achieve at this time and set smaller goals. There is no shame in starting small and working your way up.

**At the end of the day:** When mental health challenges are wearing you down and your energy is low, remember that anything that gets you moving counts: getting out of bed, getting some work done around the house, throwing a frisbee, going on a walk, biking to the store.

