

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Stress and Exercise

Kinetic strategies for stress relief involve motion or movement, like running or lifting weights. The idea is that muscular movement works with the fight-or-flight response and the physical body preparation that builds up to this response, rather than against it. By providing a direct outlet and release for the physical stress response, kinetic strategies prevent the buildup of muscular tension.

Physical Exercise

Physical activity is one of the best methods for fighting stress. Exercise helps you feel better by harnessing the body's natural fight or flight response, rather than suppressing it. Exercising for twenty minutes or more can enhance mood by releasing chemicals called endorphins, which relieve pain and increase a sense of well-being and relaxation. Exercise also helps relieve tension caused by muscle contraction. Exercise burns the energy that has been stored in the muscles, allowing them to return to their normal resting state after exercise is complete.

When choosing a specific form of exercise for stress management, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it take an hour or less a day?
- Is it possible to do easily and well without a great deal of mental effort?
- Do I enjoy it?
- If I persist in the activity, will I improve myself?
- Can I do it without criticizing myself?

You will be more likely to make a particular exercise format a habit if you can answer yes to the above questions in relation to that exercise.

There are multiple forms of exercise that you can use to manage stress. "Lifestyle exercise" is a way to utilize everyday activities as a form of exercise. Parking at the far end of the parking lot at the grocery (so you have to walk further), putting your own grocery bags into your car (rather than allowing the bagger to load them), and taking the stairs to meetings or appointments (rather than the elevator) are all examples of lifestyle exercise.

Other examples of lifestyle exercises include:

- Mowing your lawn with a push mower
- Raking leaves
- Walking instead of driving your car
- Playing catch with your children
- Turning on your favorite music and dancing
- Cleaning out the garage or attic
- Washing your car by hand
- Gardening, house, and yard work
- Walking the dog

Some people prefer to exercise by participating in sports and/or activities with other people. Joining softball, tennis, soccer, basketball, etc. leagues offer a great combination of exercise and socialization. Regular sessions of running, biking, golfing, kayaking, racquetball, roller-blading, hiking or taking walks with friends and family, etc. can also be fun ways to beat stress.

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Personal fitness programs tend to incorporate several different types of exercise: aerobic workouts, strength training workouts, and flexibility workouts. Aerobic (cardio) workouts increase endurance and promote physical (and heart) health. They involve a warm-up period followed by an active exercise period which should continue for 20-60 minutes of uninterrupted, rhythmic, large muscle movements at a moderately intense rate followed by a cool down and stretching period.

Yoga

Originating in India thousands of years ago, yoga is an ancient set of techniques for improving the body and the mind. As currently practiced in the West, yoga involves the physical practice of stepping the body through a series of poses and postures which help improve strength, flexibility and balance. The practice of yoga relieves muscle tension, lowers blood pressure, and decreases cholesterol levels. It is an excellent stress-relieving practice. There are many different types of yoga in practice today.

As with any new endeavor, you should be patient with yourself as you begin your yoga study. The use of props, such a foam bricks and cloth straps, is recommended for beginners who need help in achieving correct postures despite tight muscles. Over time, you will gradually become more flexible and be able to do increasingly more advanced routines. It is the continuing practice of yoga that produces the benefits, however, and not how many postures one can ultimately master.

You can take yoga classes at health clubs, community centers, and special yoga studios. Purchasing videos/DVDs and books to use at home is another option. Be sure to try several types of yoga and instructors to find the practice and coaching style that best meets your needs and abilities.

Pilates

Pilates was developed by Joseph Pilates during the early 1900's. This physically demanding practice strengthens the body's powerhouse (the core) with a series of fluid movements performed in a precise manner, accompanied by specialized breathing techniques and intense mental concentration. This exercise can involve mat exercises with no equipment, mat work with various resistance apparatus, machine-assisted exercises (the specialized Pilates machines are called Reformers), or a combination of all of these techniques. All Pilates routines are low impact and work very deep core muscles, which result in a flatter abdomen and stronger back while improving balance and posture and decreasing stress levels.

As with yoga, you can sign up for Pilates classes at community centers, health clubs, and special Pilates studios. Videos/DVDs that teach mat work can also be purchased for use at home.

Tai Chi

Tai chi was originally developed in China as a martial-arts style of self-defense. Over time, it has become a form of exercise and a process for personal development. Like hatha yoga, tai chi involves the practice of various postures. Movements are continuous and serve to relax and align the body. A full set of tai chi exercises is known as a form. The basic short form consists of 37 different moves.

Tai chi relaxes one's mind and heart. In fact, frequent practitioners of this exercise reduce their blood pressure about as much as those practicing more strenuous forms of aerobic exercise. Just like yoga and Pilates, you can take Tai Chi classes at community centers, gyms, or special studios (martial arts studios). Another option is to use videos/DVDs that allow you to learn and practice tai chi forms in your own home.