

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

Exercise for Stress Relief

When it comes to managing stress, making time for physical activity is absolutely critical. There is possibly no other stress reduction technique that is as effective, or as important as exercise.

Physical activity tackles stress at every level. Its benefits are not just physical, but also emotional, intellectual and social. A regular program of physical exercise:

- Strengthens heart and lungs and builds muscles for better resistance to fatigue, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and many other health conditions including high blood pressure, and perhaps even some cancers
- Releases chemicals in the brain and body that are natural mood enhancers and which increase physical and mental energy levels
- Improves blood circulation to the brain and releases neurotransmitters that enhance the ability to concentrate, improve memory, and help in staying calm and focused
- Provides options for recreation, opportunities for social interaction and the chance to engage in healthy competition with self and others—all of which enhance self-esteem, sense of competence, and outlook on life

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Count the Benefits

Regular exercise can produce tremendous physical, emotional benefits and even make your thinking clearer within a few weeks. As fitness levels increase and physical activity becomes a daily routine, you will feel more alert, more alive, better able to cope with problems and less inclined to feel overwhelmed, frustrated or angry. People who exercise regularly are also said to experience less depression. Many also get to sleep more quickly and sleep more soundly.

Proper exercise can help turn back the years for your body as well. It helps tone up muscles, and reduces the heart strain of carrying extra weight. Regular exercise combined with good eating habits can help reduce the fatty tissue that accumulates in the arteries. This increases the capacity of your heart, making physical work less of an effort. Breathing, posture, and even the glow of your skin can all be improved with a good fitness program!

Which Activities Suit Your Goals?

If you think you have felt listless, rundown or tense for too long, ask your doctor about the kinds of exercise that would best be suited for your physical condition and age. It’s especially important to do this if you have heart, breathing or weight problems, or if there are other, limiting physical conditions. In fact, having a check-up before beginning regular exercise is a good idea for anyone.

Gentle Fitness

You don't have to knock yourself out to feel better. Even 20 minutes of moderate exercise a couple of times a week can be beneficial. Any regular activity or sport that requires sustained movement can reduce health risks and stress, including:

- Walking
- Gardening
- Low impact sports such as golfing and bowling
- Bicycling
- Stretching, yoga or tai chi

Activity at this level will probably not raise the heart rate to aerobic levels, but it will give your muscles a workout. Also, the easier pace of these pursuits enables people to enjoy them for longer periods of time.

Weight Loss

Contrary to popular belief, strenuous exercise is not the best way to lose weight. Most people can sustain exercise much longer at a moderate pace, and thus burn more calories overall. Building up to a program of workouts lasting at least 45 minutes to an hour, four to five times a week, is the most effective strategy for slimming down. Suitable activities include:

- Bicycling
- Brisk walking, alternating walking and jogging or energetic dancing
- Stair-stepping
- Stationary cycling, elliptical training and cross-country skiing machines set at a low resistance level

Warm Up and Cool Off

No matter where you exercise, make sure you warm up before activity and cool down after. Take five to ten minutes to stretch out your leg, arm and back muscles. Pay particular attention to your neck and shoulders. Short stretching exercises can help prevent strains during your work out and reduce muscle

soreness later.

Be Patient, Be Persistent

Getting into a fitness activity may not immediately change your stress level—but staying with it will. That's why it's vital to pick activities you enjoy. Remember that you don't need to go through the same form of exercise every time. You can vary the workout as much or as little as you like.

The first few weeks of your program will be the most difficult for your muscles to accept. Start modestly with two sessions a week. If you give your body two full days to rest up between days of heavy activity, chances are it will handle the next round without sending you signals of distress and discouragement. Activities will become easier to do and you will be able to increase their frequency. Be patient and persevere!

You can expect to feel almost immediate benefits from your efforts. Reduced tension and greater alertness will be the easiest to feel, but you're gaining many other health benefits, too. By following the tips above, you're likely to have shed a few pounds, and be feeling more energetic within four to six weeks. With so many physical and emotional benefits waiting to be had, why not choose an activity you can enjoy, and start doing it this week?