

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

Fitness: Turn Back a Few Years and Feel More Alive

Every so often, most of us get a feeling that something is wrong with ourselves. We just don't enjoy life the way we once did. In fact, living seems to be a perpetual round of eating, working, and resting up.

When we lack the pep and the interest to really enjoy our evenings and weekends, we know something is wrong. But we usually chalk it up to boredom. Or we blame it on our age. Very few of us are willing to believe that the problem is most likely cause by a reduced level of physical fitness.

"Not me. I get enough exercise, thank you." That's what we think. But is it true? Take a look at your own day-to-day activities. Do they regularly provide you with exercise that brings all your muscles into play for 30 minutes a day? Do they give your heart and lungs a good, cleansing workout? For people who feel caught in the doldrums, the answer is usually "No." Luckily, most of us can improve our outlook by making a little more use of our bodies.

Count the benefits

A regular exercise program can produce tremendous emotional and mental benefits within a few weeks or a couple of months. As fitness levels increase, people normally become more alert, and feel more alive. They are better able to handle stress and have greater mental and physical stamina. Work and the day-to-day problems of life seem less tiring. As a result, people who exercise often feel less depressed. Many of them also get to sleep more quickly—and sleep more soundly.

A good fitness program could do all this for you, too. It could make you feel more relaxed, be more productive, and increase your zest for life.

Of course, proper exercise can help you turn back the years for your body as well as for your outlook. It helps you burn off excess fat, tone up the muscles, and reduce the heart strain of carrying extra weight.

Persistent exercise combined with good eating habits can also help reduce the fatty tissue that accumulates in the arteries. This increases your cardiovascular capacity, making physical work seem less of an effort.

Your breathing, your posture, and even the glow on your skin can all be improved with a good fitness program!

Ask your doctor

If you think you have felt listless, rundown or have been tense for too long, ask your doctor for more than pills. Ask his or her opinion about the kinds of exercise that would best be suited for your physical condition and age. It is especially important to do this if you have heart, breathing or weight problems, or if there are other limiting factors such as high blood pressure.

In fact, having a physical check-up before beginning regular exercise is a good idea for anyone. Discuss the types of activity that appeal to you with your physician. Talk about build-up periods and preliminary workouts, and calculate the length of time that your pulse rate maintained. Plan out a well-balanced, custom-tailored fitness program between you.

Scores of Good Choices

Any activity that gets your whole body moving, your heart beating faster, and your lungs breathing deeper can help you achieve a higher fitness level. Just make sure it's right for you. And start cautiously, remembering that if you can build up to three 30-minute sessions a week, you'll be gaining health and fitness benefits.

Highly Strenuous Activities. These include fast-moving sports such as basketball, any kind of hockey, soccer, lacrosse, squash, handball, fencing, boxing, etc. Activities such as running, cycling, swimming, skating, cross-country skiing, and calisthenics can be highly strenuous. Their advantage is that the degree of exertion is usually set by the individual rather than by the demands of the sport.

Strenuous-Enough Activities. Tennis, badminton, volleyball, hiking, the martial arts, table tennis, skipping, rowing, and many other forms of "milder" exercise can give the body, heart and lungs a full workout.

Easier Ways to Good Exercise. Golfing, archery, bowling, baseball, horseshoes, gardening, and even bird watching can provide a good deal of beneficial exercise. Activity at this level will probably not raise the heart rate to sustained aerobic levels, but it will give your muscles a workout. Also, the easier pace of these pursuits, enable people to enjoy them for longer periods of time.

The all-time champion of simple, easy exercise for all age levels is a nice walk of half an hour or more. You can do it anywhere, any time, and in all seasons. It isn't expensive. You can set your own pace. And, once you can maintain walking speeds of approximately 3 miles an hour or just over, you'll be reaching aerobic activity levels.

Have you ever tried to worry while walking? With all that fresh air, sunshine and so many things to see, it's very hard to hold problems in your mind. While toning up your body, walking gives your emotions a chance to unwind and sort themselves out. It's a wonderful way to deal with anxiety, tension, and stress.

Warm up and cool off

Whether you exercise alone or with a group, in a field or at a club or community centre, make sure you warm up before peak activity then cool down afterwards. Before and after, take five to ten minutes to perform exercises that will stretch out your leg, arm and back muscles to loosen them up. Pay particular attention to your neck and shoulders. These short series of exercises can help prevent strains during your peak output and reduce the muscle soreness later.

Today, there is a wide range of books that cover the basics of aerobic exercise. Many of them contain a lot of useful tips about warm ups, clothing, and footwear. A visit to your library could be a good way to start your exercise program.

Be patient, be persistent

Getting into a fitness activity does not change your stress level. But staying with it will. That is why it is vital to pick a physical pursuit—or a group of them—that you can enjoy doing. Remember that you don't need to go through the exact same form of exercise three or four times a week. You can vary the workout by as much or as little as you like, but select exercises that can give the right total body workout to you.

The first few weeks of your program will be the most difficult for your muscles to accept. Start modestly with two sessions a week, three at the most. If you give your body two full days to rest up between days of heavy activity, chances are it will be able to handle the next round without sending you signals of distress and discouragement.

Your eventual goal is to make some form of exercise a habitual part of your daily routine. But don't try
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to do it all at once. Just be persistent. You will find your activities become easier to do and you will be able to increase their frequency. Be patient and persevere!

You can expect to see and feel almost immediate benefits from your efforts—in terms of reduced tension and greater alertness. Increased levels of physical energy and positive indications of weight control should become apparent within four to six weeks.

To turn back a few years and feel more alive, make plans now for regular exercise.

You can speak with a counselor to devise a plan well suited to you, taking into account all aspects of your life. It is a good idea to speak with a health professional to assess your present physical condition before starting any fitness program, or changing your present program.

Although starting a fitness program may seem easy, staying with one may be difficult for some people. Keeping on track is much easier with support. A counselor can be there for you when you need inspiration and encouragement, and to answer fitness questions.