

Exercise and Stress

WHAT IS STRESS: There's no medical definition of stress, and health care professionals often disagree over whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them. Typically it is described as situations or events that put pressure on us or our reaction to being placed under pressure. Exercising is an effective way to decrease unwanted stress. As well as releasing endorphins in the brain, physical activity helps to relax the muscles and relieve tension in the body. Since the body and mind are so closely linked, when your body feels better so, too, will your mind.

Stress is an inevitable part of life. Seven out of ten adults in the United States say they experience stress or anxiety daily. Some stress is actually a good thing but the problem rises if it is consistently high. Individuals who experience acute episodic or chronic stress are at increased risk for developing stress-related health problems. Research supports the idea that exercise can improve the way the body handles stress, and it can provide a time-out from stressors.

Stress isn't a psychiatric diagnosis, but it's closely linked to your mental health in two important ways:

1) Stress can cause mental health problems, and make existing problems worse. 2) If you have a mental health condition the process of coping with it can be an added form of stress.

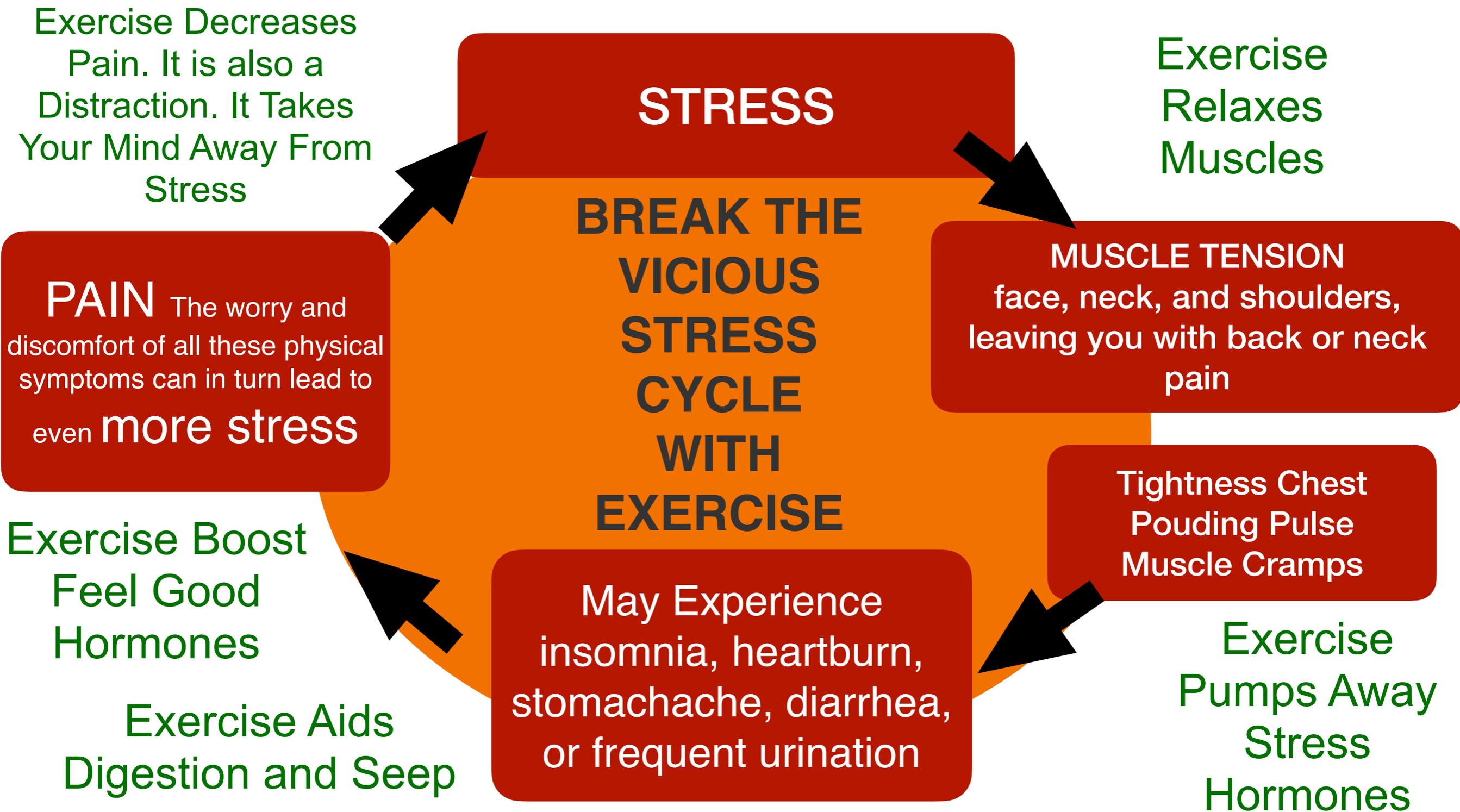
According to Harvard Health the mental benefits of aerobic exercise on stress have a neurochemical basis. Exercise reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators like serotonin. Endorphins are responsible for the "runner's high" and for the feelings of relaxation

The physical symptoms of stress are themselves distressing. In fact, the body's response to stress can feel so bad that it produces additional mental stress. During the stress response, then, mind and body can amplify each other's distress signals, creating a vicious cycle of tension and anxiety.

It is important to remember that exercise is only one component of a stress management program, and there might be situations that require assistance beyond the expertise of a fitness professional

HOW MUCH EXERCISE IS NEEDED TO MANAGE STRESS? Current Guidelines seem to Work. First any exercise will help. As little as a couple minutes of stepping can improve capacity. Psychologists studying how exercise relieves anxiety and depression suggest that a 10-minute walk may be just as good as a 45-minute workout. More or less, moderate or high, just getting going in some fashion. Aerobic activity that is higher intensity seems to have the most bang. The proposed physiological adaptations thought to improve the way the body handles stress and recovers from stress can occur with a regular moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise program, such as the recommendations of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise per week (normal breathing) or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise per week (altered breathing, work up a sweat). If an individual is using exercise as a time-out from stressors, shorter duration activity can serve the purpose, especially when lack of time or fatigue is a concern. Consider an individual who reports significant work-related stress. Breaking the exercise into two 10- to 15-minute sessions, one before work and one at lunch time when possible, can help combat stress throughout the day. A recent 2020 study found that resistance training workouts can relieve symptoms of anxiety. Resistance exercise can be used to provide a time-out from one's stressors. Because resistance training produces different exercise adaptations compared with aerobic exercise, it might not affect the way the body physiologically reacts to stress as aerobic exercise does. However, the acute effect of a time-out to reduce stress can be beneficial. The resistance exercise prescription for general health benefits of 2 to 3 days of exercise to target all of the major muscle groups performed at a moderate intensity of 8 to 12 repetitions can be recommended. Studies of *Tai Chi* and yoga indicate that sessions between 15 and 90 minutes performed 2 to 3 days per week were effective in reducing stress and improving feelings of well-being as well. See **HOW EXERCISE BREAKS THE STRESS CYCLE.**

VICIOUS CYCLE BETWEEN YOUR MIND AND BODY



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