

Do You Get Enough Exercise for Good Mental Health (Anxiety)

DO YOU/CAN YOU
DO THIS?

SHORT WELLNESS SELF-
CHECKS

As mentioned in a previous DO YOU article it's well-established that exercise can improve mental health, and potentially even alleviate or prevent depression, but how about anxiety. According to Harvard Health in 2019 one in five Americans over 18, and one in three teenagers 13 to 18, reported having a chronic anxiety disorder during the past year. One study shows that people with anxiety tend to be more sedentary and do less intense forms of physical activity, if any. That is sad to learn since exercising and moving may be the single best non-medical solution we have for preventing and treating anxiety. So exactly how much exercise does one need to protect against episodes of anxiety and anxiety disorders? While pinpointing this is not easy, a recent meta-analysis in the journal *Anxiety-Depression* found that people with anxiety disorders who reported high-level physical activity were better protected against developing anxiety symptoms (agoraphobia and posttraumatic disorder) than those who reported low physical activity. **Bottom line: when it comes to treating some anxiety, more exercise may be better according to this meta-analysis. While this may be the case some psychologists studying how exercise relieves anxiety and depression suggest that a mere 10-minute walk may be just as good as a 45-minute workout. Some additional research shows that just a single bout of exercise can help ease anxiety when it strikes. Intensity may matter for added benefit, A recent 2020 study comparing moderate to high intensity aerobic exercise found high intensity was twice as effective in improving generalized anxiety disorder measure. So either way, more or less and hard or light, move because when it comes to some anxiety disorders studies point to the effectiveness of everything from tai chi to high-intensity interval training. People experienced improvement no matter which types of activity they tried. Even general physical activity like cleaning is helpful. The important thing is to try activities and keep doing them. Although exercise has a positive effect for most people, some recent studies show that for some, excessive exercise may not have a positive effect impact on long-term mental health (see ADAA). Therefore stay within the current physical activity guideline.**

How does exercise help ease anxiety?

Engaging in exercise diverts you from the very thing you are anxious about.

Moving your body decreases muscle tension, lowering the body's contribution to feeling anxious.

Getting your heart rate up changes brain chemistry, increasing the availability of important anti-anxiety neurochemicals.

Exercise activates frontal regions of the brain responsible for executive function, which helps control the amygdala, our reacting system to real or imagined threats to our survival.

Exercising regularly builds up resources that bolster resilience against stormy emotions.

To maximize the benefits:

Choose something enjoyable so you will do it repeatedly, building resilience.

Work toward getting your heart rate up. See High Intensity Interval training.

Work out with a friend or in a group to reap the added benefit of social support.

If possible, exercise in nature or green space, which further lowers stress and anxiety.

Difference between Anxiety and Depression: Simply put: Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. It might cause you to sweat, feel restless and tense, and have a rapid heartbeat. According to Harvard Health the toll of anxiety can be high: it increases a person's risk for other psychiatric disorders like depression, and can contribute to diabetes and cardiovascular problems. Depression is a condition in which a person feels discouraged, sad, hopeless, unmotivated, or disinterested in life in general for more than two weeks and when the feelings interfere with daily activities. Many people who develop depression have a history of an anxiety disorder earlier in life. There is no evidence one disorder causes the other, but there is clear evidence that many people suffer from both disorders from the ADAA.