



## Exercise and Stress: Get Moving to Manage Stress

### KEYWORDS

Exercise & Stress manage

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### ABSTRACT

Exercise in almost any form can act as a stress reliever. Being active can boost your feel-good endorphins and distract you from daily worries. You know that exercise does your body good, but you're too busy and stressed to fit it into your routine. Hold on a second — there's good news when it comes to exercise and stress. Virtually any form of exercise, from aerobics to yoga, can act as a stress reliever. If you're not an athlete or even if you're out of shape, you can still make a little exercise go a long way toward stress management. Discover the connection between exercise and stress relief — and why exercise should be part of your stress management plan.

### Introduction

Stress is an inevitable part of life. Seven out of ten adults in the United States say they experience stress or anxiety daily, and most say it interferes at least moderately with their lives, according to the most recent ADAA survey on stress and anxiety disorders. When the [American Psychological Association](#) surveyed people in 2008, more people reported physical and emotional symptoms due to stress than they did in 2007, and nearly half reported that their stress has increased in the past year.

It's impossible to eliminate, but you can learn to [manage stress](#), and most people usually do. According to a recent ADAA online poll, some 14 percent of people make use of regular exercise to cope with stress. Others reported talking to friends or family (18 percent); sleeping (17 percent); watching movies or TV (14 percent), as well as eating (14 percent) and listening to music (13 percent).

While all of these are well-known coping techniques, exercise may be the one most recommended by health care professionals. And among ADAA poll takers who exercise, a healthy percentage is already on the right track: Walking (29 percent), running (20 percent), and yoga (11 percent) are their preferred strategies.

### Exercise and stress relief

Exercise increases your overall health and your sense of well-being, which puts more pep in your step every day. But exercise also has some direct stress-busting benefits.

**It pumps up your endorphins.** Physical activity helps bump up the production of your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, called endorphins. Although this function is often referred to as a runner's high, a rousing game of tennis or a nature hike also can contribute to this same feeling.

**It's meditation in motion.** After a fast-paced game of racquetball or several laps in the pool, you'll often find that you've forgotten the day's irritations and concentrated only on your body's movements.

As you begin to regularly shed your daily tensions through movement and physical activity, you may find that this

focus on a single task, and the resulting energy and optimism, can help you remain calm and clear in everything you do.

**It improves your mood.** Regular exercise can increase self-confidence, it can relax you, and it can lower the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety. Exercise can also improve your sleep, which is often disrupted by stress, depression and anxiety. All of these exercise benefits can ease your stress levels and give you a sense of command over your body and your life.

### Put exercise and stress relief to work for you

A successful exercise program begins with a few simple steps.

**Consult with your doctor.** If you haven't exercised for some time and you have health concerns, you may want to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.

**Walk before you run.** Build up your fitness level gradually. Excitement about a new program can lead to overdoing it and possibly even injury.

For most healthy adults, the Department of Health and Human Services recommends getting at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity (such as brisk walking or swimming) or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity (such as running). You also can do a combination of moderate and vigorous activity.

**Also, incorporate strength training exercises at least twice a week.**

**Do what you love.** Virtually any form of exercise or movement can increase your fitness level while decreasing your stress. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy. Examples include walking, stair climbing, jogging, bicycling, yoga, tai chi, gardening, weightlifting and swimming.

**Pencil it in.** Although your schedule may necessitate a morning workout one day and an evening activity the next, carving out some time to move every day helps you make your exercise program an ongoing priority.

**Stick with it**

Starting an exercise program is just the first step. Here are some tips for sticking with a new routine or reinvigorating a tired workout:

**Set SMART goals.** Write down SMART goals — specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-limited goals.

If your primary goal is to reduce stress in your life and recharge your batteries, your specific goals might include committing to walking during your lunch hour three times a week or, if needed, finding a baby sitter to watch your children so that you can slip away to attend a cycling class.

**Find a friend.** Knowing that someone is waiting for you to show up at the gym or the park can be a powerful incentive. Working out with a friend, co-worker or family member often brings a new level of motivation and commitment to your workouts.

**Change up your routine.** If you've always been a competitive runner, take a look at other less competitive options that may help with stress reduction, such as Pilates or yoga classes. As an added bonus, these kinder, gentler workouts may enhance your running while also decreasing your stress.

**Exercise in increments.** Even brief bouts of activity offer benefits. For instance, if you can't fit in one 30-minute walk, try three 10-minute walks instead. Interval training, which entails brief (60 to 90 seconds) bursts of intense activity at almost full effort, is being shown to be a safe, effective and efficient way of gaining many of the benefits of longer duration exercise. What's most important is making regular physical activity part of your lifestyle.

**Conclusion:**

Whatever you do, don't think of exercise as just one more thing on your to-do list. Find an activity you enjoy — whether it's an active tennis match or a meditative meander down to a local park and back — and make it part of your regular routine. Any form of physical activity can help you unwind and become an important part of your approach to easing stress.

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