

~ May is Mental Health Awareness Month ~

MENTAL HEALTH & EXERCISE

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC



The benefits of exercise are many. Besides being physically fit, exercise benefits a person's mental health. Regular aerobic activity including jogging, biking, swimming, dancing and gardening have proven to increase blood circulation to the brain which helps to alleviate stress and helps with a positive outlook in mood. Our bodies, which include our mind, are gifts from God and exercise helps us take care of them.

Exercise and Depression

- Studies have shown that exercise can treat mild depression just as well as antidepressant medication.
- Exercise promotes many changes in the brain including neural growth and the release of endorphins known as the feel good hormone.
- Those who exercise regularly have a more positive outlook.
- Exercise serves as a distraction to negative thinking.

For many of my clients who struggle with mood, I encourage exercise because of the positive effect. Walking for fifteen to twenty minutes three times a week is beneficial. No time to exercise? Try a simple lifestyle change like parking the car a little further away or using the stairs.

Exercise and Anxiety | Stress

- Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment. When stressed or anxious, we tense our muscles without even noticing. It is not uncommon for stress to affect the body physically.
- Exercise can help manage physical tension and anxiety/stress symptoms better.
- Exercise helps one to stay in the moment and teaches us to be more mindful.
- Breathing is also a component of exercise and focusing our breath helps in being mindful as well. Let your breath set the rhythm for praising God while you exercise. (Psalm 150:6)
- For those who struggle with anxiety, breathing techniques are used often in therapy and have a natural calming effect.
- Anxiety causes the mind to go in many different directions - exercise helps it to stay focused.

Exercise and ADHD

- Regular exercise improves concentration, motivation, memory, and mood.
- Brain chemicals such as dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin all affect focus and attention. Exercise naturally boosts these brain chemicals just as medications can.
- Exercising forces a person to stay more focused and on task. When someone struggles with ADHD, thoughts tend to be scattered, and organizational skills and forgetfulness are not uncommon.

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Exercise and PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder)

- Exercise helps us to become more in tune with our body and how it feels and reacts. With PTSD, our nervous system becomes stuck on the stress like a skipping record.
- Evidence has shown that by paying attention to our body and how it feels during exercise, we can help the nervous system become unstuck by learning to have new awareness.
- We cannot change what we are not aware of, therefore being aware of our body's reactions are key and can be empowering as we learn how to cope with PTSD symptoms.

Overall Sense of Well Being

For many years prior to working as a counselor, I was a personal trainer and fitness instructor with a fitness ministry focused on body, mind and spirit. God has created the three to work together as one. The mind is strong, and what we think and tell ourselves motives us. When engaging in exercise from a healthy perspective, there are no negative effects and the benefits to mind, body and spirit are many:

- More energy and stamina
- More endurance
- Stress reducer
- Mood enhancer
- Calming effect
- Better sleep
- Higher self esteem
- Sharpens thoughts and memory
- Weight control
- Better heart rate

Feeling helpless and don't know where to start? Take baby steps – you don't have to have the all or nothing mindset. It is OK to start at ground zero. Making small goals to start with and accomplishing them will give you confidence. It may help having an exercise buddy or even choosing to exercise at a time of day when you have the most energy. Remember something is better than nothing. If you have physical limitations, check with your doctor before you begin.



Top Down Effect

No time? In our busy world some of us feel exhausted. When tired or stressed, exercise may be the last thing on your mind. However, exercise will actually give you more energy. In working with many busy moms over the years, the topic of selfishness and taking time away from the family would notoriously come up. My answer would always be to remember the top down effect. When you feel good about yourself, everything else falls into place, which allows you to be a better mom, wife, sister, and a more productive human being overall. God calls us to be the best person we can be and taking time to exercise helps us to gain not only physical, but mental strength. ■

*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?
For you have been purchased at a price.*

Therefore, glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20



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