

Module 21 Resources

Optimal Movement

Aerobic activity: Most research on exercise and mental health focuses on aerobic exercise (think running, cycling, swimming, elliptical, walking, calisthenics, dancing,) vs. anaerobic (weightlifting, sprinting etc.). For this reason, we want to focus on activities that are aerobic in nature if we want to maximize the brain benefits of exercise. Anaerobic exercise is also beneficial, but aerobic exercise is particularly potent due to its ability to promote brain growth and repair via a [promoting BDNF](#).

Shift from “exercise” to movement: The benefits of exercise are well-known, but when people are struggling with depression and anxiety, motivation and energy can be sparse. That’s why you should consider focusing on movement, because all movement counts. Moving around each and every hour is important. If you only exercise, but then spend much of the day sitting, it doesn’t really benefit your mental health and brain health. Much like eliminating processed foods, we need to eliminate a sedentary lifestyle to beat depression and anxiety.

Sprints over marathons: Short bursts of activity are easier to fit into a busy lifestyle. Perhaps set a goal of 20 minutes per day or commit to a set of body weight exercises like push-ups and air-squats. Overall it’s important to get your heart rate up and blood flowing. And remember, walking is one of the best activities for your mental health and has been used throughout history for calming the human mind.

Focus on the feeling: Movement and exercise trigger the release of many different feel good chemicals in your brain. Many of my patients struggling with depression need a nudge to really soak in this feeling and use it to counter more negative feelings.

Open skilled activities: Open skilled activity (such as most team sports, i.e. pickleball) seem to be more effective than closed skilled activity (such as repetitive movement) at [increasing BDNF](#). For this reason I advise most of my patients to find at least one open skilled activity that they enjoy and participate in it regularly.

Fun: I hope it has been clear throughout this course that seeking and enhancing your enjoyment of experiences is a key skill to develop. This also means we need to occasionally change things in our routine, or ideally, have a diverse set of enjoyable physical activities. When it comes to movement and exercise for mental health, it’s imperative that you find something that you enjoy. The best kind of movement is sustainable. Doing something you enjoy makes it easier to continue to do it.

Get outside: My best recommendation is to exercise outdoors whenever possible. Nature exposure is beneficial for the brain on its own, so when you add this into the mix you get compounding benefits. Hiking, trail running, biking, team sports, roller blading, and swimming can all be done outdoors, giving the benefits of sunshine, fresh air, exposure to the marvels of the natural world, and an

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activation of our senses in ways that don't happen inside. Often my patients describe feeling more calm quite quickly, and research shows that seeing the green of nature is naturally soothing. In fact, [a review in 2021](#) found that 90 percent of the studies concerning nature therapy and mental health had found at least one statistically significant improvement.

Find a buddy: Movement is more fun with others. To push yourself and be accountable is easier when someone else is by your side. It also makes exercising more enjoyable and often more fun and playful. It is easier to mix things up or try something new - a trail run instead of your normal route or join the local softball league or head to the new rock climbing gym in town - if you have a buddy. Over the years, I've loved learning new exercises and stretches from my various exercise partners and team mates. I even find that these relationships help motivate me when I am solo remembering the many good, and challenging, times I've had with them. There are running groups, exercising classes, personal trainers and coaches who can certainly serve this role as well.

What if I can't exercise right now?: If you are struggling with an injury or chronic physical disability or challenge, for many people these exercise and movement recommendations aren't possible. In these situations, I often look to my colleagues in physical and occupational therapy to help my patients find solutions and get the movement they need in a way that is feasible and satisfying. Interestingly, some benefits of exercise and movement can be [mimicked by time in a sauna](#).

[The HUNT Study: Exercise and Depression](#)

[Aerobic exercise is an effective treatment for depression](#)

[Neuroplasticity—Exercise-Induced Response of Peripheral Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor](#)

[Mental health benefits of nature-based recreation: a systematic review](#)