



# Using exercise to manage depression

## The benefits of exercise

Exercise is commonly recommended by healthcare providers for those affected by depression. These recommendations are backed by numerous studies, showing that those who exercise regularly experience fewer depressive symptoms than those who do not. In fact, studies have shown that 16 weeks of regular exercise can be as effective as commonly prescribed anti-depressant medications (SSRI's) for treating mild to moderate depression in older adults who are inactive.

## Understanding how exercise helps with depression

Understanding exactly how exercise can help individuals with depression continues to be investigated and isn't yet clearly understood. While most agree that not one single hormone or chemical in your brain can be attributed to the benefits of exercise, research has suggested that regular exercise can increase levels of serotonin and endorphins in the brain. This is important due to their involvement in mood, sleep, libido, appetite, and other functions linked with depression. In addition, these chemicals in your brain can be increased with exercise.

Regular exercise has also been shown to assist in addressing psychosocial factors for those suffering with depression. Some examples of these factors include: increased self-esteem and sense of control with recovery; reduced loneliness due to more community engagement; increased energy levels, and distraction from worries and rumination.

### References:

Schuch, F. B., & Stubbs, B. (2019). The Role of Exercise in Preventing and Treating Depression. Current sports medicine reports.

Schuch, F. B., et al (2016). Exercise for depression in older adults: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials adjusting for publication bias. Revista brasileira de psiquiatria.

## Exercise Recommendations

### How much?

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians recommend a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on most days. However, understanding the complexities that come with depression, in particular reduced motivation and feeling tired, achieving these recommendations can be daunting and seem unachievable. As such, it is important to know that a little activity is better than none, and more is better than a little. Using small 10-minute bouts of exercise throughout the day can help make the total of 30 minutes more achievable and lead to increased motivation and exercise tolerance.

### What type?

Research supports the benefits for depression in both aerobic (cardio) and resistance (strength) training. While intensity of the exercise can play a role in these improvements, maintaining a regular routine with exercise is one of, if not the most, important factors when it comes to choosing the type of exercise. Therefore, we suggest starting with the most appealing and meaningful form of exercise to you - be it walking, lifting weights, bike riding, rock climbing or swimming.

