Article Series Staying Active All

Using exercise to fight the blues

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All Staying Active

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Being diagnosed with cancer and undergoing treatment can impact the way you feel emotionally and physically. You may experience treatment side effects, such as fatigue, depression or anxiety. Exercise may help boost your self-esteem, reduce depression and anxiety and increase energy and strength.

Let’s take a look at the effect of physical exercise on your brain and how it may be able to help improve your emotional well-being.

The role of exercise in the brain

Your brain is made up of billions of cells, called neurons, that are responsible for how you feel, think, behave and move. Neurons communicate by using neurotransmitters. There are many different neurotransmitters and they have different effects on your brain. Two neurotransmitters in particular—endorphins and serotonin—are thought to be why exercise is such a powerful way to improve your emotional well-being.

Exercise produces “feel good” hormones

As you move your body, it produces endorphins. Often called “feel good” neurotransmitters, endorphins act as one of the body’s natural pain relievers. In other words, they reduce pain and boost pleasure, which can result in an increased feeling of overall well-being.

Endorphins have many benefits. In addition to reducing physical pain in your body, endorphins can also help alleviate symptoms of depression, reduce stress and anxiety, and help boost your self-esteem. This can help you continue to exercise and enjoy it.

Sami Mansfield, founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, shares a few ways to help your body produce endorphins:

- Focus on movement that you can complete for 3-5 minutes at a time
- If you are tired or have balance limitations, start with a chair-based exercise. Find some examples here
- If you are physically able, start with some body weight movements, such as moving from a seated to a standing position, going up and down a few stairs, or lifting small soup cans or hand weights
- If finding the personal motivation to exercise is challenging for you, get a partner who can help motivate you when you may not feel like exercising

Increase your serotonin levels through exercise

Serotonin is a natural mood stabilizer that promotes well-being and happiness. It also helps regulate when you sleep and wake up, helps you think and controls your mood. You can naturally increase your serotonin levels through exercise and exposure to sunlight.

Lift your mood with different kinds of exercise

The benefits of aerobic training such as walking, biking, swimming, and dancing on reducing symptoms of depression are well established. Even five minutes of aerobic exercise can help with anxiety. More recently, resistance training has also been shown to significantly reduce symptoms of depression. Resistance training includes movement that uses body weight, resistance bands, hand weights, or other objects for exercises. Try it today if you're feeling up to it!

Check out other articles on the site for more exercise ideas. Try these five tips to keep moving and six exercises to improve your balance. You can also track your steps with the free **LivingWith®** app.

The information contained herein is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace discussions with a healthcare provider. All decisions about your health and exercise routine should be made with a healthcare provider.

Sami Mansfield is an oncology exercise specialist and Director of Oncology Wellness for one of the largest cancer centers in the Midwest. She is also the founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, an organization focused on developing oncology wellness and exercise resources for hospital and healthcare organizations, nonprofits and individuals affected by cancer.