

# 10 Ways Exercise Improves Your Mood

No, the mental health benefits of exercise aren't just in your head

By Mary Pritchard



SHUTTERSTOCK

Research has long supported the benefits of exercise, from weight control to reducing the risks of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and even cancer. Regular workouts strengthen your bones and muscles, increase your flexibility, and help you stay active and mobile as you age, helping you live longer.

Exercise's effect on mental health and mood is no exception—it's as effective in treating minor depression as therapy and prescription drugs. The mood-enhancing benefits apply for everyone. Here are 10 ways:

## **1. Exercise can help you think more clearly and make better decisions**

Exercise activates a part of your brain called the ventral prefrontal cortex, which is important for decision making and emotional processing.

## **2. Exercise can help reduce negative moods**

In addition to helping us make decisions, the ventral prefrontal cortex processes negative emotions like fear and helps us decide whether certain situations are risky or not. Frequent exercise helps you better process negative emotions so you can stay focused on the positive.

## **3. Exercise helps you resist stress**

People who exercise can more effectively deal with stressors in their environment. Frequent exercise actually alters a part of your brain called the dorsal raphe nucleus. This part of the brain is responsible for mood regulation (via one of the neurotransmitters it produces, called serotonin) and for alerting you to the presence of stress in your environment (via another neurotransmitter called Substance P).

#### 4. Exercise reduces tension and anxiety

Exercise increases your serotonin level (that's the "feel good" neurotransmitter), which helps decrease negative emotions and increase positive ones.

#### 5. Exercise improves memory

Exercise increases the activity level in part of your brain called the hippocampus, which plays a key role in helping you form new memories and retrieve old ones.

#### 6. Exercise improves cognitive performance

Research suggests that even short bouts of intensive exercise during your workday can increase performance and productivity.

#### 7. Exercise helps reduce pain

Everyone knows about the "runner's high," a feeling of pain reduction that accompanies lengthy bouts of exercise. Research suggests that you don't have to run marathons to see the pain-reducing benefits of exercise—even low-impact activities like water aerobics can help reduce pain.

#### 8. Exercise increases body satisfaction

People who exercise usually report increased body satisfaction immediately following exercise. Those who work out generally report lower levels of body dissatisfaction compared with infrequent exercisers.

#### 9. People who exercise report having better romantic relationships

Researchers aren't sure of the reason. It could be that exercise makes you feel better about yourself. Maybe it improves your sex life. Or perhaps the good mood it puts you in helps smooth over any issues you might have with your romantic partner.

#### 10. Exercise predicts happiness

Studies continue to show that people who exercise are happier—no surprise considering all the elements above coming together!

If you're vulnerable to depression or seasonal affective disorder, exercise should be one of your mainstays. And even if you don't struggle with those issues, hitting the gym can still give you positive effects that are well worth it.

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