

Optimizing Brain Health

Physical Activity & Mental Wellness



Exercise helps us stay physically fit. The physical benefits of exercise include improved sleep, better physical health, improved sex life, trimmer waistline, and even a longer life. The benefits of exercise do not end there. Physical fitness also helps mental fitness. The mind and body are intricately linked, so if we want to improve our mental health, we can look to exercise—in addition to other forms of treatment—to improve such conditions as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The improvements may help increase brain function and focus. In other words, it is important to be physically active in order to stay mentally active.

- **Depression:** Endorphins—the powerful “feel good” chemicals released during exercise—can help combat depression by energizing our spirit, calming us down, and providing a sense of well-being.
- **Anxiety:** Anxiety is also reduced by the release of endorphins. Exercise will boost mental energy while reducing tension—a hallmark symptom of anxiety.
- **ADHD:** ADHD symptoms can also be lessened with exercise. The other chemicals released in the brain when we exercise (dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin) all affect focus and attention. Therefore, exercise can have similar effects as ADHD medications.
- **Stress:** Exercise may help to alleviate the physical symptoms of stress such as insomnia, heartburn, fatigue, and tension among others. It can be effective in breaking the cycle of stress.
- **PTSD:** Exercise has been shown to benefit those recovering from trauma. Focusing on the movements we make while exercising can help “reset” the nervous system and help us move past the immobilization stress response common to PTSD and trauma.

Tips for adding exercise into your daily routine:

- Schedule workouts during the time of day when your energy is at its highest.
- Pick activities you enjoy.
- Start small. Go for a walk. You don’t need a gym membership or fancy equipment to get started.
- Get social. Invite a family member, friend, or neighbor to join you.
- Get extra steps in. Park further from entrances and take the stairs.
- Have fun. Listening to music while exercising can keep you motivated.

People who exercise regularly enjoy a better mood, less stress, improved memory, sharper thinking, and more restful sleep. Connect with the EAP for further support and guidance on how to use physical activity to benefit your mental wellness and optimize your brain health.