

Anxiety and exercise

One of the ways people often try to manage their anxiety is through physical exercise. It turns out that there is good scientific evidence that physical exercise can provide relief from the uncomfortable physical symptoms of anxiety and can also reduce how much anxiety people feel in response to stress in their lives. This information sheet is designed to provide a summary of the benefits of exercise for anxiety.

How can exercise help my anxiety?

There is good research showing that physical exercise improves physical and mental health, including anxiety and depression. People who exercise are less likely to have an anxiety disorder, and exercise naturally increases some of the brain proteins that help us learn that we are safe. Exercise appears to help with anxiety regardless of the causes or triggers of the anxiety, so it can be effectively applied to a range of anxiety-related problems, such as panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

But I'm working with a therapist or taking medication, so why exercise as well?

Exercise has been shown to provide added benefit to medication or psychological treatments. One study of people with anxiety disorders showed that combining cognitive behaviour therapy with at least 150 minutes of walking per week resulted in better treatment outcomes compared to a group who did not increase their exercise. Exercise also has the advantages of having no side effects, and of being free and highly accessible. You also don't need a pay health practitioner to exercise – you can just do it whenever and wherever you wish!

But I don't like gyms!

If you like attending a gym, then great! But gyms don't suit everybody, and if they aren't your thing then there are heaps of ways to exercise! Studies that have investigated the impact of exercise on anxiety have looked at various types of exercise (e.g., brisk walking, running, swimming, cycling, and yoga) and all have benefits. So find an activity that you enjoy and get started!



Dancing classes, hiking, ball games, skipping, rock climbing, yoga, hula hooping, team sports, boxercise, trampolining, cycling, martial arts, group fitness classes, taking a pet for a walk, bowling, swimming, Zumba, workout videos, kayaking...the list is endless. You just need to find an activity that you can regularly fit into your routine. Start small and work your way up as you

enjoy the benefits of increasing fitness and energy.

You might notice opportunities to get active in small ways throughout your day, such as taking the stairs rather than the lift, parking as far away from your office as possible, hosting walking meetings, and dancing around the house like nobody is watching while doing your chores. Some people find that combining exercise with social interests or hobbies that they do regularly helps exercise to become a habit. Exercising with other people also provides some extra motivation (for the times when you may not feel like exercising), and can have the added benefit of enjoyable social interaction.



How much exercise do I need to do?

To improve physical and mental health, the World Health Organization recommends adults should exercise between 75–150 minutes a week, depending on the intensity of the exercise. There is some evidence that higher intensity exercise is more effective than lower intensity exercise, but it can also be harder to stick with, so the most important thing is that you exercise in a way that can be maintained over time.



Set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely goals, such as a particular number of steps or distance to cover per day. The best goal is the one that gets you moving – so think about what will work for you.

Okay, so how can I get started?

By making the decision to exercise more, you've already taken the biggest step towards your health and well-being. Decide what activity interests you most, then take the steps required to get started. Call your friend or the sports club to make the arrangements. Put on your runners. Walk out the door. And get moving! Action often needs to come before motivation – once you start moving it will be easier to continue. Ultimately, the most powerful motivation will need to come from within – consider why you have decided to make this change in your life, and what you stand to gain. Keep the image of your new future in mind as you take steps towards better health and well-being.