

Medicine for Your Mind: Movement and Physical Activity

A significant amount of research has clearly demonstrated that exercise and staying physically active in general can significantly improve mood and help reduce the symptoms of both depression and anxiety. Indeed, a large scale study published in August 2016 provided some interesting evidence for this by examining what happens when active people are denied their customary exercise boost.

Researchers from the University of Mississippi recruited 39 young adults, ages 18 to 35, all of whom regularly exercised moderately or vigorously for at least 150 minutes a week before the start of the study. Two-thirds of them were told to stop exercising for a week and to limit walking; the other third, the control group, continued their normal exercise routine. Before and after the intervention, the participants underwent a psychological evaluation. Even after just seven days, the suddenly sedentary group experienced large adverse effects on mood and depression.

Then, after they resumed physical activity for a week, they regained their normal emotional state. Those results are hardly surprising. We have known for many years that physical activity can help improve mood and maintain psychological equilibrium in many ways. Some of these include: reducing stress and anxiety, enhancing sleep, providing a sense of self-efficacy (a belief you can accomplish a task), and enhancing social support (if exercise is done in a group). Take away physical activity, as in this study, and active people show signs of depression and anxiety.

One take-home message is that athletes and consistent exercisers who sustain an injury that prevents them from working out should be aware of the “maladaptive effects” of becoming sedentary and try to counter them by, for instance, finding another form of physical activity.

Applied more broadly, we know that for everyone, physical activity and reduction of sedentary behavior have a combined effect on improving both physical and psychological health. If the benefits of exercise could be distilled into one medication and bottled, it likely would be the best selling and most prescribed medication in history.

Truly, physical activity and exercise is as beneficial for the area “north of your shoulders” as it is for the areas “south of your shoulders”.