

EXERCISE CAN HELP CONTROL STRESS

People who exercise regularly will tell you they feel better. Some will say it's because chemicals called neurotransmitters, which are produced in the brain, are stimulated during exercise. Since it's believed that neurotransmitters mediate people's moods and emotions, they can make you feel better and less stressed.

While there's no scientific evidence to conclusively support the neurotransmitter theory, there is plenty to show that exercise provides stress-relieving benefits.

There are four ways in which exercise controls stress:

- **Exercise can help you feel less anxious**—Exercise is being prescribed in clinical settings to help treat nervous tension. Following a session of exercise, clinicians have measured a decrease in electrical activity of tensed muscles. People are often less jittery and hyperactive after an exercise session.
- **Exercise can relax you**—One exercise session generates 90 to 120 minutes of relaxation response. Some people call this post-exercise euphoria or endorphin response. Many neurotransmitters, not just endorphins, are involved. The important thing, though, is not what they're called, but what they do: They improve your mood and leave you relaxed.
- **Exercise can make you feel better about yourself**—Think about those times when you've been physically active. Haven't you felt better about yourself? That feeling of

self-worth contributes to stress relief.

- **Exercise can make you eat better**—People who exercise regularly tend to eat more nutritious food. And it's no secret that good nutrition helps your body manage stress better.

It's Time to Get Started

Now that you know exercise can make a big difference in controlling stress, make some time for regular physical activity. We'll help you get started by listing three activities you can choose from:

- **Aerobic activity**—All it takes is 20 minutes, six to seven days a week. Twenty minutes won't carve a big chunk out of your day, but it will significantly improve your ability to control stress.
- **Yoga**—In yoga or yoga-type activities, your mind relaxes progressively as your body increases its amount of muscular work. Studies have shown that when large muscle groups repeatedly contract and relax, the brain receives a signal to release specific neurotransmitters, which in turn make you feel relaxed and more alert.
- **Recreational sports**—Play tennis, racquetball, volleyball or squash. These games

require the kind of vigorous activity that rids your body of stress-causing adrenaline and other hormones.

Not Just Any Exercise Will Do

Don't try exercising in your office. Outdoors or away from the office is the best place to find a stress-free environment. Even a corporate fitness center can trigger too many work-related thoughts for some people.

Stay away from overcrowded classes. If you work surrounded by people, a big exercise class may be counterproductive. Solo exercise may be more relaxing for you. If, however, you work alone, you may enjoy the social benefit of exercising in a group. A lot depends on your personality and what causes stress for you.

Don't skip a chance to exercise. Take a break every 90 minutes and you'll be doing yourself a favor. Ninety-minute intervals are a natural work-break period. And four 10-minute exercise breaks will burn about as many calories as a solid 40-minute session. Work-break exercises can be as simple as walking or climbing stairs, stretching or doing calisthenics.

Controlling stress comes down to making the time to exercise. You're worth it!

Additional Resource

American Psychological Association—Exercise Helps Keep Your Psyche Fit: www.apa.org/releases/exercise.html

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org/GetFit and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts™



©2009 American Council on Exercise®

To obtain reprint permission contact the American Council on Exercise®