



## **"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Physical Activity**

### **The psychological benefits of physical activity: An active body keeps a healthy mind**

Healthy living involves many things including daily exercise, eating healthy and well-balanced meals, managing stress, and getting a good night's rest. Physical activity is a very important part of maintaining both physical and psychological health.

Research shows that physical activity has important psychological benefits. For example, exercise can improve your mood and help you feel more confident and competent. It can help prevent and manage depression and anxiety, increase energy, reduce stress, and improve mental alertness and stamina.

Some kinds of physical activity like team sports provide a social support network which can have lots of benefits including friendships, improved mood and a better quality of life.

### **What type of physical activity and how much do I need to do to feel better?**

There is not one specific formula of physical activity that works for everyone. Many studies have shown that including aerobic activities (i.e. activities such as running or bicycling that condition the heart and lungs to meet the body's increased need for oxygen) and weight resistance in a physical activity routine is important for fitness.

However, the duration, frequency, and type of physical activity depend on the individual's current level of fitness and fitness goals. It is generally suggested that individuals should do thirty minutes of moderate exercise such as brisk walking, three to five times per week.

Improvements in mental health however can come from any form of physical activity whether it is aerobic or non-aerobic in nature and whether it is done all at once or in small spurts. Examples include gardening, golf, walking the dog, playing sports, etc.

Many people say they "feel better" after regular exercise, regardless of the type of activity. We are likely to keep doing things that we enjoy, that are easy to fit into our daily routines, and that leave us feeling good.

### **I don't know where to start: The importance of goal setting in physical activity**

When choosing the right type of physical activity for you, it is important to set realistic goals and give yourself the time necessary to achieve the goals. Many people start out with unrealistic expectations.





For example, they want to lose weight in too short a period of time or they exercise too often and for too long periods of time. If you set a goal you cannot meet, you can end up feeling disappointed, ineffective, and you are more likely to give up. Set goals that you can easily achieve and increase the goals slowly.

Changes in health (e.g. weight loss, improved cardiovascular fitness) can take time so it is important to set behavioural or performance goals against which to measure your success.

Examples of behavioural goals might be the number of flights of stairs climbed per day or the number of walks per week. Try to make your goals specific (e.g., I will walk 2 kilometres three times per week).

If your goals are too general (e.g., I will walk more) they are difficult to measure and provide less motivation. Boredom with routine can affect motivation also so variety in your training program can help. If you are unsure of what are your appropriate fitness goals seek help from fitness and/or health professionals.

## **How much and when is it too much? The psychological signs of overtraining**

Many of us lead very busy lives and struggle to manage all our responsibilities. It is important to make taking time for ourselves a priority and to find ways to help you do so.

We all have individual limits for what we can take on physically and mentally. If we take on too much too quickly, training exceeds the ability to adapt and overtraining can occur.

Overtraining is also known as burnout, overwork, or overstress and its signs can be quite varied and include a sudden inability to complete workouts, fatigue, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, mood disturbances (i.e. irritability, depression, apathy/poor attitude towards training, loss of motivation to train, and/or mental exhaustion) and increased susceptibility to injury/illnesses.

The cause of overtraining is usually: not resting enough or doing too much of the same exercise. The longer the overtraining occurs the more rest is required. Therefore, early detection is very important. Your mind and body need time to recover.

If you realize that your workouts are suffering and you have lost interest and energy, it is important to take a break from your routine. Pushing through a period of overtraining instead of taking a rest can lead to significant mental health problems.

## **Where do I go for more information?**

You can get more information about physical activity from the Public Health Agency of Canada at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>.

They also have a physical activity guide that might be helpful to find ways to incorporate physical activity in your life. Additional information can be found on the Health Canada website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>.





Before engaging in physical activity, speak with your family physician to make sure you are healthy. Sometimes exercise can be dangerous to people with certain illnesses or conditions.

For other useful sport and activity related websites visit:

Canadian Heritage at <http://www.pch.gc.ca>.

The Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association at <http://www.cwsa.ca/>.

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

*This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Associations by Dr. Hannah Marchand, University of Ottawa.*

Revised: July 2019

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association  
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3  
Tel: 613-237-2144  
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657

