



**By Robin Weiss Director of Fitness**

## **Exercise Offers Mental As Well As Physical Benefits**

You've heard it time and time again. But, I'll say it again anyway because it's that important:

Stay on a consistent exercise program throughout your life. Don't view exercise as a temporary means to an end – such as weight loss. Exercise is part of a healthy life, and while it does help you lose and maintain weight, it also helps prevent health problems, from heart disease to depression. All it takes is 20-60 minutes, most days of the week

We all know and love the physical benefits of exercise. For example, research has shown that 3 or 4 brisk 10-minute walks a day can help lower our blood pressure. But, exercise can give us so much more.

### **Exercise Can:**

- ✓ Reduce stress by helping to dissipate the lactic acid that accumulates in our blood
- ✓ Sharpen our mind by increasing the amount of oxygen available for our brain
- ✓ Ease built-up muscular tension
- ✓ Strengthen and stimulate our heart and lungs
- ✓ Stimulate our nervous system
- ✓ Increase our production of endorphins -- those substances which create a sense of well-being and increase our body's resistance to pain
- ✓ Stimulate the release of epinephrine, a hormone that creates a sense of happiness and excitement
- ✓ Increase deep sleep, as our brain compensates for physical stress

## **Let's look at some specific examples**

### **Exercise Keeps Our Mind Sharp**

A recent study from the National Institutes of Health found that the most sedentary people are 2.5 times more likely to develop dementia than regular exercisers. Dementia is a condition of declining mental abilities that affects our memory, personality, verbal abilities, and skills such as driving a car.

Research has also shown that as little as 3 hours of power walking -- a pace slightly greater than 3 miles per hour -- a week increases the number of neurons in our brain and

the connections between them. This can result in improved memory, multitasking ability, and concentration.

According to another 6-year research study that monitored the mental health and exercise habits of more than 1700 healthy seniors with no signs of cognitive problems or dementia, healthy seniors who exercise regularly have a 30% to 40% lower risk of developing Alzheimer's and other types of dementia.

These results are part of a growing body of evidence that physical activity helps sustain mental faculties. As little as 15 minutes 3 days a week of exercise or a short, brisk walk everyday makes a difference.

### **Exercise Makes Us Feel Good**

If you're feeling a little blue, get moving. Physical activity changes our brain chemistry and positively influences our mood. It also triggers the release of endorphins, which act on our brain as natural pain relievers.

Studies have shown that aerobic exercise increases the serotonin (aka, the feel-good chemical) levels in our brains. John Bartholomew, PhD, a study author and Professor of Kinesiology, suggests that the sense of accomplishment we get from knowing that we've done something good for ourselves further enhances the feel-good boost we get from exercise. Exercising can also boost our confidence. As we start working out and getting stronger, our sense of strength in other aspects of our lives naturally improves.

We've known for sometime that exercise can chase away the blues. But, in the past few years, researchers have discovered that just a 30-minute walk can give a temporary lift from even major depression.

Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin asked 40 men and women recently diagnosed with major depression to walk on a treadmill or rest quietly in a comfortable chair. After 30 minutes, both groups had fewer negative feelings, such as anger, fatigue, and tension. But, only the exercisers said they actually felt good. The walkers showed an 85% increase in vigor or liveliness, and a 40% improvement in well-being. This lift lasted about an hour.

The last thing we should do is lie around and sulk when we're feeling down -- it's totally counterproductive. We have the power to change your lives, so let's get up and do it! I can't think of a better way to reap the benefits of exercise than by working out in the atmosphere of support and friendship available at **Kathy's Healthclub**. I'll see you there!!

References: SparkPeople.com 2005, 2008; EverydayHealth.com 12/07; MSNBC 2006; USA Today 2006, Prevention 2006