How Exercise Supports Mental Wellbeing

We often hear that exercise is important for our bodies, but it's just as important for our minds. Moving regularly doesn't just help us stay fit; it can influence how we feel, think and cope with everyday challenges.

Research shows that people who are physically active tend to report better moods, lower levels of anxiety, and stronger overall mental wellbeing. Exercise is linked to increases in brain chemicals that help regulate mood and motivation, may help reduce long-term inflammation, and supports communication between the gut and the brain. It also helps the brain stay flexible, which can make it easier to manage stress and emotions over time.

Exercise can also bring social and emotional benefits. Activities done with friends or in groups can reduce feelings of loneliness, boost confidence and create a sense of belonging. Whatever the activity, regular movement is a simple and effective way to support mental wellbeing.

How exercise supports gut health

Our gut and brain are closely connected. The bacteria and other helpful microbes living in our digestive system, known as the gut microbiome, influence mood, focus and emotional balance.

Exercise helps keep the gut microbiome healthy and diverse. This supports digestion, helps reduce inflammation and supports healthy brain function. Even gentle movement can make a difference.

Spending time outdoors can also help. Green spaces support relaxation, vitamin D production, better sleep, and the simple enjoyment of being outdoors, all of which are linked to mental wellbeing.

Reducing long-term inflammation

Inflammation is the body's natural response to injury or infection. Short-term (acute) inflammation is helpful, but long-term (chronic) inflammation can affect both physical and mental health.

Regular exercise helps the body manage this long-term inflammation. Both aerobic exercise (like running, swimming or cycling) and strength-based exercise (like weightlifting or bodyweight workouts) can support the body in keeping inflammation in check. Over time, this helps protect mood, energy and overall wellbeing.

Building resilience to stress

Have you ever noticed feeling calmer after exercise? That's because movement triggers the release of endorphins, natural chemicals that lift mood and reduce discomfort. Exercise also boosts serotonin and dopamine, brain chemicals that regulate mood, motivation and reward.

Exercise also increases a protein called BDNF, which helps the brain grow, adapt, and cope with stress. Regular movement makes it easier to manage life's challenges and strengthens emotional resilience over time.

Social and Emotional Benefits

Exercise isn't just about the body and brain; it also helps us connect with others. Team sports, clubs, or group activities can:

- Reduce feelings of loneliness
- Boost self-confidence and self-esteem
- Create a sense of belonging

For children and teenagers, social interaction through exercise is particularly important. Finding activities they enjoy with friends makes movement fun, motivating and easier to stick with.

Supporting brain health

Exercise helps the brain grow and stay flexible. This is especially important for young people, whose brains are still developing. Regular physical activity:

- Supports memory, learning and problem-solving
- Helps the brain adapt and form new connections (neuroplasticity)
- Protects brain structure and function over time

Activities like yoga, tai chi, dance or team sports also encourage body awareness and emotional regulation, supporting mental health in a holistic way.

Why exercise matters for young people

Children and teenagers benefit from regular movement in many ways. Active young people tend to:

- Feel less anxious or low in mood
- Sleep better, which supports emotional balance
- Have improved memory, focus and learning

The key is enjoyment. Movement doesn't have to be structured or competitive. Activities such as skateboarding, dancing, swimming and ice skating all count! Encouraging children to find activities they enjoy helps create lifelong habits that support both mental and physical wellbeing.

Making exercise part of everyday life

Exercise isn't about perfection. Recent research has shown as little as 15 minutes per day help support better mood. Everyday activities like gardening, walking to the bus stop or even

housework, count toward your weekly activity and contribute to the same mental health benefits. The most important thing is to find activities that feel enjoyable and sustainable.

Moving your body is one of the simplest, most reliable ways to support your mental wellbeing – and it's never too late to start. Every small bit of movement counts!

Glossary

Gut–brain connection – The communication between the gut and brain, which affects mood, thinking, and emotional wellbeing.

Gut microbiome – The community of bacteria and microbes in the digestive system that help digestion, immunity, and mental health.

Neurotransmitters – Chemicals in the brain that send messages between nerve cells. Important ones for mood include:

- **Serotonin** – regulates mood, sleep, and appetite
- **Dopamine** – helps with motivation, focus, and reward
- **Endorphins** – improve mood and reduce discomfort

Inflammation – The body's natural response to injury or infection. Long-term inflammation can affect physical and mental health.

BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor) – A protein that helps the brain grow, adapt, and cope with stress. Exercise increases BDNF levels.

Neuroplasticity – The brain's ability to form new connections and adapt, helping with learning and emotional regulation.

Microbes – Tiny living organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, and viruses. Many microbes live in our gut and help with digestion, immunity, and even mental wellbeing.

Aerobic exercise – Activities that get your heart and lungs working harder, like walking, running, swimming, or cycling.

Strength training / resistance exercise – Activities that make your muscles work harder, like lifting weights, push-ups, or squats.

Chronic stress – Stress that lasts a long time and can affect your mood, sleep, and overall health.

Mood – How we feel emotionally, like happy, sad, calm, or anxious.

Emotional regulation – The ability to manage your feelings and respond to situations in a balanced way.

Cognitive function – How well your brain thinks, remembers, solves problems, and focuses.

Vitamin D – A vitamin our bodies make when exposed to sunlight, important for bones, immune system, and mood.

Green spaces – Outdoor areas with plants, trees, or grass, like parks, gardens, or fields.

Physical activity – Any movement that uses energy, from structured exercise to everyday chores.