

Study: Exercise should be prescribed more often for depression, anxiety

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Exercise is a magic drug for many people with depression and anxiety disorders, according to researchers who analyzed numerous studies, and it should be more widely prescribed by mental health care providers.

"Exercise has been shown to have tremendous benefits for [mental health](#)," says Jasper Smits, director of the Anxiety Research and Treatment Program at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. "The more therapists who are trained in exercise therapy, the better off patients will be."

The traditional treatments of [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) and pharmacotherapy don't reach everyone who needs them, says Smits, an

associate professor of psychology.

"Exercise can fill the gap for people who can't receive traditional therapies because of cost or lack of access, or who don't want to because of the perceived social stigma associated with these treatments," he says. "Exercise also can supplement traditional treatments, helping patients become more focused and engaged."

Smits and Michael Otto, psychology professor at Boston University, presented their findings to researchers and mental [health care providers](#) March 6 at the Anxiety Disorder Association of America's annual conference in Baltimore.

Their workshop was based on their therapist guide "[Exercise for Mood and Anxiety Disorders](#)," with accompanying patient workbook (Oxford University Press, September 2009).

The guide draws on dozens of population-based studies, clinical studies and meta-analytic reviews that demonstrate the efficacy of exercise programs, including the authors' meta-analysis of exercise interventions for mental health and study on reducing anxiety sensitivity with exercise.

"Individuals who exercise report fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression, and lower levels of stress and anger," Smits says. "Exercise appears to affect, like an antidepressant, particular neurotransmitter systems in the brain, and it helps patients with [depression](#) re-establish positive behaviors. For patients with [anxiety disorders](#), exercise reduces their fears of fear and related bodily sensations such as a racing heart and rapid breathing."

After patients have passed a health assessment, Smits says, they should work up to the public health dose, which is 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous-intensity

activity.

At a time when 40 percent of Americans are sedentary, he says, mental health care providers can serve as their patients' exercise guides and motivators.

"Rather than emphasize the long-term health benefits of an exercise program — which can be difficult to sustain — we urge providers to focus with their patients on the immediate benefits," he says. "After just 25 minutes, your mood improves, you are less stressed, you have more energy — and you'll be motivated to exercise again tomorrow. A bad mood is no longer a barrier to exercise; it is the very reason to exercise."

Smits says health care providers who prescribe exercise also must give their patients the tools they need to succeed, such as the daily schedules, problem-solving strategies and goal-setting featured in his guide for therapists.

"Therapists can help their patients take specific, achievable steps," he says. "This isn't about working out five times a week for the next year. It's about exercising for 20 or 30 minutes and feeling better today."

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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