

Managing anxiety on the run

March 16 2011, By Sara Peach

The next time you're nervously prepping for an exam or a crucial job interview, consider this: Taking a break to exercise may help you stay calm and focused as you complete your big task.

Exercise is an effective short-term treatment for anxiety, said Jonathan Abramowitz, PhD, director of the Anxiety and Stress Disorders Clinic at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In fact, research suggests that – at least for temporary anxiety – exercise can be just as effective a coping tool as medication and therapy, he said.

Although it has a negative reputation, anxiety is actually a normal emotion, Abramowitz said: “Anxiety is our friend.”

It evolved in our ancestors as a response to danger, such as a nearby predator. When you perceive a threat, you begin sweating, your heart rate increases and your breathing accelerates. That is your body's way of preparing to fight or run away, a response called “fight or flight.”

Of course, many modern dangers – such as a bad grade or an unsatisfactory job interview – can't be thwarted by fighting or fleeing. In those cases, you may be left with only the unpleasant effects of anxiety, such as sweaty palms and a pounding heart.

Exercise can help you manage anxiety by distracting you from your worries and giving you a feeling of accomplishment, Abramowitz said. It also causes your body to release endorphins, pain-relieving chemicals that suffuse you with feelings of well-being.

TIPS

- Don't do too much, too soon. When you start a new exercise routine, set goals that are reasonable for your ability. You're less likely to injure yourself – and thus cause yourself additional distress – if you break your sessions into small, frequent increments.
- How much exercise does it take to manage anxiety? That depends, Abramowitz said. If you're already in good physical condition, try aiming for thirty minutes of exercise, three to five days a week. But generally, you'll need to exercise just long enough to have a true break from your normal environment.
- When should you see a doctor? About 40 million American adults have anxiety disorders, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Although [exercise](#) can help you manage anxiety in the short term, it's not an effective long-term treatment for anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks or phobias, Abramowitz said. If you spend more than half of your time worrying about something, or if your anxiety doesn't diminish within a week or so, you should talk with a professional.
- Avoid taking benzodiazepines, often sold under the names Xanax, Valium, Klonopin. Those are quick-acting medicines that dampen the fight-or-flight response, and they can be habit-forming, Abramowitz said: "They're not a long-term fix."
- Don't hesitate to seek help. A therapist can help you learn additional techniques for managing your anxiety without medicine, Abramowitz said. "People should try cognitive-behavior therapy with a well-trained mental health professional before they take medicine for [anxiety](#)," he said, "because these problems are very treatable."

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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