

Tackling anxiety, stress and mood slumps by staying physically active

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Credit: The City University of New York

Before Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC/CUNY) transitioned to distance learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rob Gizis, a web designer in the Public Affairs office, would ride a Citi

Bike four miles from his Prospect Heights, Brooklyn apartment to his office at Fiterman Hall in lower Manhattan.

In addition to taking in majestic views of Manhattan as he crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, Gizis said his commute was invigorating.

"Generally speaking, when I do ride, I've not only got more energy, I have a bit more bounce throughout the rest of the day," said Gizis.

But now that Gizis is working at home, it's been challenging to carve out time for a bike ride either before or after work—and he is not alone. The [daily routines](#) of thousands of BMCC faculty, staff and students were upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sense of isolation from working and attending class at home can result in added stress and anxiety. One healthy stress coping mechanism is to make the extra effort to keep physically active.

Exercise is an anxiety buster

"One of the worst things you can do right now, is stay in the house staring at the walls or a computer screen," said Michael Cullen, a certified trainer who oversees BMCC's fitness center and recreation programs. "The best thing you can do for yourself is to get up and say, let's go take a walk or maybe a light jog."

The payoffs of [exercise](#) are tremendous. Numerous scientific reports show that keeping physically active has [health benefits](#) beyond improving [muscle tone](#) and putting pep in a person's step.

Exercise in almost any form not only reduces stress it can enhance mood. Being active boosts feel-good neurotransmitters or endorphins. And any [physical activity](#) that takes a person away from sitting at a desk all day long can serve as a healthy distraction from anxiety.

Cullen says he and his wife have gone out for daily walks—a minimum of 2.5 miles daily— since the onset of the pandemic. The wear and tear to the ankles and knees from walking, which is an aerobic exercise, is minimal, he said. Over time, the cumulative impact on the body from daily walks is very good for the body and mind.

"A nice walk through the park looking at the trees or other sites in your neighborhood will get your blood circulating, your heart and lungs pumping and improve your mood and your spirit," said Cullen.

For the more ambitious, bicycling and running as well as weight and resistance exercises such as yoga, martial arts or Pilates are all beneficial to mind and body.

"If you need more muscle to compensate with the physical activity you're undertaking, the body will build new and stronger muscle mass that can push or pull greater amounts of weight and endure for longer periods of time," said Cullen. "But if you don't exercise at all, the body won't maintain the existing muscle mass you're not using."

The same is true for the heart and lungs. If a person is not in motion, the heart, lungs and circulatory system function at a lower level, and eventually, they get used to it, says Cullen.

"They won't be accustomed to delivering blood and oxygen to the muscles and brain at a higher rate," said Cullen.

When a person exercises, the body demands natural hormones and steroids which has a psychological effect. But, when a person stops exercising, they might be more susceptible to mood slumps.

Explore your exercise options

"There are ways to add spice to exercise routines and fight the slumps by switching things up. One way is to seek out a partner to walk, ride or workout with," said Cullen.

Another tactic is to try out new ways of exercising. Maybe ride a different bicycle or stop biking and switch to running or vice versa. Walkers can choose a different path or street and take in new sights and scenery.

"I'm also a big proponent of martial arts," said Cullen. "You can do beginner martial arts exercises at home by yourself. It's as simple as going to You Tube and finding a beginner level course where you can learn katas, forms and patterns."

Fundamentally, it's all about staying active in one form or another according to Cullen.

BMCC Health Education Professor Jason Bravo concurs, adding that in addition reducing stress and increasing metabolism, exercise provides a sense of resilience and accomplishment that can carry over into other aspects of a person's life.

"I'm a huge proponent of people exercising every day, for at least a brief period," said Bravo. "It facilitates better circulation, improved delivery and utilization of ingested nutrients, improved range of motion, improved digestion and an immediate sense of well-being that eventually comes to fruition, with consistency."

Bravo said people should try to incorporate some light resistance exercises into their routines, as the consistent, full contraction of muscles can trigger a cascade of anabolic hormones that improve the performance and integrity of muscles, along with potentially decreasing joint friction.

"In simple terms, squeezing your muscles leaves tone in your muscles which can improve spinal and bone alignment and in general, will make you feel better," said Bravo.

Search for free or reduced-price yoga classes online

Teacher Education Professor Cara Kronen has been teaching yoga for 15 years. She first discovered the ancient Indian practice when her mother took her to a class after a bad car accident. At first, Kronen wasn't the biggest fan of the practice.

"Despite hating yoga classes at first, I kept going back," said Kronen. "I could tell this was something my body and heart really needed and slowly I could see the profound changes in my mental health and overall well-being."

Since coming to BMCC, Kronen has been offering Yoga for Teachers as a professional development program for K-12 educators in New York City. She says there is more to yoga than stretches, poses and physical postures.

"Yoga practices can include focus on mindful meditation, breath, selfless service, and ritual cleansing, amongst other things," said Kronen. "Yoga teaches us to focus on the present, be in the here and now, not the past or the future. When you're not focused on what was or will be, you let go of anxiety and fears. The physical practice is what helps keep your mind focused on the present moment."

Although yoga has been mass marketed in the United States and has become pricey and exclusionary, most yoga studios offer community classes for free or at reduced rates, says Kronen.

"Living in the age of COVID has pushed many teachers to offer yoga

classes online for much lower rates or for free, on YouTube or Facebook Live," said Kronen. "You just have to be committed and open-minded."

Provided by The City University of New York

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