



Timely Information for Personal Success

The Role of Exercise in Mental Health

By Mike Jacquart

I am not a clinician or a dietitian, but I do know from my own experiences that exercise plays a role in our mental health – perhaps an important one. I suffered from depression a good portion of the past year, but even during my darkest days I was often successful at finding time to exercise – more specifically, riding my bicycle.

My line of thinking was, there were a LOT of things out of my control, but one thing I DID have control over, was whether or not to ride my bike. I felt that if I did not accomplish *anything* else that particular day, I could at the very least say that I got some exercise on my bike. I had a number of bike routes; the shortest was about 3 miles, while my longest was around 14. I'd say I averaged 5 miles a day, usually 4-5 days a week.

The Huffington Post lists 13 mental health benefits of exercise at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/27/mental-health-benefits-exercise_n_2956099.html. I don't particularly agree with all of them, but I definitely concur with some, namely:

❖ **Exercise reduces stress.** Many studies allude to this. For one thing, exercise increases concentrations of norepinephrine, a chemical that can moderate the brain's response to stress. As much stress as most of us seem to be under in today's fast-paced society, it would seem that stress-reduction alone is a good reason to exercise.

❖ **Enjoy the great outdoors.** I am very fortunate to live in a small community where a quarter-mile or so out of town, I can be biking near the woods and often sight animals such as deer, turkey, and others. I also like riding a stationary bike indoors when it's cold, rainy, or snowy out, but taking in the great outdoors is definitely one of the best parts about bike riding. Let's face it, for Northerners like myself, indoor exercise alone can get rather dull until the temps warm up this time of year. One more benefit: You notice a LOT more of your surroundings when you're going much slower, on a bike, as opposed to whizzing by on the same roads with your car.

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Healthy Recipe: Summer Fruit Sizzle

INGREDIENTS:

- ½ teaspoon butter
- ½ cup blueberries
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- Dash of nutmeg

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION:

- Calories per serving: 134
- Carbohydrates: 32 g.
- Sodium: 6 mg.
- Fat: 1 g.
- Saturated fat: 1 g.
- Fiber: 1 g.

DIRECTIONS:

❶ In a small skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the fruit and cook until it begins to soften slightly, about 2 to 3 minutes.

❷ Add maple syrup and nutmeg. Bring to a boil and then remove from heat.

❸ Serve over waffles, pancakes, ice cream or frozen yogurt.

Serving size: About ¼ cup.

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❖ **Tap into creativity.** Feeling uninspired in your cubicle? Sometimes a break in routine such as going for a walk or bike ride, for starters, can relax yourself sufficiently enough that ideas that were simply not coming to light sitting at a keyboard, just might pop into your brain when you're out and about, doing something.

❖ **Boost happy chemicals.** As I mentioned, I think this is *THE* most important, and yet overlooked, reason to exercise! "Exercise releases endorphins, which create feelings of happiness and euphoria. Studies have shown that exercise can even alleviate symptoms among the clinically depressed. For this reason, doctors recommend that people suffering from depression or anxiety (or those who are just feeling blue) pencil in plenty of gym time. In some cases, exercise can

be just as effective as antidepressant pills in treating depression." (*Italics mine; the effects of exercise may vary widely from person to person.*)

❖ **Don't worry about not exercising a lot.** Some people get the notion that if they're not big exercise enthusiasts, exercising isn't worth the time. Not true! Studies have shown that exercising for just 30 minutes several times a week can boost overall mood.

So there you have it. Get out there and exercise – the benefits are mental as well as physical. If a big book reader and Internet surfer like me can do it, *anyone* can! Like a lot of things, it's often a case of mind over matter, and *your mind matters*. ■

Mike Jacquart is the publisher and editor of "Employee Assistance Report" and a frequent blogger and LinkedIn contributor.

