

Exercise Banishes “Blues” from Gray Days



Call it the doldrums, cabin fever or an instinct to hibernate: the shorter, grayer days of fall and winter can sometimes get you down. Cold weather is inevitable, but the “blues,” known as SAD (seasonal affective disorder), do not have to be! In fact, a dose of regular physical activity may boost your mood. Researchers have found that even people with mild to moderate clinical depression can gain relief through exercise. For some people, it is as effective as psychotherapy and antidepressant medications.

Scientists surmise that exercise stimulates the activity of mood-related brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Mayo Clinic experts say it “may also boost feel-good endorphins,” reduce muscle tension, improve sleep and reduce levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress.

While more rigorous activities, such as running, seem to produce the best results, more moderate exercises, including strength training, aerobics and low-intensity workouts, such as walking, dancing, swimming or gardening, are all effective mood lifters. Optimally, 30-minute moderate-intensity sessions 3 to 5 times a week are enough to make a difference, in some cases cutting depression symptoms by nearly half. If it is difficult to get started, shorter amounts of activity—even 10 to 15 minutes at a time—can improve mood.

Any activity you enjoy is a good place to start, especially since depression affects motivation. The payoffs will be worth it. Not only can exercise improve your mood but it is also good for weight management and strengthens the heart, lowers blood pressure, and improves muscle tone and strength.

Exercise is not necessarily a substitute for medical treatment of depression, a clinical illness that can undermine your health, relationships and quality of life. But if you just suffer from seasonal “blues,” consult us for a discussion of your exercise options and a program designed just for you.