



Management Matters

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Instructor Training

BY BARBARA A. BREHM, ED.D.

Exercise and Depression

Exercise can help your clients with depression, but know your professional boundaries.

RESEARCH CONTINUES to support the positive emotional health benefits of exercise for reducing symptoms of depression.^{2,4} Regular physical activity may promote a more positive mood and better energy level, and increase a person's resistance to stress. Best of all, exercise may prevent relapse into another round of depression for people prone to this disorder.

In one study,¹ subjects suffering from depression were divided into three groups: aerobic exercise only, medication only, and combination of exercise and medication. Symptom improvement was similar for all three groups. This means that exercise was as effective as medication for the treatment of depression.

But after 10 months, the results became even more interesting. The subjects who exercised, with or without medication, experienced significantly lower rates of symptom recurrence. This is especially good news, since depression recurs for many people.

What is depression?

Depression is a mental health disorder marked by both mental and physical symptoms. Symptoms of depression vary from person to person. In general, depression is diagnosed when people experience a number of symptoms, including prolonged feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness; loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed; and unexplained changes in sleep, appetite and weight. Depression may be severe or mild, and last for weeks or years.

Depression is a debilitating disease that interferes with every aspect of a person's life. The combination of fatigue, negative mood and inability to feel pleasure result in a downward spiral of doing less and

feeling worse. The best thing for people who are depressed is to get out and do things, but people with depression often have difficulty summoning the desire or energy to do the things that might help them feel better — like exercise. While regular physical activity helps reduce symptoms of depression, people with depression face huge emotional hurdles when attempting to stick to an exercise program.

What kind of exercise is best?

Aerobic exercise is generally recommended for the relief of depression, but almost any type of physical activity can be helpful. If clients have specific recommendations from their healthcare providers, help them follow their doctor's orders. As usual, adherence is more important than an ideal exercise program that is not followed. Help your clients begin slowly and build gradually. The general recommendation of 30 minutes of aerobic activity per day most days of the week appears to be effective.⁴

A comprehensive treatment program

Clients exercising to relieve depression may also be taking medications and following other therapeutic recommendations. Never suggest that medications are not needed! If discontinuing or reducing medication becomes a treatment goal, then your client must work closely with his or her physician on this process.

Your scope of practice

While it is appropriate for fitness professionals to promote the positive emotional health benefits of physical activity, make sure you do not slip into the role of therapist. Personal trainers are especially likely to be invited into their clients' personal lives, as conversation

develops during workouts. But always maintain your professional distance, and monitor your level of involvement; never diagnose illness or recommend treatment.

When clients complain, you can certainly listen with a sympathetic ear. Clients may even share the fact that they are exercising with you because they hope to reduce symptoms of depression. That is fine. You may discuss with them how studies have found that exercise may help reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and depression for many people, keeping the focus on general research findings. If clients convey that depression is interfering with their ability to function, suggest that they seek professional psychological guidance.

Many trainers have had the sense that certain clients were beginning to lean too heavily on them. Some have even gradually fallen into a "helping" relationship, where clients call them at all hours when they feel stressed or lonely. It is natural to want to be helpful, but realize that you are not helping if you keep clients from getting professional aid. Talk the situation over with your manager, if you work at a fitness center. And don't be afraid to discontinue your relationship with a troubled client if you are getting in over your head. **FM**

REFERENCES

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Depression: Lifestyle Helps Treatment and Prevention

BY BARBARA A. BREHM, ED.D.

Regular exercise can help lessen the feelings of depression.

DEPRESSION IS a complicated disorder with both physical and psychological symptoms. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 10 percent of adults in the U.S. suffer from depression each year. Symptoms of depression vary from person to person. In general, depression is diagnosed when people experience a number of symptoms, including prolonged feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness; loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed; and unexplained changes in sleep, appetite and weight. Depression may be severe or mild, and last for weeks or years.

Depression is a debilitating disease that interferes with every aspect of a person's life. The combination of fatigue, negative mood and inability to feel pleasure result in a downward spiral of doing less and feeling worse. The best thing for people who are depressed is to get out and do things, but people with depression often have difficulty summoning the desire or energy to do the things that might help them feel better.

Holistic treatment enhances quality of life

Many treatments help reduce symptoms of depression, and medical care for this disorder has improved greatly over the past few decades. People experiencing symptoms of depression should discuss their symptoms with their healthcare providers. Because depression has a high rate of recurrence, people should do everything they can to develop a depression-resistant lifestyle. The good news is that factors that reduce the risk of depression also reduce feelings of stress, lower risk of chronic disease and enhance quality of life.

People taking medication for depression should never discontinue it or change dosages without medical supervision. Lifestyle changes complement medication and psychotherapeutic approaches. If you are experiencing depression, work with your

providers to develop a lifelong depression-resistant lifestyle that incorporates the best of medical science and healthful behavior.

Regular physical activity

Research suggests that regular physical activity is as effective as medication in reducing symptoms of depression. Most researchers recommend exercise that is somewhat vigorous, such as brisk walking, running or active sports like basketball or tennis. But studies have also found improvements for people who participated in strength training and yoga. People who are not currently active should begin slowly, build gradually and check with their health providers to discuss any health concerns. A personal trainer can help recommend an exercise program that will be the most convenient and enjoyable for you. Find activities that you enjoy and can do with a friend!

Natural light

Choose activities you can do outdoors, when possible. Find ways to increase your exposure to full-spectrum light, at least 30 minutes per day, preferably the same time each day. People who find they become more depressed with shorter days may experience the most relief from regular light exposure. Light boxes can be helpful if you can't spend time in the sun.

Good nutrition

All of the good advice you have heard for heart-healthy eating applies to depression prevention, as well. Keep your blood sugar and mood on an even keel with regular healthful meals that include plenty of fruits and vegetables. Also, the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish are associated with reduction in depression symptoms.

Enough sleep

Try to get eight hours of sleep per night. If you have sleep problems, follow all the



good advice you have heard for getting a good night's sleep: going to bed and getting up at the same time each day, avoiding stimulants and developing a relaxing bedtime routine.

Monitor and interrupt negative self-talk

People with depression tend to dwell on negative thoughts. They go over and over problems, memories and worries, a process known as rumination. With regular practice, you can learn to develop a mindful awareness of your thoughts, and to interrupt unproductive patterns.

Spend time with friends

It can be difficult to make the effort to get together with friends when you are feeling depressed. Yet, this is the best thing for you, for it helps break the cycle of rumination that worsens depression. Develop ways to spend time with people who lift your spirits. **FM**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Depression. National Institute of Mental Health. www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/depressionmenu.cfm
Ilardi, S.S. Therapeutic Lifestyle Change. www.psych.ku.edu/TLC

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