Anxiety and Exercise

Winter, economic downturns, health issues — sometimes we just worry ourselves sick. There is a way to battle the blues. I was reading one of my wellness blogs recently and the headline was “A Surprising Remedy for Anxiety.” I know people who suffer anxiety and I had to read on. It turns out that strength training was the suggested remedy.

Apparently research says you can get good results from doing a few exercises for a few minutes, just a few times per week. The key is to do exercises that involve your whole body. Do the exercises to the point where you feel your muscles working and you feel yourself breathing deeply. Working out releases endorphins, which help you relax and feel positive. By focusing on the feeling of your muscles and your breath, exercises become a meditation, which trains your mind to focus, be present in your body and let go of other distractions. This is a powerful skill that you can apply when you feel anxious.

Strength training makes stronger muscles and bones and gives you confidence and self-esteem. Something as simple as sets of squats with hands overhead and reverse leg lifts from a push-up or plank position can make a difference. You don’t have to have a gym membership to do these simple exercises. Start from where you are and work to where you can.

So the blog inspired me and got me to wondering whether there was any other research into the idea of exercising to relieve anxiety. It turns out there has been quite a bit on this subject. Research at Princeton University puzzled scientists for a time. On one hand, exercise was known to prompt the creation of new and very excitable brain cells. At the same time, exercise can induce an overall pattern of calm in certain parts of the brain.

Studies in animals showed that physical exercise does create excitable neurons in abundance, especially in the hippocampus, a portion of the brain known to be involved in thinking and emotional responses. But exercise was also found to reduce anxiety in both people and animals.
How can an activity simultaneously create ideal neurological conditions for anxiety and leave practitioners with a deep-rooted calm, the Princeton researchers wondered. Their findings suggest that exercise creates tons of excited neurons in the brain but at the same time it creates large numbers of shushing neurons that release the neurotransmitter GABA, which calms the excitable neurons’ activity, presumably keeping unnecessary anxiety at bay.

The Mayo Clinic, WebMd and the Harvard Men’s Health Watch also support the idea that aerobic and endurance exercise is key for your head. The Harvard Men’s Health Watch newsletter says, “Regular aerobic exercise will bring remarkable changes to your body, your metabolism, your heart, and your spirits. It has a unique capacity to exhilarate and relax, to provide stimulation and calm, to counter depression and dissipate stress. It's a common experience among endurance athletes and has been verified in clinical trials that have successfully used exercise to treat anxiety disorders and clinical depression. If athletes and patients can derive psychological benefits from exercise, so can you.”

So it seems simple weight training or any kind of exercise can have beneficial effects. Try new and different things. You might find something you enjoy doing. Consistency is the key. Carving out 30 minutes a day most days of the week (or at least three) will go far to increase your physical and mental health.

Marsha Munsell is a health, home and family development program assistant for the Cooperative Extension Service, a part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Contact her at 907-474-2429 or mkmunsell@alaska.edu.

- 30 -