

Exercise and Psychological Disorders

By Kent Pegg

Millions of Americans suffer, to some extent, from a psychological disorder. Most prevalent among these are depression and anxiety disorders.

For many years, therapy from psychologists and psychiatrists and medications have been used to treat these disorders. Today, exercise is increasingly being included in the treatment plans for those suffering from these problems.

Numerous studies have been done showing the benefits of exercise. Exercise improves mood, increases self-esteem and provides a general feeling of well being for everyone, but especially for those with psychological disorders.

Depression is the most common mood disorder. Ten to twenty-five percent of women and five to twelve percent of men will experience at least moderate levels of depression at some time during their lives.

Individuals with neurological disorders are even more likely to experience depression. Forty percent of those with Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and Huntington's disease, strokes, or multiple sclerosis experience mood disorders.

Further, a staggering fifteen percent of those who experience depression will attempt suicide during their life. If you are experiencing depression it's important that you check with your physician. Beneficial treatment through psychotherapy and medication is available, and may be appropriate.

Also, consider making exercise a part of your life. Exercise can improve your mood and feeling of well being, and can significantly increase your energy level.

Any exercise is good so if you haven't been working out regularly, start slowly. Walking and light gym workouts with weights are a good place to start.

As your energy level increases, gradually increase your exercise duration and intensity. Over time, add aerobic activity like elliptical trainers and treadmills and increase your weight lifting.

Be prepared for some setbacks and difficulties as you begin your exercise program. Depression can deplete motivation so get help to develop a structured program and seek support and encouragement from family, friends, and fellow gym-goers.

Since many people who suffer from depression also have problems with chronic exhaustion, be patient and give your exercise program time to work. You'll be surprised at the energy boost that will occur in time.

Anxiety disorders are another psychological disorder that affects many individuals. The American Council on Exercise divides anxiety disorders into four general types: generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder/agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and social phobia.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) affects three to eight percent of the population. GAD is characterized by excessive anxiety and worry about events and situations. Individuals with GAD may experience symptoms of restlessness, lack of energy, muscle soreness from tension, irritability and insomnia.

Panic Disorder produces recurrent panic attacks where a person experiences anxiety, apprehension, terror, an inability to breathe and heart pain. Agoraphobia is the avoidance of places or situations where panic attacks either have occurred or are likely to occur.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder produces recurrent and intrusive obsessions or compulsions in the individuals it affects. The person, while realizing these obsessions or compulsions are irrational, is unable to control them.

Social Anxiety Disorder or Social Phobia produces anxiety to social situations including having to perform in front of other people. Affected individuals typically are forced to avoid the feared situation.

Like depression, the four anxiety disorders are often treated through therapy and/or medication. Also, as with depression, exercise can help.

Exercise will help produce a more relaxed state and decrease anxiety. Aerobic exercise and light weight training are generally best and progress slowly, increasing duration and intensity as allowed.

Get some assistance to develop a highly structured exercise program that emphasizes consistent realization of short-term goals. Since those with anxiety disorders may tire easily, morning exercise may be the best.

Additionally, realize that there will typically be an increase in heart rate and a shortness of breath while participating in exercise. This is normal and, while it should be monitored, is to be expected. Some apprehension is also common with everyone when they begin an exercise program, whether or not they have an anxiety disorder.

If you're experiencing problems with depression or an anxiety disorder, please seek help. Consult the proper medical professionals to see if therapy or medication is right for you.

Also, consider adding a program of regular, structured exercise to your life. I've seen many people significantly improve the quality of their lives and reduce their levels of depression and anxiety through exercise.

A happier, healthier life may be just a few workouts away.

Kent Pegg is a certified personal trainer and the co-owner of the Los Alamos Fitness Center. If you have any questions about the content of this article you can call him at 662-5232.