

REAL LIFE SOLUTIONS

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Walking for a Better State of Mind

How many times have you said, “I’ve got to get out and get some air,” or “I’m going for a walk to clear my head”? You don’t know why, but getting out and getting a little exercise just seems to make you feel better. Well, there may be more truth to that than you know.

Whether you’re experiencing stress, a mild bout of depression or even fighting a serious depressive illness, a good walk might be just the right medicine.

When you’re “stressed,” taking a walk gives you a change of scene and some fresh air. The exercise provides an outlet for tension and nervous energy. It gives you a chance to forget about your problems or if you prefer, to think about them more clearly.

Less obvious is that walking may also be an effective treatment for the symptoms of depression. The National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association (NDMDA) recommends walking for people who have depression or bipolar disorder. The NDMDA also suggests people with depression or bipolar disorder allow themselves to

be exposed to light and to change the stimulation in their environments—both part of a good walk.

Several studies support the benefits of walking:

- The National Center for Health Statistics analyzed the results of four U.S. and Canadian surveys. The Center found that young or old, rich or poor, and even regardless of physical health, exercise can lower anxiety and depression and lead to a more positive mood. The surveys also found that the quality of the activity—how much you enjoy it—matters. Housework can be quite an exercise, but for lifting your spirits, it’s got nothing on a pleasant outdoor walk.
- A study conducted at the Duke University Medical Center suggests that exercise may be just as effective as standard anti-depressant medications for treating even major depression. Duke psychologist James Blumenthal, the study’s lead researcher, noted that for some patients, exercise may be preferred over other treatments. The Duke study focused on elderly patients diagnosed with major depressive disorder, but Duke researchers speculate that the results probably hold true for other people as well.

While researchers agree that walking probably helps reduce depression, there

is less agreement on exactly why it works. Some credit its biological effects. The Duke study suggested that improved aerobic capacity may have caused part of the reduction in depression. Others think exercise works by increasing levels of the important brain chemicals serotonin and norepinephrine. Both are active ingredients in anti-depressant medications.

Another theory is that exercise may help, in part, because people are taking an active role in getting better. It gives people a greater sense of control over their condition. It helps people feel more self-confident.

Finally, it may be that because walking reduces stress, it reduces depression. Some people are more likely to experience depression because of their inherited genes. However, research by the National Institutes of Health indicates that stress can help trigger depression in these people. And because walking helps reduce stress, it reduces one cause of depression.

Whatever the reason, the evidence is building: If you’re stressed or suffering from a depressive illness, exercise such as walking may be just the thing you need. Why not take a walk and see for yourself?

By James Rea © Lifescape, Reviewed Nov 2, 2009



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