

LIVE. WORK. WELL.

Beat the Blues with Physical Exercise

Do you find that your mood tends to be lower during the Fall and Winter months, or that you have less energy and motivation? According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, 2-3% of Canadians experience severe Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), while an additional 15% of Canadians experience a milder form of seasonal depression. Beyond these statistics, it is also possible that many more of us experience some degree of the “winter blues” between September and April each year.

So, what can be done to help?

If you are among the group of people who are severely impacted by SAD, seeking professional help by speaking with a doctor and counsellor is beneficial. In addition, there are a number of *self-help strategies* that have proven to be effective including; getting adequate daylight exposure, eating a nutritious diet, keeping a regular sleep schedule, staying socially connected, and getting adequate exercise. Of these self-help strategies, let's *focus on physical exercise*. It's one of the most beneficial, but often most challenging practices to have in place when the days are wet, cold, dark, and grey.

According to a 2019 study out of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 35 minutes per day or 4 hours per week of regular physical exercise was found to significantly reduce the risk of depression, even in those genetically predisposed to the condition. Furthermore, both high-intensity forms of activity such as aerobic exercise, and lower-intensity activities, such as yoga and stretching, were both found to help decrease depression. A key takeaway from this research is that even a small amount of exercise can have a positive impact on our mental health – and every little bit can help. Even if you don't have 35 minutes per day, as little as 5 minutes per day can make a difference.

But what about the weather?

During the winter months the weather can hinder adequate exercise for many people. Taking up a winter sport, such as skiing or snowshoeing, is one way to get some exercise while also enjoying the great outdoors. Some other possibilities include joining a gym or an exercise class such as spin or yoga. It is also possible to get a good workout at home with or without equipment, and without requiring much space (for a great home workout resource check out <https://darebee.com/>). And lastly, for those who are willing to brave the elements it's great to go outside for a walk or run, regardless of the weather.

Getting Started

As with most things, getting started with a physical exercise routine is often the hardest part. This becomes even more so if we are struggling with depression or any form of mental health issue. Here are a few ideas to help an exercise routine take root in your life:

1) Start small

It is not necessary to run a marathon to gain the mental health benefits of exercise. Instead start small and plan for a 10-minute walk. Once that has become routine, you can build up from there.

2) Choose what you enjoy

In order for a new routine to stick, it is helpful to enjoy it. If running isn't your thing then don't run – maybe yoga, dance, martial arts or frisbee golf are more your style

3) Schedule it when your energy is highest

Most people find that they have more energy at certain times of the day than others. If possible, try to schedule your exercise at times of the

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day when you're feeling most energized – and stick to that routine.

4) Buddy up

Exercising with a friend, family member, or colleague is another way to help support the regular routine. Having a partner can make exercise more fun and can also help you keep each other accountable.

5) Reward yourself

Lastly, there's nothing wrong with treating yourself to a small reward after a job well done – provided it doesn't counteract all the good self-care you just did. Some examples include a healthy, delicious

smoothie, a soothing bath, or an episode of your favourite show.

We hope these ideas help you to stay active and feel well!

Additional Resources:

<https://cmha.ca/winter-blues-101/>

<https://cmha.bc.ca/documents/seasonal-affective-disorder-2/>

<https://www.realsimple.com/health/mind-mood/emotional-health/exercise-depression>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm>



To our clients, member employees and families;

We are nearing the two-year mark since the COVID19 pandemic began and brought with it an impact on our stress levels, anxiety, self-care, and overall mental health. As always, it has been our privilege to be here for you supporting you through all the diverse challenges you may have faced over the last while. We would like to extend our gratitude for continuing to trust us to help you navigate all the twists and turns of life. We truly love the work we do each day and we will continue to be here for you moving forward and past the pandemic.

In 2021 we saw 594 new clients and held 2078 counselling sessions in addition to other wellness groups, presentations, and debriefings. We also had 244 no-shows and late or last-minute cancellations. We understand that sometimes life happens, things come up unexpectedly, or we fall ill and need to stay home. Where possible, we do appreciate receiving as much notice as possible if you need to cancel or reschedule your session. This allows us time to hopefully fill the spot, maximize on our availability and efficiency, and reduce wait times. Thank you again for your effort and consideration on this.

With best wishes as we inch closer to leaving this past winter behind us and welcoming a brighter spring. Hear that? It's the quiet stir of cherry blossoms almost ready to burst.....

You Are What You Eat — and Other Teachings from Nutritional Psychiatry

I remember as a child my parents would say to me “You are what you eat!”, and I would find this rather odd and somewhat confusing. As a little concrete thinker I was left wondering what on earth my parents were on about – clearly I was not a banana, or a piece of chocolate cake. Decades later, it makes so much sense. We may not literally or magically turn into the delicious morsel we just consumed, but what we eat does indeed transform us. And while most of us are aware of how food can transform us physically – reminded by our tighter-than-usual pants, or less-than-kind bathroom scale – we often neglect to recognize the less visible, but equally significant effects that our food choices have on our mental wellness. Nutritional psychiatry explores this relationship, giving us key insights into foods that optimize or hinder our mental health.

Incidence of depression and anxiety in western society has soared over recent decades. There is speculation that this could be a result of increased awareness of mental illness and better assessment methods, but there is also a distinct possibility that these conditions are simply more prevalent. If the latter is true then we have to ask; what’s causing this increased suffering? Modern society has introduced many changes to our daily lives and habits, one of which is what and how we eat. Food is plentiful for most (too plentiful for many). Processed foods high in sugar and saturated fats are abundantly accessible. Most of us are busy, many of us are eating on the go, or not eating regular meals. Is it possible that these changes are wreaking havoc on our mental health? Proponents of nutritional psychiatry think so.

Perhaps you’ve heard of Serotonin – a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate sleep, appetite, mood, and also inhibits pain. Many believe that serotonin plays a crucial role in moderating depression and anxiety. Did you know that 95% of serotonin is produced in the gut? And that our gut is lined with hundreds of millions of neurons? So it makes sense that what we eat influences emotion! This connection between our gut and our brain is known as the Gut-Brain Axis (GBA).

A 2015 research review published in *Clinical Psychopharmacology and Neuroscience* suggests that the GBA might be the “missing link” in our understanding of depression. The GBA is highly influenced by billions of good bacteria that are known as the “microbiome”. The tasks of the microbiome are plenty and include protecting against toxins and bad bacteria, reducing inflammation, improving nutrient absorption, and activating neural pathways between the gut and the brain. This influences both mood and energy levels, as well as inflammation throughout the body. Chronic inflammation is known to increase risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer and rheumatoid arthritis. Pretty cool, right!?

So how can we enhance our gut microbiome? First and foremost, it’s important to make changes that are achievable and sustainable. There are lots of tweaks to what we consume that can help us achieve greater wellness, both physically and mentally, but they only work if we maintain them. So try adding or reducing just one or two things, and remember, if you slip up or forget, it’s ok! Change is hard, and perseverance is key.

Reduce Sugar

Sugar has been linked to the development of depression and anxiety. It decreases a protein called Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) which is known to be connected to depression and memory/learning issues. It also affects our brain and nervous system much like a drug, so when we consume large amounts of sugar we experience highs and lows throughout the day in both mood and energy, leading us to crave more sugar. In fact, withdrawal from sugar is very powerful, and at its worst can mimic a panic attack! When it comes to sugar, definitely, less is more.

Consider probiotics

Probiotics are the good bacteria that make up our microbiome. Results from several studies suggest that they can reduce depressive symptoms and improve mood. Clinical trials have shown that



You Are What You Eat (cont'd)

Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium appeared to be most helpful for mental health. Consider a supplement, or adding more probiotic foods into your diet – yogurt, tempeh, miso, tofu, sauerkraut, soft cheeses, sourdough, kefir, kimchi, and kombucha are all good choices. Your gut and your brain will thank you!

Increase Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Depression appears to be less common in countries that consume large amounts of fish. This led researchers to look at a possible connection between the two. Omega-3 Fatty Acids are found in fish, and two in particular (DHA and EPA) are found to be with reduction in symptoms of depression. If eating fish more regularly doesn't work for you, consider an over-the-counter daily supplement. Suggested dose: 1-2g of EPA + DHA (with at least 60% EPA) daily.

Vitamin D

The brain has receptors for vitamin D in areas involved with depression, and according associated to a review published in the British Journal of Psychiatry, low concentrations of vitamin D in your body are associated with a higher risk of depression, and the lower the levels the higher your risk. We naturally produce vitamin D with sun exposure, but as we all know, in the Pacific Northwest opportunities for basking in the sun are few and far between, especially in the winter months. Several studies have found that taking a daily vitamin D supplement can have numerous medical benefits, including an overall reduction in stress and depressive symptoms.

The winter months are hard for many of us. Sometimes just making a little change can have a big impact. Remember it's always best to speak to your doctor or health professional before making changes to your diet or taking anything new. If you find the topic of nutritional psychiatry interesting you might like to read: This is Your Brain on Food by Dr. Uma Naidoo, a nutritional psychiatrist and faculty member at Harvard Medical School.



Did you know...

Along with the website, Upper Island Counselling has a Facebook page, Twitter feed and Instagram account. You can follow one (or all) of these social media platforms for quick access to news and information, as well as links to the most recent blog entries and newsletters. If you have any ideas or topics of interest that you would like us to cover in upcoming blogs or newsletters, please feel free to send us an email at info@uics.ca or give us a call at 250-287-2266! We always appreciate your input.