

## Physical activity—better than you think! Symptoms of depression can improve with exercise

There is a growing body of literature that discusses the association between exercise and reduced anxiety, decreased depression, enhanced mood, improved self-worth and body image and improved cognitive functioning. In particular, exercise is emerging as an effective intervention that has a clinically significant impact on depressive symptoms. (Cole, 2010; Knubben et al, 2007; Mental Health Foundation, 2005; Richardson et al, 2005).

In spite of the benefits of physical activity, people with mental illness tend to be more sedentary and more deconditioned than the general population resulting in significantly higher rates of mortality and morbidity from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity. And, depression is more common in people with these chronic health problems. There is therefore a need for effective physical activity interventions that target people with mental illness (Cole, 2010; Richardson et al, 2005).

Exercise provides a feeling of body control. Exercise helps to release anger and hostility and distracts people from depressive thoughts (Knubben et al, 2007). The Mental Health Foundation (2005) highlights the following feedback from people who have incorporated physical activity as part of their treatment regime:

- Exercise is natural
- Exercise gives a sense of achievement and control
- Exercise does not produce the side effects of some medication
- Exercise has positive side effects (e.g., lower risk of heart disease, stroke, some cancers, obesity)

Exercise has also been found to effect changes at the bio-molecular level. Changes in the concentration of the stress hormone, cortisol, have been found with associated effects on mood. Serotonin levels have been found to be increased with physical effort which can also have positive effects on one's mood (Knubben, 2007).

The benefits of exercise have become the basis of a movement in the United States entitled **Exercise is Medicine®**. Its guiding principles are shared by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the American Medical Association (AMA) which support the notion that health care providers – especially physicians – should play a vital role in encouraging patients to get healthy. And, fitness professionals should have the hands-on opportunity to carry out the doctor's 'orders' within the walls of a health club or integrate physical



Work Information Newsletter is developed by Adeena Wisenthal, registered occupational therapist and owner of ERGO-Wise, a centre in Ottawa that specializes in workplace mental health.

This issue focuses on physical activity and its impact on mental health. A healthy lifestyle that includes good nutrition and physical activity contributes to a healthier mind and body.

### Exercise is good medicine!

[www.exercisemedicine.org](http://www.exercisemedicine.org)

Structured exercise is muscling its way into a wide variety of disease prevention and treatment plans.

Exercise's greatest strength may be that it can work on both physical and emotional levels.

Exercise should be individually tailored to meet a person's current level of health. A qualified accredited professional is strongly encouraged to be part of this process.

***Avoid inactivity!***

## Physical Activity

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activity in some other way within a healthy lifestyle.

Building on the concepts of this movement and together with evidence-based research, we must consider regular physical activity as a necessary ingredient in the treatment of people suffering from depression. Occupational therapists have been involved in the provision of sport and other physical activities within mental health settings since its inception as a profession (Cole, 2010). Occupational therapists consider all aspects of a person's 'engagement in meaningful activity' (self-care, leisure, and work) when assisting a client to achieve their rehabilitation goals.

At ERGO-Wise, we work within an occupational therapy framework recognizing the value of physical activity for physical and mental health benefits. We apply this philosophy when helping clients to re-engage in life before they can even consider returning to work and, as well, when preparing claimants to return to work as we consider all aspects of a person's functioning which can influence their transition back to the workplace.

While our primary focus at ERGO-Wise is return-to-work preparation through cognitive work hardening, we also consider the benefits of a healthy lifestyle

which include good nutrition and physical activity. These can be incorporated within a work hardening program when a client identifies these areas as concerns and sets them as goals.



### Types of physical activity:

- Walking
- Yoga
- Swimming
- Cycling
- Pilates
- Running
- Belly dancing
- Skating
- Skiing
- Snowshoeing
- Strength training
- Aerobics classes
- Aqua Fit
- Spinning

*Increasing one's physical activity can be challenging especially if one feels depressed. That is why it is important to start slowly with manageable goals. Having a friend or buddy with whom one engages in physical activity can help. It is also helpful to work with a trained professional who can guide the person in appropriate types of activity as well as be a support and a guide for that person all the while offering motivation and encouragement.*

*Physical activity can be something a person engages in alone or can be done in a group atmosphere such as joining groups, classes etc. The person's preference will determine what they do and how they will do it. The important thing is that they begin to start moving and be more active.*

### References

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[www.exerciseismedicine.org](http://www.exerciseismedicine.org)

ERGO-Wise specializes in workplace mental health. Our focus is on return-to-work preparation through our hallmark cognitive work hardening program, which assists clients to develop the cognitive skills they need to meet job demands. It also provides the structure and work routine that disability claimants need in order to prepare for transitioning back to work. Specific skills such as assertiveness, time management, and organizational skills can be part of the program as well.

In helping someone return to work, we look at the whole person. In keeping with current research and the expressed goals of our clients, we are considering a person's lifestyle more and more in the preparation for returning to work. Physical activity and good nutrition are becoming part of this process.

- Return-to-work
- Job coaching
- Supportive counselling
- Job accommodation
- Skill development
- Ergonomics
- Pain management
- Education, Healthy Lifestyle

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