

EXERCISE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Regular exercise has multiple benefits for people with mental health issues.

By Neda Amani Golshani

A patient came to see me some time ago asking if I could be her family physician. I asked her the typical “meet and greet” appointment questions including those about past illnesses, family health history, medications and allergies. She told me she had suffered from severe depression for most of her adult life and had been hospitalized, sometimes for months, for repeated suicide attempts.

For a split second, based on purely what I recognized as my own fears, I questioned whether I could care for her effectively. I proceeded to learn that her mental illness had been compounded by significant social isolation. She had had no family or other support for most of her life. While she was outlining this obviously difficult-to-recount history, I noticed a serene and contented energy. This led me to ask “How are you currently feeling?” Her prompt reply: “I’ve never felt better in my whole life.” “What has made things different for you?” I asked. “I joined a fitness club and hired a personal trainer one year ago and started working out two hours a day. I’m back to my healthy weight and haven’t been depressed this whole time....I haven’t felt suicidal once.”

This woman didn’t know anything about my practice. She didn’t know that I’ve been using exercise to treat and prevent illness in my patient population for the past five years by providing a program that minimizes some of the typical barriers to activity – such as cost and lack of personalized fitness training support – that many people face. What was astounding to me was how this woman, facing nearly all the typical barriers (e.g., female, low socioeconomic class, mental illness) had decided to overcome these and spend a significant amount of her income to join a gym and work with a personal trainer. By doing so, she had regained her life.

I had immediate admiration for her strength and courage and felt lucky to have the opportunity to care for her and learn from her.

My new patient is one of 36% of Canadians who report having suffered from anxiety or depression. As a woman, she is statistically more



likely (40%) to have experienced depression or anxiety then a man (32%).

Everyone knows about the positive benefits of exercise for the body. But what about the mind? Intuitively, and if we view the mind/spirit/body as one, and if we view the mind/spirit/body as one, we can be certain that exercise of any amount and type benefits the mind. But what is the evidence, and how can we ensure that exercise is as routinely prescribed to patients with psychiatric illness as pharmacological treatments?

HISTORY OF EXERCISE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Throughout history many societies, ancient and modern, have used exercise to prevent disease and promote health and well-being. There is evidence that exercise is beneficial for mental health: it reduces anxiety, depression, and negative mood, and it improves self-esteem and cognitive functioning.

Scientists have been aggressively studying the link between exercise and mood changes for decades. They have long known that exercise improves the spirit of people without mental illness, and hundreds of studies have shown that it can improve the psychological health of those who suffer moderate depression, whether or not they take medication or engage in some type of counselling therapy.

Newer research has looked specifically at how exercise can help people with conditions like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and severe anxiety disorders. Most recently, a 1999 study published in the *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* found "lowered feelings of depression and improved self-esteem, body consciousness and activities of daily living among participants with bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder who exercised three days a week over a period of 15 to 20 weeks."

In another similar study, at the University of Florida College of Nursing at Gainesville, researchers looked at the effects of an aerobic exercise program on 20 people with schizophrenia. After four months of exercising three times a week, the patients lost weight and gained cardiovascular fitness. Compared with a control group of sedentary patients, the exercisers also had fewer psychiatric symptoms such as social withdrawal and paranoia.

Exercise has even shown to help reduce auditory hallucinations in patients with psychotic symptoms. Schizophrenic patients participating in a study published in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* in 1999, reported sleeping better and feeling better about themselves on the days

Time is Money with VIBRAFLEX

As the value of your client's time rises, they are likely to buy more of it, which explains why people are paying to save time.

The VibraFlex® was designed to optimize training time in a more productive and efficient way. Training sessions of only 3-5 minutes, two to three times per week have been shown to produce measurable results. Capture a new time-crunched client segment for your club.

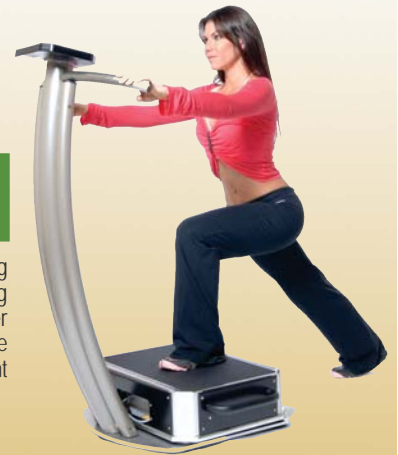
VibraFlex® Offers:

A 5-30 Hz frequency range for optimal training effect · Patented oscillating vibration pattern with proven results · **Add any time** Chip Card Option and Reader for increased business flexibility



Chip Card Option

To receive a personal invitation to the VibraFlex® WBV Webinar Series and discover what else we offer, give us a call, send an email, or visit our Website



**MORE CLIENTS
MORE PROGRAMS
MORE REVENUES**

"The Vibraflex keeps the client's mind engaged and keeps them committed to working out."

~Gunnar Peterson, CSCS, CPT



VibraFlex® now available in Canada through:



1-888-611-2008
info@motionhealth.ca
www.motionhealth.ca

FITNESS AV

www.FitnessAV.ca



The Fitness Audio Visual Experts

We put industry proven solutions to work for you.

Fitness AV is the leader in Sound & Video systems for Fitness, Recreation & Aquatics.



See

You want to look great for your class. Come see our huge variety of pouch belts in funky styles and stunning colours, designed to help you to look your best.



Hear

You want a headset mic & sound system that works out as hard as you do. The experts at Fitness AV have the systems that work... every class, every time.



Feel

You just led your best class ever. You feel great. Your members feel great. You'll always get that feeling with Fitness AV!

✓ Free Tech Support for Life

✓ Outstanding Product Selection

✓ Fast Friendly Service

1-866-696-9006

Shop online @ www.FitnessAV.ca

they exercised. These participants also reported hearing fewer voices on their physically active days.

The most accurately documented mental health benefits are in the area of treating depression. New data shows that exercise is better than medication as a treatment for people with depression. A 10-month study, conducted at Duke University Medical Centre, Durham, North Carolina, assessed 156 adult patients who suffer from major depressive disorder. Participants were randomly assigned to anti-depressant medication Zoloft, aerobic exercise or a combination of the two. The study found that participants who did exercise-only showed greater improvement than the other two groups and were less likely to relapse.

Exercise also seems to help reduce anxiety. An analysis of studies from 1960 and 1991 found that 81% of the studies concluded that physical activity and fitness were related to anxiety reduction following exercise. These findings are consistent with those of earlier studies. "When compared to the widely accepted forms of treatments, such as anti-depressants, counselling or therapy, physical activity has been shown to work as well," said Dr. Jack Raglin, of Indiana University, an authority on exercise and depression.

EXERCISE DOSE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Interestingly, the required amount of exercise for mental health benefits is the same frequency and intensity required for physical health benefits like hypertension and diabetes. Moderate exercise three or four times a week performed for 30 minutes is required and can range from brisk walking to swimming and lifting weights. Any activities that are enjoyable and that gets people moving is appropriate. These could include dancing, pilates, yoga, hoola hooping, skipping, inline skating and even tai chi.

Yoga is now embraced across the globe as a way to make one feel better. Practicing yoga postures, breathing exercises and meditation makes people healthier in body, mind and spirit. Research shows that yoga helps manage or control anxiety, chronic fatigue, depression, headaches, stress and numerous other physical conditions and diseases. What's more, it improves energy levels, reduces stress and tension, increases self-esteem and improves creativity and concentration while inducing a sense of wellbeing and calm – even after just one session.

Tai chi is a form of Chinese self-defense that has existed for about 2,000

years. It is sometimes described as "meditation in motion" and although once limited to older adults in North America, it has become increasingly popular as a basic exercise program and as a complement to other health care methods for all age groups. Its health benefits include stress reduction, greater balance and increased flexibility. Recent research shows that for older adults in particular, practicing tai chi regularly may reduce anxiety and depression, improve sleep quality and relieve chronic pain.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Despite growing evidence supporting the benefits of exercise on various mental illnesses, it has yet to become widely recognized by mainstream mental health services as an effective intervention. This is because the same systemic and individual barriers that need to be overcome to integrate exercise as a treatment for physical illness need to be overcome before exercise is integrated into mental health treatment.

According to Dori Hutchinson at Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, one principle problem is that up until now clinicians have separated mental and physical health treatment. "What we've done as a field is to work so hard to treat illness that, without meaning to, we have disconnected mind/body/spirit. We are not approaching wellness in a holistic way. Certainly, the mental health process does not work to promote wellness – it works to treat illness."

Additionally, many physicians who want to prescribe exercise for their mentally ill patients have few resources to turn to. There is no system that allows these patients affordable and quality exercise programs with effective instruction and support. As people with mental illness are often financially unstable, many will not change their activity behaviour simply because they've been told to do so. Most people don't understand the benefits of spending resources they don't have to join a gym or hire a personal trainer.

Exactly how and why exercise works to improve mental health conditions remains a mystery. Therefore, research-oriented practitioners overlook exercise in favour of more readily quantifiable treatments like drugs. Those who support exercise as a mode of treatment or an adjunct to pharmaceuticals and counselling, argue that we also don't know why anti-psychotic medications or electroconvulsive therapy work – and yet these are more commonly accepted psychiatric treatments.

It is important to note that the benefits of exercise are not dependent upon endorphin release; people can improve

their moods and lessen their anxiety with small amounts of exercise that are not associated with significant endorphin production. Hence, even small amounts of isolated exercise, five- to 10-minute sessions throughout the day can have significant mental and physical health benefits. Moreover, rhythmic aerobic exercise, as experienced by runners and dancers, produces a calming and sedative effect because of its ability to alter one's consciousness. These exercisers lose themselves in the runners' high or in the euphoria of the dance. It may be that this euphoria in combination with the physiological changes that occur during any activity help to enhance mood and improve an overall sense of well being.

Being in nature – in the daylight – also helps, particularly with SAD (seasonal affective disorder).

Nonetheless, exercise should never be considered a replacement for drugs without proper medical consultation, consent and ongoing supervision from a physician. Even with depression, where the supportive evidence is most clear, its use as a sole therapeutic measure should be taken with caution and only after a comprehensive discussion with the patient's primary care physician or psychiatrist. Patients with severe depression, including most women with post-partum depression and patients who have depression with psychotic features, require medication to stabilize their moods. In these cases, exercise prescription initially is impractical and may even alienate the patient, increasing their guilt and self loathing if they are unable to change into exercise clothes or get out of bed.

Most types of physical activity done in moderation have minimal to no negative side effects. Recommending the potential therapeutic role of being active regularly to patients with mental health conditions can only be beneficial.

I believe that the medical community and the fitness industry can make a significant impact by working together to educate people with mental illness about the therapeutic powers of *any* type of physical activity. These two professions need to work together to create affordable physical activity training resources with the support of a health care and/or fitness professional for people with mental illness and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. FBC

Dr. Neda Amani Golshani works in Toronto and Ottawa as a family physician and is creator of The Real You Exercise Prescription program. She is the in-house doctor and health expert for Women Moving Forward™, the champion physician for Active Living for Ontario and a regular speaker and presenter. For more information, visit www.drnedaca.ca.