

Leisure activities and depression

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Wed, Feb 22, 2012

OK. I admit it. I annoy some people. Probably more than just ‘some.’

Of course, they are usually nice about it: “Gee, Tom, you sure seem to be a happy guy. Why are you always so upbeat?”

They don’t accept the obvious answer that I have a wonderful wife and family, a terrific bunch of friends, and a very satisfying job. They want to make the answer more complex.

So, here’s another answer: I exercise.

Some very well done recent studies confirm that exercise is one of the most effective preventive and treatment modalities for depression.

We have known for years that regular exercise can improve our health by reducing high blood pressure and lowering cholesterol.

By improving body fat metabolism, it also helps prevent diabetes.

An article published this month in *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise* reported the results of a 10 year study in men from age 20 to 87 years of age who recorded their levels of leisure time activity and various measurements of depression.

They were divided into four levels of physical activity: sedentary, light activity, moderate activity (about the equivalent of 150 minutes of walking per week), and high activity.

Both the moderate (sweating not necessarily involved) and high activity groups had more than 50 percent reduction in depressive symptoms over the 10 years.

Even those who were only minimally active during their leisure time had a 24 percent reduction in depressive symptoms.

Interestingly, this seems to apply only to leisure time activities. Those with physically active jobs or who walked a lot at work, but who did not exercise during their leisure time had depressive symptoms similar to those who were sedentary.

This is not necessarily new information. A short term study published in the *Journal of Correctional Health Care* in December 1994 demonstrated a significant reduction in jail inmates who had 3 hours of organized physical activity per week. I assume this did not include wall climbing.

All of this looks good on the surface, but every good thing has associated problems. When one is depressed, there is very little motivation to get up off of the couch and go for a walk, fly a kite, or swim. Depression is an evil illness that robs its victims of the energy to just make the decision to get up and do anything.

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The key is to avoid setting yourself up for failure. Think of exercise as your reward for being who you are instead of one more obligation you have to face to get through the day. Don't schedule an hour for walking, but instead start with 5 or 10 minutes.

If you are having a good time and want to add 5 or 10 more minutes, fine. Try to get an exercise 'buddy,' even if it is just the family dog.

Spend an extra 5 minutes playing 'catch' after the obligatory bathroom walk.

My older son and his wife walk their cat each evening 'on a leash.' I have never figured that one out.

Don't spend a lot of money on sporting equipment or classes unless you are already exercising regularly, and you have identified a sport or class that sparks your interest. Start with a good pair of shoes, some loose clothing, and a street, sidewalk, track, or mall.

On a busy day, give yourself credit for housework you accomplished, and don't feel that you have to go out and do other exercises, unless you want to.

Your ultimate goal should be to try to do something physical during your leisure time for 30 minutes or so 5 days a week. Mix it up: take up bowling, play golf (without the cart, whenever possible), walk, swim, bike. Be as creative as you like, but try to make the new activity fit your lifestyle, and try to incorporate someone else in your endeavor, so you will have that additional 'voice' reminding you to get up and do things. Enjoy.

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