



## Mental Illness and Exercise

As with the general population, activity and exercise are very important for people living with mental illness because of a higher risk for heart disease. Exercise can have a huge impact on your health. Physical activity can lower the risk of early death, heart disease and stroke, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, weight gain and high cholesterol—all problems commonly found among people living with mental illness.

While exercise is extremely important, please engage with your health care provider before starting an exercise plan. He or she will confirm that you are putting together a safe and appropriate plan.

### Tips for Exercising on a Budget

**Take advantage of everyday opportunities.** You don't need special equipment for an aerobic workout. Take a brisk walk every day, whether it is a path through your neighborhood or laps in a local mall. Make a workout of household chores.

**Consider modest investments.** Some inexpensive products to consider include dumbbells, resistance tubing, balance balls, jump ropes and exercise videos or DVDs—some may even be available for free from your local library.

**Improvise.** Exercise doesn't have to be intimidating or expensive. You don't need a gym membership to go for a light jog or a walk with a friend. Canned goods can serve double duty as hand weights, milk or water jugs can be filled with water or sand and a common step stool can become exercise equipment if you use it for step training.

**Be a savvy shopper.** Check out your local recreational department or check into the fitness center of a local college or church for bargain access. Online classifieds or used exercise equipment stores often have deals on equipment. Sharing the expenses with a friend can both help defray costs as well as provide motivation and support for a new fitness routine.

### Steps to Success

Follow the steps below to form your own exercise routine.

#### Warm-up

The warm-up will slowly increase your breathing, heart rate and body temperature. Your warm-up should last between five and 10 minutes.

#### Strength Training

This part of an exercise program can be done in many different ways and will help protect your body from osteoporosis, help burn calories and increase lean muscle mass.

Good examples:

- push-ups
- crunches
- pull-ups
- squats
- lunges
- dips



Strength training should be done twice a week when you are first starting out. Try building up as you progress to three or four times per week.

#### Aerobic Exercise

This part of an exercise program includes activity that raises your heart rate. This is the type of exercise best associated with reductions in depression and anxiety.

Basic aerobic exercises include but aren't limited to jogging, swift walking, swimming, step or stair climbing, cycling and inline skating. Start with just 20 minutes a day, and eventually try working up to five hours of aerobic exercise into every week.

#### Flexibility Exercises

This portion of an exercise program, also known as stretching, can be done anywhere, anytime. Stretching can increase flexibility, your range of motion and the blood

flow to your muscles. Stretching also relieves stress, improves balance and helps relax tense muscles. Here are some important tips:

- Be sure to stretch major muscle groups including calves, thighs, hips, back and shoulders.
- Do not bounce as you stretch because this can cause slight tears in the muscles, making them tighter no matter how consistently you stretch.
- Stretching should not be painful, but expect to feel some tension. If you feel pain, you have stretched too far. Ease up and hold the stretch lightly.

## Cool-down

Gradually decrease the intensity of the exercise over a five- to 10-minute period until your heart rate and breathing rate are near normal.

## How Hard Should I Work?

There are several ways you can determine your exercise intensity level. The easiest way is known as the talk test. As a rule of thumb, if you can talk easily you aren't at the high end of your exertion. If your goal is to exercise at a moderate intensity, you should be able to talk, but not sing, while performing your activity. If your goal is to be exercising at a vigorous intensity, you will not be able to say more than a few words without pausing to take a breath.

## Tips for Staying Motivated

### Barrier 1: "I don't have time."

**Solution:** Squeeze in a few short walks throughout the day, get up a few minutes earlier, take the stairs or do housework at a fast pace, combine activities (e.g., instead of a meeting a friend for coffee, meet for a walk), put your exercise on your calendar, stretch and do strengthening exercises while you are watching television, get off one bus stop before your desired stop or park your car further from the store.

### Barrier 2: "Exercise is boring."

**Solution:** Choose activities you enjoy; vary your routine; get an exercise partner and/or check out exercise classes or sports leagues at your local recreation center.

### Barrier 3: "I worry about how I look during exercising."

**Solution:** Remind yourself that you are doing yourself a favor and focus on how you feel after a

workout and praise yourself after your improvements and each time you keep your commitment to exercise.

### Barrier 4: "I can't afford to join a gym."

**Solution:** Get a great workout by simply using the resources that surround you, take a walk, play basketball, go bowling, ride your bike, dance, go hiking, go roller or ice skating and/or spend some free time gardening.

### Barrier 5: "I am afraid that I will hurt myself."

**Solution:** Be sure to check with your health care provider before you start an exercise program. If you are new at this, begin your new program slowly so you do not get hurt or get such sore muscles that you won't continue. Choose an activity that is appropriate for your age and ability level. If you decide to go to a local YMCA or recreation center, ask for assistance from the staff at the facility. Finally, remember to warm up and cool down before and after exercise.

NAMI Hearts & Minds program is an online, interactive, educational initiative promoting the idea of wellness for individuals living with mental illness. This Fact Sheet is offered for informational purposes only. It does not intend to recommend specific treatment or strategies. Individuals should always engage with their health care provider before starting an exercise plan.

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For more information about exercise or the NAMI Hearts & Minds program, visit

