



Ready, Set, Run! Combat Seasonal Affective Disorder with Regular Exercise

Imagine going to the doctor with symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and he or she hands you a new prescription: Do two sets of squats, 15 bicep curls, 10 laps around the track and call me in the morning. Although this is not (yet) an accurate picture, experts are starting to recognize that regular exercise is not only good for your mood but may help combat depression, too.

While the exact causes of seasonal affective disorder are unclear, most theories attribute the disorder to the reduction of daylight hours in late fall and winter. The shorter days and reduced exposure to sunlight that occurs in winter are thought to affect the body by disrupting:

- **Circadian rhythms.** Your body's internal clock or sleep-wake cycle responds to changes between light and dark to regulate your sleep, mood, and appetite. The longer nights and shorter days of winter can disrupt your internal clock—leaving you feeling groggy, disoriented, and sleepy at inconvenient times.
- **Production of melatonin.** When it's dark, your brain produces the hormone melatonin to help you sleep and then sunlight during the day triggers the brain to stop melatonin production so you feel awake and alert. During the short days and long nights of winter, however, your body may produce too much melatonin, leaving you feeling drowsy and low on energy.
- **Production of serotonin.** The reduced sunlight of winter can lower your body's production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate mood. A deficit may lead to depression and adversely affect your sleep, appetite, memory as well as other aspects of your life.

So how does exercise fit into this? Exercise is not just about aerobic capacity and muscle size. Sure, exercise can improve your physical health and your physique, trim your waistline and even add years to your life. But that's not what motivates most people to stay active.

People who exercise regularly tend to do so because it gives them an enormous sense of well-being. They feel more energetic throughout the day, sleep better at night, have sharper memories, and feel more relaxed and positive about themselves and their lives. And it's also powerful medicine for many common mental health challenges.

Studies show that exercise can treat mild to moderate depression as effectively as antidepressant medication—but without the side-effects, of course. In addition to relieving depression symptoms, research also shows that maintaining an exercise schedule can prevent you from relapsing.

Exercise is a powerful depression fighter for several reasons. Most importantly, it promotes all kinds of changes in the brain, including neural growth, reduced inflammation, and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being. It also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals in your brain that energize your spirits and make you feel good. Finally, exercise can also serve as a distraction, allowing you to find some quiet time to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed depression.

For people suffering from the depression that comes with SAD, it can be hard to start incorporating exercise into their lives. Because symptoms include fatigue and loss of interest in activities, it can be difficult for people to take that first step, both literally and figuratively. This is where the help of a physical therapist that excels in motivating patients to perform exercises both safely and effectively can come in to play. Just because you don't have a specific injury doesn't mean you can't try physical therapy. Having a decrease in energy and muscle performance that is affecting how you perform your regular activities is reason enough. In fact, a bonus of seeing a physical therapist to get started on a new exercise program, is that they are trained to identify other injuries or illnesses that require a special approach.

Obviously you don't have to have depression to reap the benefits of exercise. In fact, the mood-boosting pastime can help anyone who might be temporarily sad or otherwise not themselves. Major life stressors—divorce, loss of a job, and death—are difficult for anyone and regular exercise is a great way to help people through a tough time.

With regular exercise, you're guaranteed to see improvements in the following areas:

- Strength and flexibility
- Sleep
- Memory
- Self-confidence
- Energy
- Mood

Even minimal changes in any of these areas could change your outlook on the day and your ability to participate in activities you once enjoyed. So, what are you waiting for? Ready, Set, Run!

References:

- 1) [http://www.ppsapta.org/userfiles/File/APTA%20PPS%20Toolkit%20October%202017%20%20%20Newsletter%20Item\(1\).pdf](http://www.ppsapta.org/userfiles/File/APTA%20PPS%20Toolkit%20October%202017%20%20%20Newsletter%20Item(1).pdf)
- 2) <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad.htm>
- 3) <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm>