Regular physical activity can improve your mental health

Source: Natalie Jones, extension specialist for family health

Most of us know that physical activity provides numerous physical benefits to our bodies, but a lesser-known benefit of physical activity is that it also improves our mental health.

Physical activity promotes positive changes in your brain including neural growth, reduced inflammation and new activity patterns that promote calmness and improved well-being. During exercise, the brain releases endorphins, which are chemicals that can help improve your mood and raise your spirits. Physical activity can also give you a break from your daily worries, as it allows you to focus on something else.

Research has shown that regular physical activity, which is 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous movement each week for adults and 60 minutes each day for children, can improve brain function. Improved brain function occurs regardless of your age, ability, ethnicity, shape and size.

Some of these results occur immediately after one workout and include reduced short-term anxiety, improved sleep and improved cognitive function.

Improved cognitive function can result in better academic performance for students, including improved test taking skills and higher grades. Research has also shown that regular physical activity reduces the risk of depression and improves the moods of young people between the ages of 6 and 17.

In adults, physical activity can speed up brain processing, improve memory and lead to a higher quality of life. As physical activity becomes a regular part of your daily routine, you can experience long-term mental health benefits including reduced anxiety, lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, deeper sleep, stronger planning and organization skills, and more control over your emotions and behaviors. Harvard University researchers found that when people increase their physical activity to 35 minutes a day, they have a reduced risk of depression, even if they have a genetic predisposition to the condition. Physical activity has also shown to reduce the risk of dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease.

If you have not worked out in a while and are ready to start adding physical activity into your day, you may want to consult a medical professional before beginning. However, most people can achieve moderate intensity exercise, which would include brisk walking, with few adverse issues.

If 150 minutes each week seems like a lot, you can break up the 150 minutes into segments as small as 10 minutes to help you work physical activity into your day. Normal household chores like mowing the grass and vacuuming count toward your weekly physical activity goals.

More information on the benefits of physical activity, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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