

Disability, Physical Activity, and Mental Health

By now, we all know that we need to exercise for our health. We have heard it said over and over how weight loss is beneficial for reducing the symptoms of many health complications including stroke and heart disease. But did you know that physical activity is also good for your mental health? Physical activity has been shown to relieve stress, decrease anxiety and depression, and improve memory as well as support better sleep – just to name a few.

Physical health is closely linked to mental health, and when you take care of one, you may also find that you are taking care of the other too. Studies have demonstrated that exercise (or physical activity) can be used to treat mild-to-moderate depression as equally effective as antidepressant medication; however, the reverse can also be true and if you experience a long-term physical health condition, it may also increase your risk of mental health problems.

So how do you tackle both your physical health while also improving your mental health? Here are NCHPAD's top five tips to ward off those five extra pounds, perhaps make those ADL's a little easier, and help you feel better mentally as well.

Top 5 Tips

1. **Choose Your Activity Wisely.** In order for exercise to become something you continue to do, it must be something you enjoy. This will make it easier to stick to a routine, and you will probably be more liable to want to fit a fun activity into your schedule. There are several accessible activities that will allow you to remain active. If possible, try to choose an exercise or activity that also challenges you without overwhelming you. Be mindful of how much exercise you are starting out with – too much exercise can be just as detrimental as not enough when it comes to forming a habit and reaping mental health benefits as well.
2. **Overcome the Barriers.** There are barriers to exercise that the majority of people face, such as finding the time to exercise or knowing what to do once you do find time. There are also other barriers that you will face that are unique to only

you. Do not allow those barriers to conquer you and steal your fight for greater physical and mental well-being. Whether the barriers are transportation, costs, access, or something more personal, seek out the right resources, people, or organizations that can help you overcome those obstacles. Make a plan and stick to it. If one option doesn't work, move on to the next before you lose your motivation for change.

3. **Accountability.** Everyone possesses the power to talk themselves into or out of something, so enlist help to keep you on track. Find an exercise buddy or maybe even an entire fitness class to help maintain your consistency of exercising. Joining a group exercise class can have multiple benefits like developing social relationships, meeting new people, becoming a part of a larger community, and finding others who may have experienced some of the same barriers as you (and have learned how to overcome them). Regardless, having someone there to hold you accountable can be just what you need on those days when you just don't want to get moving.



4. **Rewards.** Rewards can be very beneficial to keep you motivated and moving forward. It's important to set goals and know when you have reached them so that you can see the progress you have made and reward yourself appropriately. When you are setting your goals, try to think outside the box. Sure, most folks would like to lose 5 or 10 pounds, but will that really have the greatest impact on how you feel? Maybe a bigger goal would be to feel more rested, have more energy, get better sleep, or feel less stressed - all of which are obtainable with the right combination of diet and exercise. And who knows, maybe once you have reached one of those goals like having more energy, you will be able to reward yourself by trying something new that you have been dying to try out but just didn't think you could!

5. **Get the Resources You Need.** We already talked about choosing your

activity wisely, overcoming barriers, setting up some accountability, and the importance of rewards... but with all of those tips, you need the right resources so that you can be successful! This is where NCHPAD has you covered. Did you know that before anything else, NCHPAD was created as a resource center on information on physical activity, health promotion, and so much more for people with a disability? Use our resources and Live Help button to discover how we can help you gain access to living a healthy lifestyle and making positive changes to both your physical and mental health.

References and Resources

[**NCHPAD**](#) – The National Center on Health Physical Activity and Disability

[**The Mental Health Benefits of Exercise**](#) – A guide on the mental health benefits of exercise produced by HelpGuide.org a trusted guide to mental and emotional health.

[**Physical Activity, Sport and Mental Health**](#) – Explains why being active is important, the types of activity to consider, how to overcome barriers, planning a safe routine and ideas for staying motivated.

[**Physical Activity and Mental Health**](#) – Details how being active can help depression and other mental health issues. (Royal College of Psychiatrists)

[**The Exercise Effect**](#) – Discusses the mental health benefits of exercise and why it should be used more frequently in mental health treatment. (American Psychological Association)

[**Exercising to Relax**](#) – How physical activity and autoregulation exercises can help reduce stress. (Harvard Medical School)

[**Depression and anxiety: Exercise eases symptoms**](#) – How to relieve symptoms with exercise, including tips to help you get started and stay motivated. (Mayo Clinic)

[**For Depression, Prescribing Exercise Before Medication**](#) – Article about how aerobic activity has shown to be an effective treatment for many forms of depression. (The Atlantic)

[Guide to Physical Activity](#) – Provides many examples and ideas of physical activity that you might not have considered exercise. (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)

[Fitness Basics](#) – A comprehensive guide to fitness including overcoming barriers, creative ways to exercise, types of exercise and measuring your heart rate. (Mayo Clinic)

[Tips to Help You Get Active](#) – A step-by-step guide to getting active, breaking down how to overcome barriers and practical tips on getting started. (National Institutes of Health)

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