

Spring Training for the Whole Year

By Guest Columnist, Michelle DeCola, L.C.P.C

Spring is here and we can celebrate being free from winter's grip. The frigid temperatures and heavy snow not only kept us hostage to the indoors, but it also kidnapped our "joi de vivre". Our extreme winter left many people with extreme winter blues.

Thankfully, the promise of sunshine and blue skies brings a new inspiration to increase our activity and concurrently, increase our ability to feel our best. Sunshine, exercise, trying new things and setting new goals are a sure way to expand our happiness.

My nine-year-old daughter had a school project where she had to list four of her wishes for her third grade class. Her first wish was to have "P.E." (physical education) every day. I asked her why and she said, "Mom, it feels good to run and play." I told her I couldn't agree more.

We are all well aware that exercise is good for our bodies. It strengthens our heart, lowers our risk of diabetes, cancer and stroke, lowers blood pressure, builds bone density, improves metabolism and boosts our immune system. But, as my child discovered herself, exercise is great for strengthening our psyche as well. One of the most consistent and powerful ways to change the way we feel is through exercise.

Several studies have shown that aerobic activity as well as weight training is effective in decreasing the symptoms of depression and anxiety. Recent recommendations from the Journal of Preventive Medicine suggested that a half-hour of exercise six days a week is an ideal amount. A 15-minute walk, three times a week can boost your mood. If you are already exercising four-to-six times a week, adding a new challenge to your exercise routine will enhance your mood even further.

There are many theories behind why exercise helps fight depression and anxiety, but my theory is simple: "self care." We feel better when we take care of ourselves. We live in a culture where we pack our schedules with activities, obligations, and responsibilities. At the same time, we are trying to maintain our family and social relationships. Sometimes, we can forget to take care of ourselves. As a result, our self care often means sitting on the couch, and or just sitting in front of our computers.

Instead, hold your own personal "P.E." class and make self care child's play. Working out is one thing in our control that we can do to take care of our mind and body which in turn, nurtures our soul. It is one thing that we can decide to do to bring more happiness and fulfillment into our lives.

So how does exercise lift your mood? Some evidence suggests that exercise raises the levels of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters in the brain. It can also increase endorphins

which temporarily boost the mood, sometimes known as the "runner's high." When endorphins are released, they work as natural pain-killers and can reduce emotional distress and elevate our mood.

Another theory by psychologists Rod Dishman and Mark Sothman suggests that exercise helps stave off depression and anxiety by helping the brain cope better with stress. Exercise is proven to release muscle tension which aids in relaxation and stress reduction. Feelings of anxiety are decreased when we feel more capable of managing our stress.

Exercise proves to be an important tool to enhance a stronger, healthier mental psyche. Here are some tips to keep in mind to help your body and mood stay fit:



Exercise with friends or in groups. There is a positive mood-lifting benefit from being with people who share your same values.

- **Prioritize exercise as an important part of your life.** Each day you work out, you will be taking care of yourself. Exercise needs to be planned, just as any other important obligation. The more you see yourself sticking with it, the better you will feel.

- **Make your exercise fun.** Choose any activity that you enjoy. If you're looking for a greater challenge, try a new class or try competing in a race or a triathlon. (I loved trying kickboxing with FFC Oak Park Group Fitness Instructors Constance Papciak and Tess Cruz!).

- **Exercise with friends or in groups.** Exercising with others helps you stay accountable to your goals. There is a positive mood-lifting benefit from being with people who share your same values.

- **Set goals that work for you.** Set simple goals that are attainable. Try pushing yourself a little harder each time you exercise. Make sure the exercise goal is more about taking care of yourself, and less about how you want to look. Helping yourself feel good inside will definitely have a positive affect on how you look outside. The best way to feel good year around is to develop an exercise routine that will motivate and challenge you each time you work out.

Remember, a day without exercise is like a day without sunshine.



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