

Exercise During the Pandemic

Everyone knows that regular exercise is important. Most people think of how it affects them physically. However, it also affects you mentally. During these trying times it is important to stay physically active for many reasons, like the obvious physical reasons such as fighting obesity, helping with chronic health conditions, boosting the immune system and helping with balance and flexibility, just to name a few. Let's take a look at some ways exercise also helps our mind.

Exercise reduces stress and anxiety. It boosts mood by releasing a hormone called endorphins. Endorphins are known as the body's natural feel-good hormone. This helps make problems we are encountering seem more manageable. This is also what causes feelings such as "runner's high" and what makes you feel so good after a good workout. All of this adds up to helping individual reduce their stress levels and build emotional resilience.

Believe it or not, exercise helps to improve your sleep patterns as well. Regular exercise helps you fall asleep faster and even improves your sleep quality which, in turn, helps boost your immune system as well. It is not fully known or understood why exercise helps with sleep, but there are some theories. One is that it helps with stress reduction, allowing the body the ability to fall asleep faster and into a deeper state of sleep. This then helps rejuvenate the body for tomorrow.

It is becoming increasingly recognized that exercise is also necessary for helping people with their mental health and can even be a factor in treating chronic mental illnesses. Evidence shows that exercise reduces the likelihood of depression and helps maintain mental health as we get older. Exercise can also be used as a treatment option. Exercise can be as effective as medications for a wide range of conditions like mild to moderate depression, dementia, and anxiety. There is also evidence supporting that it helps reduce cognitive issues like schizophrenia.

So how long does one need to exercise before starting to reap the benefits? In order to feel the benefits of exercise to the fullest, you need to do aerobic exercises three or more times a week for 45-60 minutes per day. Positive effects will usually start to be noticed by week four of consistent exercise, with the most anti-depressant effect happening around the 10-12 week point of consistent exercise.

Now that you know some of the benefits of exercise, how do you exercise during a pandemic especially when you are advised to avoid gyms? One way is to go outside. You can go for a walk, a run, or find other ways to exercise while also getting some great Vitamin D from the sun, which is also helpful with mental health. Being outdoors also provides an opportunity to engage in activities with your family

outside of your house. Many gyms and workout programs are also offering virtual exercise classes. If money is an issue, there are a lot of great workout videos on YouTube.

We all need to continue to improve physically and mentally. Exercise is a great way to do so, but you must also challenge yourself to get better from day to day and week to week. It will also give you a sense of accomplishment and something to be proud of in these trying times. Exercise not only for your body but for your brain as well.

References:

Exercise is Essential for Well-Being During COVID-19 Pandemic

<https://patients.healthquest.org/exercise-is-essential-for-well-being-during-covid-19-pandemic/#:~:text=However%2C%20here%20are%20a%20few,infections%2C%20including%20COVID%2D19.>

How Your Mental Health Reaps the Benefits of Exercise

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-works-and-why/201803/how-your-mental-health-reaps-the-benefits-exercise>

Exercising for Better Sleep

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/exercising-for-better-sleep>

How Does Exercise Affect the Brain

<https://www.dana.org/article/how-does-exercise-affect-the-brain/>

Helping Youth Manage Disappointment

As communities across Nebraska continue to feel the weight of the pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the distress that our youth may be experiencing as their lives continue to be disrupted. Specifically, youth are having to learn to deal with a number of losses that are hitting them all at one time. Missed opportunities to participate in extracurricular events such as sports or music competitions, cancelled homecoming dances and winter formals, postponed family trips, being unable to gather to celebrate important milestones like birthdays, and changes in holiday traditions with families may lead youth to feel an increased sense of sadness, frustration and disappointment. Even missing out on regular

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activities like going to the movies with friends, sleepovers or going on a fieldtrip can be upsetting for many kids. Considering everything individuals and communities have lost as a result of the pandemic, missing out on events, milestones and activities may seem like a small sacrifice, however, this doesn't make the feelings of disappointment less heavy or easier to process for youth. While many adults are dealing with some of the same let downs, they have more experience in processing challenges as well as a greater number of skills to cope with such difficulties. Parents and caring adults can help youth walk through their disappointments by offering compassion and empathy, while offering support to help kids manage their feelings and emotions.

Dealing with change and loss is an inevitable part of life but during a time when life seems increasingly unpredictable, experts recommend having more frequent discussions about coping with disappointment and overcoming obstacles. The below tips can help guide adults to help youth deal with feelings of disappointment and loss.

Listen Empathetically: Avoid minimizing feelings. For example, saying, "I am sorry your basketball season is cancelled, but at least you are healthy", may not be helpful in the moment. Instead, actively listen to how your child/teen is feeling and acknowledge their experience.

Validate: Validate feelings of disappointment. For example, you might say, "I know what you are going through is really hard." or "You'll get through this, but it doesn't make it any less difficult right now". Let them know it is okay to feel disappointment and to grieve their loss.

Provide Perspective: Remind youth that they are not alone in their disappointment. Emphasize that there are youth across the community who understand their feelings because they are sharing in similar experiences. Encouraging kids to talk about what they are going through with friends can provide opportunities to bond over their shared disappointment and help kids put things in perspective.

Provide Encouragement: Avoid giving false reassurance but emphasize that, while we don't know when or how it will happen, eventually our current circumstances will change. It might be helpful to share with your child/teen past experiences of change or uncertainty that you have gone through and how you dealt with the challenges.

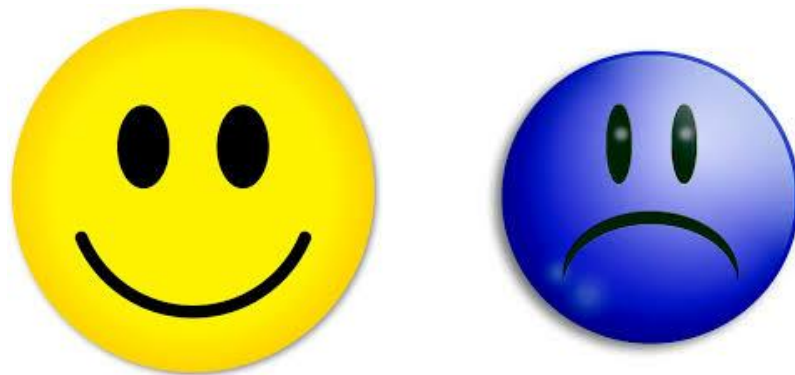
Practice Coping Skills: Share with kids how you cope with disappointment and change. This is also a good time to have kids reflect on their own coping skills. For example, you might ask, "What has helped you feel better during hard times in the past?" Support kids in exploring new coping strategies such as journaling, taking care of a pet, seeking support of friends/family, exercising, engaging in a hobby or starting a new project.

Encourage Self-Care: Now, more than ever, it is important for adults to promote mental health hygiene for our youth. This includes getting good sleep, eating wisely, exercising, getting fresh air, nurturing support systems and utilizing coping skills. Above all else, encourage kids to ask for help if they are feeling overwhelmed with feelings of loss and disappointment.

While this has been a tough year for many, it can also serve as a time of personal growth. According to the American Psychological Association, "the losses and missed milestones from COVID-19 can build youth resilience and their ability to cope with future challenges". Building resilience isn't always an easy

process, but it can help us move forward in times of adversity. Learning how to navigate disappointment can lead to emotional growth and foster skills to help recover from future setbacks. Check in with youth often during this time to assess how they are doing. If you are worried that a youth may need extra supports or professional guidance, reach out and ask for help. A family doctor, school social worker or counselor or a licensed mental health provider can offer guidance.

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; John Hopkins Medicine (<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org>); National Association of School Psychologists



Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar Disorder is a chemical imbalance brain disorder. A chemical imbalance in the brain occurs when there is either too little or too much of certain neurotransmitters.

Neurotransmitters are the chemical messengers, such as [serotonin](#), dopamine, and norepinephrine. Serotonin is considered the “happy drug”, while Dopamine is considered the “feel good drug” because of the way they control and regulate mood and emotions.

Norepinephrine is a bit different as it helps regulate attentiveness, sleeping, dreaming, and learning. Furthermore, norepinephrine is also released as an actual hormone into the blood, where it causes blood vessels to contract and heart rate to increase.

2.9% of kids (about 3 out of 100 or approximately 1.7 million) have a Bipolar diagnosis. Bipolar Disorder causes intense mood swings, ranging from emotional highs to emotional lows. The mood swings tend to be episodic and sporadic and vary in how often and for how long they occur for each individual person. The mood swings often affect sleep, activity, behavior and the ability to do everyday tasks, such as school work and chores.

The emotional highs are referred to as mania or hypomania. During a manic episode, kids often feel very energized, “hyped” and restless. Their activity level is high and they think they can do a lot of things at once and believe they can do them very well. They can also appear agitated and have trouble sleeping during a manic episode. Symptoms of mania include:

- Racing Thoughts
- Intense Irritability/quick-tempered
- High self-esteem
- Feelings of invincibility
- Not sleeping much
- Talking Quickly
- Substance Use
- Unsafe Sex
- Gambling
- Trouble concentrating/easily distracted
- Suddenly driven to accomplish your goals or try new activities
- Skipping school

Mania may also trigger psychosis. Symptoms may include delusions, acting unusually silly, hallucinations, talking incoherently and/or fast, and agitation. At times, those experiencing psychosis and having hallucinations may need to be hospitalized.

The emotional lows are referred to as major depressive episodes. During a depressive episode, it can be difficult for a kid to concentrate and participate in normal, daily routines. A kid in the midst of a major depressive episode may feel depressed, sad, empty and/or hopeless. They generally have low energy and appear to lose interest in activities they usually enjoy.

Symptoms of depressive episodes include:

- Feelings of Sadness or Anxiousness
- Feelings of Guilt or Hopelessness
- Low Self-Esteem
- Lethargic/Extreme Exhaustion
- Somatic Complaints (Headache & Stomachache)
- Loss of interest in activities they usually enjoy
- Change in Sleep and/or Appetite
- Thoughts of Death/Suicide Attempts

Diagnosis:

Bipolar Disorder in kids can be very challenging to diagnose, especially in adolescents. It can be difficult to distinguish between typical adolescent behavior, as it is quite normal for adolescents to have extreme mood swings. And as of right now, there are no blood tests or definitive brain scans that diagnosis Bipolar Disorder.

Instead, doctors and/or mental health practitioners rely on behavior tracking and self-reporting to determine patterns as well as family history. Kids of parents with Bipolar Disorder have a much greater risk of having Bipolar Disorder than those who do not have parents with Bipolar Disorder.

There is also some research that indicates that hardships and trauma may exponentially increase the possibility of developing bipolar disorder in youth as well as adults when there is already a hereditary factor of having the disorder.

Some research studies have found differences in brain structure and function between people who have bipolar disorder and those who do not. Researchers are studying the disorder to learn more about its causes and effective treatments.

Treatment:

Bipolar Disorder is often treated with medication. Medications affect individuals differently, so medications need to be monitored closely. Due to the complexity of the disorder, it often takes multiple medications to manage the symptoms. It may also take quite a bit of trial and error through medication adjustments before the right combination of medications is found. Generally, doctors often begin with low doses.

Psychotherapy is also very beneficial to individuals with Bipolar Disorder and is used to help them and their family understand and manage their symptoms.

What Parents Can Do:

- Pay attention to signs and symptoms. If you believe your kid may have Bipolar Disorder, contact your doctor and/or a mental health professional.
- Listen to your kid and encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Be patient and understanding of their symptoms.
- Watch for any signs of suicidal ideation. Consult a mental health professional and/or your family doctor immediately if you notice signs of suicidal ideation.
- Notify the doctor if you notice harmful side effects from the medications.
- Help your kid understand their treatment plan so they can learn to manage their symptoms. One way you can do this is to create a chart to track behaviors and moods.

Resources:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/bipolar-disorder-in-children-and-teens/index.shtml>

www.nami.org › [Mental-Health-Conditions](#) › [Bipolar-D...](#)

Bipolar Statistics, Myths, and Facts - WebMD

DMDD Versus Bipolar Disorder | MGH Clay Center for Young ...

[NIMH » Bipolar Disorder](#)

www.nimh.nih.gov › [health](#) › [statistics](#) › [bipolar-disorder](#)