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The New (Buzzy) Benefits of Exercise

Physical activity doesn't just get you fit. It can also boost your mental and emotional well-being to help you 'flourish'

ESPAÑOL

You may already know that physical activity can boost your brain, strengthen your muscles and help you live longer. But it turns out that staying active also has powerful benefits that go beyond physical health.

Boosting your mood and helping you beat stress are two better known dividends paid by exercise. But the benefits go even further. A study of more than 18,000 middle-aged and older adults published in the [Journal of Behavioral Medicine](#) in April, for instance, showed a strong link between regular physical activity and feeling a greater sense of purpose in life.

"A sense of purpose comes from having goals and activities that add direction and meaning to life, and if you think about physical activity, that's exactly what it does," said Ayse Yemiscigil, lead author of the study and a researcher with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

The study found that the association goes both ways. In other words, people who exercise more reported an increasing sense of purpose, while those whose sense of purpose was strong in the beginning were the most likely to exercise regularly.

"The more you get active, the more you get the sense of purpose — and vice versa," Yemiscigil says. "It's an upward spiral."

The findings are especially important for older adults because studies show that such a sense of purpose (and your activity level) tends to decline as you get older, Yemiscigil says. Maintaining this positive focus, on the other hand, has been tied to longevity and a lower risk of [heart disease](#) and [Alzheimer's disease](#) — not to mention that it's strongly linked to overall well-being.

Ilene Berns-Zare, a psychologist and professional coach, says having purpose is essential for finding that combination of physical, mental and emotional well-being that allows you to live your best life, a state that some call “flourishing.”

"It's very important to have a sense of purpose; it's one of the pillars for flourishing," she says. "It's been shown to enhance your quality of life and your happiness."

Yemiscigil's study is one of a growing number teasing out the psychological benefits of exercise. The benefits “almost seem to have no limit,” says Ramani Durvasula, a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles. Exercise “makes us feel revitalized. It makes us feel stronger. It can even make us feel more powerful.”

Here are some other specific ways physical activity can help you flourish, according to research:

It makes you happier

Physical activity releases chemicals in the brain that relieve anxiety and depression and make you happier almost instantly, Durvasula says. It happens with all types of activity, no matter how vigorous. “It doesn't have to be a marathon. It can be yoga or a moderate walk.” A [2018 study](#) found that as little as 10 minutes of physical activity may boost happiness.

It helps you bond with others

You've probably experienced that feeling of shared connection when you've exercised with others, whether it's as part of a group exercise class, or simply walking with a friend.

Research shows that [physical activity actually primes our brains for socialization](#) and makes us more likely to trust others. Exercising with someone “creates a different kind of connection and a deeper intimacy,” Durvasula says. “That's why the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) was tough for a lot of people. Taking a Zoom class together is not the same as exercising in person with other people.”

It gives you a sense of accomplishment

When you knock out a Pilates class, finish an exhilarating hike or mark your 50th indoor cycling class, admit it: You feel triumphant. That sense of self-efficacy helps

you to be bold in other parts of your life, Durvasula says.

After physical activity, “we feel more powerful and capable of taking on other challenges in life,” she explains. “Research shows on a day you work out, you are much more likely to take on cognitive or workplace challenges. It shifts your mindset to ‘I can do this.’”

-----Written by Michelle Crouch, AARP, July 7, 2021

AARP was founded in 1958 and has over 38 million members. It is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for people over the age of 50. AARP is well-known for its advocacy efforts, providing its members with important information, products and services that enhance quality of life as they age. They also promote community service and keep members and the public informed on issues relating to the over 50 age group.

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