

HEALTHY LIVING

Physical activity can help alleviate stress

In the stressed-out '90s, rare are those who can say that nothing is taxing or exceeding their coping abilities.

The Health Promotion Survey conducted early in the decade showed that

nearly 50 per cent of Canadians led a fairly stressful life and an additional 12 per cent led a very stressful life.

How do you fare? Try this abbreviated version of the Life Change Index. Among the following events, circle those you have experienced in the past year or expect to

experience in the near future.

- Event - Impact Number
- Death of a spouse - 100
- Divorce - 73
- Death of a close family member - 63
- Marriage - 50
- Gain of a new family member - 39
- Change in financial state - 38
- Change to a different line of work - 36

Mortgage over \$80,000 - 31
Trouble with boss - 23
Change in sleeping habits - 16

If an event has occurred or is expected to occur more than once, multiply the impact number by the frequency of the event. Then add up your scores.

The full version of the Life Change Index, attributed to Holmes and Rahe, contains 43 stressful

events. Individuals scoring 300 or more on the full version have an 80 per cent likelihood of illness in the near future.

For those who score between 150 and 299, the likelihood decreases to 50 per cent.

Below 150, the likelihood of illness is rated at 30 per cent.

Most Canadians know that physical activity reduces stress. Yet all Canadians who are stressed do not engage in physical activity. Research shows that physical activity helps to alleviate emotional distress by:

- promoting relaxation;
- acting as a time out;
- providing a psychological distraction;
- changing one's mood;
- enhancing self-esteem and feelings of competence;
- providing a time and an opportunity to work through problems (as can happen during walking or running);
- generally regulating emotional and physiological reactions to a stressful event.

The following patterns of physical activity appear to be the most beneficial:

- Aerobic activity lasting

20 to 40 minutes has shown reductions in anxiety lasting two to four hours following exercise.

• Programs lasting at least 10 weeks and preferably longer than 15 weeks, lead to the greatest reductions in anxiety.

• The intensity of the exercise may not have to be highly vigorous to provide beneficial effects. Examination across a number of studies has shown significant reductions in anxiety from moderate intensities as well.


What does this mean? It means that aerobic activities work best for alleviating mental stress. Any of Canada's favorites will do the trick: walking, cycling, swimming and many others.

It also means that physical activity should be at an intensity to which you can comfortably adjust.

Finally, regular physical activity has the greatest stress-reducing potential, since greater benefits are observed in longer programs of activity.

Regular physical activity may help to reduce anxiety on a daily basis and hence, prevent the development of stress in the first place.

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