Unleashing the Benefits of Exercise for ADHD

by KRISTI LAZZARI

Taming Stress and Anxiety With Exercise for ADHD

I once accused a well-known yoga instructor of trying to murder me.

He was completely innocent and very much unaware that I harbored such feelings. He'd never even met me. Still, as I huffed and puffed, red-faced and sweating in my living room, unable to pull myself off the floor, I knew that DVD was going to be the end of me.

I'll tell you a secret. I used to have a very bad relationship with exercise. Exercise was something I did only when I was on the weight loss bandwagon, and that never lasted for long.

Exercise was a chore. It was an unpleasant and futile task. It was something I never saw results from, and I never stuck to any particular form of exercise long enough to make a difference. I knew I felt better when I exercised, and yet I still made excuses not to.

The relationship now isn't perfect, but it is much improved over what it once was. There are a couple of very specific reasons for that.

When I learned to accept my body for what it was, not what I thought it should be, I learned to see exercise as something that benefited my body with better health, not just as a means to shed a few pounds. I also could not deny the connection between exercise and a reduction in my attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms.

The Connection Between Exercise and ADHD

There isn't a lot of research on exercise for ADHD, but studies indicate that regular physical activity can relieve symptoms. If you aren't used to following a regular exercise routine it can seem like a challenge to get started, but the benefits will be worth it.

Exercise produces endorphins, known as the "feel good" chemical in the brain. Endorphins have the power to improve mood, create feelings of happiness, and reduce the symptoms of depression.

Exercise encourages the production of dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin. This can have a similar effect on the brain as that of stimulant medications. Increased dopamine can help improve attention and focus, and exercise can help to let off the excess energy we all too often struggle with.

My Love Affair With Exercise

I still don't always love to exercise. Sometimes I don't have the energy, or the chaos is running high and I just don't feel like it.

When I am in the midst of ADHD meltdown mode — when nothing is going right, stress is high, and everything I say and do is wrong — the last thing I want to do is exercise.

I want to sit on the couch, eat ice cream, watch movies, and try to ignore my problems.

When the clutter is taking over, my to-do list is seven pages long, and I don't see any way out, I want an escape — not exercise. There already seems to be too few hours in the day, I can't find time to throw one more thing in the pile.

That's When I Need Exercise the Most

There is no way I can ignore the many benefits of exercise for ADHD:

- It calms and relaxes us.
- It keeps us sharp (or sharper).
- It burns off excess energy — that fidgety, restless feeling that makes us want to climb the walls.
- It improves sleep.
- It improves mood.

Exercise for ADHD Doesn't Have to be Boring

You don't have to go to the gym to get exercise (unless you like that sort of thing). You don't need any equipment, unless you will use it and enjoy it. So really, there are no excuses not to exercise!

Whatever you decide, mix it up, try new things and have fun. Remember you're doing this for your physical and mental health.

There are so many things you can do for exercise. Choose what works best for you and your family!

Aerobic activity works wonders for ADHD symptoms — I feel so much better after a burst of activity. And yoga definitely helps calm the mind.

- **Aerobic exercise can be anything that gets your heart rate up.** There aren't any rules! Roller skating, basketball, spinning, exercise classes, dance, riding bikes, playing tag with the kids — pick activities that are fun to you.
- **Yoga doesn't have to be all or nothing.** I am as stiff as a person can be, but I have found doing regular, mindful stretching is essential to calming and quieting my mind.

I enjoy Zumba and walking at a local park. I also kick the soccer ball around with my daughter in the back yard.

Some days when my focus is waning and I need a pick-me-up, I'll do a few minutes of intervals. It works wonders to get me back on track.

I'll do an activity like jumping jacks or shadow boxing for two minutes, followed by a minute of marching in place. I'll repeat a couple of times and then get back to work.

I don't need a lot of research to support what I already know: exercise eases my symptoms and makes living with my ADHD a whole lot easier.

I go through periods where I'll stop exercising and I see the decline. I know how much better I feel when I exercise, and that's all the proof I need. Exercise is a tool that is easily available to assist with my ADHD, one I am happy to have in my arsenal.