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My Messy Life: Q&A

How to Be Happy: Exercise is the Best Way to Improve Mood

Source: By SARAH TRELEAVEN  
Posted: 07/16/08 11:02AM  
Filed Under: [Health](#)



How to be happy. That's really what it all comes down to, isn't it? Even if life has been chugging along at a fairly joyous pace, most of us would admit a little more happy couldn't hurt. Often all that requires is a gentle reminder of how good we already have it or a simple tweaking of our glass-half-empty perspectives in order to turn the tide. This column will do that just that. Each week, Sarah Treleaven will seek out someone

who has gained wisdom and insight into how to live a happier, more fulfilling existence and she will get their best advice.

Last week: [What if you had 37 days left to live?](#)

This week: Debbie Mandel, the author of *Turn On Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul*, is a stress-management expert who has written extensively on the topic of fitness and general well-being. Here, she discusses why working out will affect more than your waistline, and why we should all just put on our sneakers and go.



Did you have a bad day? Overloaded with stress? A workout is the easiest way to feel instantly better. iStock

Q: What affect does physical exercise have on mood, happiness, and stress?

A: Physical exercise releases damaging stress hormones, virtually moving them out of the body, generates endorphins (feel-good chemistry), increases levels of serotonin and balances the brain. Exercise also generates new nerve cells in the brain and enhances the connections between brain cells, which chronic stress shrinks. That can trigger depression, which shrinks the brain even more. However, there is great news. Exercise reverses this process; in fact, exercise causes the brain to grow and flower. After you exercise, you reap the rewards of the relaxation response both physically and emotionally. You have met a challenge and accomplished it. This process reinforces your personal empowerment and actually raises your threshold for stress, which transfers to all the stressors in your life.

Fashion Police



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[This week's gallery](#)

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Mack Daddy: David Eddie's blog



Writer David Eddie works at home and spends much of his time looking after his three boys. He's no minivan-driving kind of parent, though. David Eddie is Mack Daddy.

[A few words for a dead pet rat](#)

My Heart Is an Idiot: Love Advice



Davy Rothbart's heart might be an idiot, but he has gained some wisdom from his years of romantic misfires. Is your heart acting like a jerk?

[How to survive a break up](#)

Momedy: Yuki Hayashi's blog



Yuki Hayashi writes from home in-between hand-feeding her six-year-old and dodging furballs and creditors. What's it like to be the exact opposite of Supermom?

[Why I can't write this blog](#)

with Josh Freed



When Debbie Mandel's mother was sick she would head to the gym after visiting the hospital to work out her sadness.

Ultimately, exercise distracts you from a negative mindset, worry and anxiety. After your workout, you are more likely to use your energy to find a positive solution instead of sending that email you will later regret.

In my books, my affirmation is: **Activity Alleviates Anxiety.** I personally lived these words viscerally. Daily right after work, I would visit my mother in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease; then I

drove straight to the gym for an hour to work out my sadness. In this way when I returned home to my children, I was my true, resiliently optimistic self, able to see the whole picture of my life, not just the dark spot.

**Q: Are some types of exercise better than others?**

A: There are different kinds of exercise, something for everyone, as one size does not fit all. The greatest motivation for exercise other than the health benefits is to like it. Whatever exercise program you choose, find one that makes you feel happy and empowered. It is important to have a balanced exercise program alternating aerobics with strength training and incorporating stretching exercises for flexibility to reap the most benefits. There are so many options from swimming to martial arts classes, yoga, Pilates, tai chi to belly dancing or weight lifting classes. You can join a tennis league or play basketball with your kids.

Whatever exercise you choose, I suggest that you "Mind your muscle." Do it with consciousness as opposed to just going through the motions while you talk on your cell phone. Exercise will make you present and alive as you increase your focus and body awareness like a moving meditation.

Worthy to note: Strength training increases testosterone levels in both men and women – responsible for libido. **Exercise makes you sexy which is a great way to express your vitality.**

**Q: How much exercise do you need to do to feel the positive affect on your mood?**

A: Everyone is different. On average it takes about thirty minutes to feel that endorphin rush. However, if you are having a bad day, you might have to exercise for an hour. There is great synergy when exercising to upbeat music, so that you can feel better more quickly. Besides the music persuades you to get up and move!

**Q: If exercise makes us feel so good, why don't more people do it?**

A: Ah, that is the question! In my new book, *Addicted to Stress* (September 2008), I cite the primary reason for not exercising. Exercise is something we do for the self and most of us put ourselves last on our to-do list. When we exercise, we are taking care of the self and believing that we are worth it; we embrace the self instead of running away from our core identity with distractions. Also, we have become accustomed to a genie in a bottle – taking pills for this and pills for that. However, many of the pills we take to combat depression and anxiety do not work the way commercials tell us they do. They don't balance the brain the way exercise does, either. While some people might have a clinical disorder and do need medication, exercise augments and supercharges their mood, too. For the rest of us, exercise will suffice to generate wellbeing.

However, with that said, if we are sad and fatigued, we don't feel like exercising. It sounds counterintuitive to exercise when we feel tired. But if we just push through, our energy levels soar and we are more productive in all our endeavors.

Also, many of us are afraid of failure. One of my clients felt intimidated when she joined a gym – all those beautiful women in their micro-mini outfits. I explained to her that they were looking at themselves in the mirror and not looking at her. She laughed and was able to get started. After three weeks, it became a good habit. Another reason that keeps us from exercising is that we have an all or nothing philosophy. If we are busy with life and can only do a twenty-minute workout, our stern inner critic makes us feel bad. Instead, we could activate our good inner coach

## Health Tip of the Day



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who might say, "Great job for doing some exercise today."

**Q: What's the scientific explanation for the correlation between exercise and mood or stress?**

A: The stress response helped Neanderthal man to adapt with the fight, flight or freeze mode as he faced the tiger on the Savannah plains. Neanderthal man was physically active – he had to keep moving, for if he stayed in one place too long, he would be eaten. Nowadays our lifestyle has changed and it is easier to "hunt" for food – far too easy.

We have become more sedentary and eat more fatty comfort food. Meanwhile, our stressors have changed as we are bombarded by environmental, physical, emotional and global stressors 24/7. One of the stress hormones, cortisol, has been implicated in driving our craving for fatty, sugary comfort foods while depositing fat around the middle. I see a link between the obesity epidemic, metabolic syndrome and stress. However, regular exercise calms the body, moving the stress hormones out, as it strengthens the infrastructure of nerve cells activating the production of proteins that protect the brain cells against damage like dendrites shrinking and cells dying. When your body and brain are operating at peak performance, you feel balanced and your mood is so much better.

**Q: How can people who are used to being sedentary get started? How do you get motivated?**

A: It's quite simple. Don't make resolutions and postpone. Just turn on the music and move. Put on your sneakers and walk out the door. Exercise with friends for the social aspect. Attend classes that are scheduled, which will help you stick to an exercise schedule. Hire a personal trainer for a while to teach you; individualize your workouts and you will be held accountable. Don't overdo it! Small steps, giant gains. Build up gradually. If you watch a lot of TV, exercise during the commercials!

**Q: How can one avoid the boredom or monotony of an exercise routine?**

A: You change your routine. For example, if you are strength training, incorporate aerobic intervals in between, and vary the repetitions, even the order. Work out with a buddy and get competitive. Try new classes and new instructors. An instructor with good energy is motivating. If you jog outdoors, try a different location for a different terrain. Incorporate seasonal exercises to tap into nature's energy. Try new exercise videos. I love belly dancing, so I tie a sash around my hips and express my feelings to the music. Belly dancing is a great lower and upper body workout. It's been around for 5,000 years, so there must be something to it.

**Q: Can you suggest a basic weekly routine to help elevate mood?**

A: Two days of strength training 30 minutes to an hour, three days of aerobics 30 minutes to an hour, two days of graceful stretching 30 minutes. The great thing about doing some sort of exercise every day is that exercise organizes your day around good health. You will be eating quality foods to fuel your body. So now you are exercising, elevating your mood through food, and most importantly – you are doing something for yourself! Don't forget that housework and gardening are also considered to be exercise. Just put your mind into the movements and you are working out.

**Q: Are you happy? If yes, what works best for you? What are your top tips?**

A: Yes, I am happy. I have faced many hardships in life and experienced grief, but I begin every day with this premise: I am above ground. This sets me up for a reasonable happiness. It is important to have reasonable expectations; otherwise, you are forever yearning and escaping. In addition to exercising and eating balanced meals, I reframe negatives into positives every day. It has become a reflex for me. We all make up stories and fill in the details. I choose to make up a good story and act as the heroine. Also, for me, creativity fills the void of loss and disappointment. My passion is writing and motivational speaking, being part of a larger context, as I maintain my unique voice. In order to be truly happy one has to live an authentic life, to feel liberated and to know what one uniquely brings to the table while helping others. So when something destructive happens in your life, do what I do: Fill it with creativity, something which makes your heart sing. And last, but not least, I use my inner treadmill – humor! Don't we take ourselves far too seriously? Life can often be a sitcom.

**How to Be Happier Archives**

Ninety percent of work happiness is attitude.

Were you born happy or do you default to melancholy? It doesn't really matter because [happiness is in your control](#).

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