

## **The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns**

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### **"A Strong Body Makes The Mind Strong"**

from the American Counseling Association

It was in 1785 that Thomas Jefferson, long an advocate of keeping active and fit, wrote "A strong body makes the mind strong." His preferred method for staying active was long walks, which gave way to horse back rides in his later years. And while you may not have his Monticello estate in Virginia to stroll about, his advice regarding physical activity and good mental health is just as true today.

Recent studies have shown that exercise can directly affect a number of things related to good physical and mental health, even to the point of improving brain function.

University of Illinois exercise scientists reviewed more than 100 recent studies related to the effects of aerobic exercise and weight training on the human brain. Several studies found that exercise promotes the production of a protein that has been shown to stimulate the growth of neurons and enhance cognitive performance. Bigger biceps and a bigger brain seemed to be what they were finding.

And while most of us are aware that exercise can improve a number of health issues, including diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis, it may come as news that research has shown that exercise also produces significant psychological benefits, including help in fighting depression and anxiety.

Although experts don't know exactly how regular physical activity helps ease depression, it appears that exercise helps release certain chemicals (like neurotransmitters, endorphins and endocannabinoids) that seem to lessen depression. Exercise also helps reduce certain immune system chemicals that have been shown to worsen depression.

Of course, you don't have to be suffering from depression or anxiety to enjoy the benefits that regular exercise can bring. One clear benefit is how it can boost self-confidence. As you meet exercise goals and challenges you will begin to feel more confident. Getting in shape can also help you feel better about your appearance.

Starting a regular exercise program can also be a distraction that helps take your mind off your worries. And, as you hit the Y, local gym or walking and jogging trails, it's likely you'll increase social interaction, another key to good mental health.

Yes, it does take some effort to get into a regular exercise program, but the physical and psychological benefits are many. And you don't have to go overboard. Experts say just 30 minutes of strong exercise, three times a week, will bring considerable benefits to the whole you.

*"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to [ACAcornet@counseling.org](mailto:ACAcornet@counseling.org) or visit the ACA website at [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)*

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