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## **Exercise motivation... for stress reduction** <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

Does exercise really reduce stress? I recently took a new job that is very high stress, and I need a release. My friend says I should take up mountain biking, that it will reduce my stress (and keep me from gaining weight at this desk job). Thanks for the great site.

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

A high-impact yes to your question! In fact, there aren't many better pursuits than exercise for stress reduction. Before delving deeper into why exercise is so great, it's best to make sure everyone's on the same treadmill about the definition of "exercise." According to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans <sup>[2]</sup>, it's recommended that adults (ages 18 to 64) get 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week. Physical activity is considered moderately intense if you are working hard enough to break a sweat, but you are still able to hold a conversation. If you're breathing hard and fast, your heart rate is up and you're not able to get many words in, that type of activity can be described as vigorous. Additionally, two or more days of muscle strengthening activity per week is also recommended.

Before you run in the other direction, consider some of the health-promoting and stress-controlling benefits of aerobic activity. Most notably, aerobic exercise strengthens your heart and lungs. These two vital organs — especially the heart — bear the brunt of the body's physiological stress response, as they are constantly being called upon to "fight or flee" from job, school, family, financial, relationship, and every other kind of stressor we confront daily.

You brought up another exercise plus: weight loss and maintenance. For many of us, looking good also means feeling good and vice versa. Exercise improves physical appearance, enhances self-esteem and self-confidence, and offers other mental health goodies. Regular exercisers report more energy and better ability to concentrate. Oh, and don't forget about improved quality of sleep, reduced stress reactivity (not getting as stressed out about things as you usually do), and, yes, maybe even a slowed aging process!

Exercise as stress-management strategy is easier said than done, so here are some tips that

have helped many health-seekers to start and stick with exercise programs:

- Begin slowly. If you are not accustomed to exercising, start out with 10 to 15 minutes twice a week and build up from there.
- Snag a workout partner — there's nothing like the motivation of another sweaty, panting humanoid to keep you going.
- If the gym will be "workout central" for you, take a quick lesson from a trainer on proper equipment use. Simple direction from experienced health club personnel can reduce gymphobia (and possibly injuries) while improving the quality of your workout. Your gym might offer this one-time service free of charge to newcomers, but this doesn't mean that you can't ask for guidance down the line, too.
- Let friends and family know that you are exercising for your health — let them cheer you on.
- Finally, make your workout sessions regular and real. Schedule them in your calendar, just as you would record business appointments, classes, and social engagements.

If you are 35 or older or have any heart trouble, blood pressure problems, or other medical conditions, you will want to get a medical clearance from your health care provider before you choose your exercise plan.

By the way, you have a variety of exercise options, and you don't have to join a gym to partake. Walking briskly, running, biking (mountain if it sustains your heart rate), swimming, calisthenics, playing tennis or basketball, and cross-country skiing are just a few possibilities. Check out some Q&As in the *Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity* [3] archives to learn more about your options for making physical fitness a priority in your life.

In addition to exercise, try to take breaks from your high-stress job. Walk around outside, take lunch, or sit in the bathroom for a few minutes if that's the only time you can get away. Just a few breathers during a hectic day can go a long way toward stress relief.

Good luck getting moving!

Alice!

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