

Mental Health Awareness Month

Why Be Active?

Help for depression and anxiety

Exercise is a scientifically proven mood booster, decreasing symptoms of both depression and anxiety. Physical activity kicks up endorphin levels, the body's famous "feel good" chemical produced by the brain and spinal cord that produces feelings of happiness and euphoria. Even just moderate exercise throughout the week can improve depression and anxiety, so much so that some doctors recommend trying out an exercise regimen for these conditions before turning to medication.

Decreased stress

Another mental benefit of exercise is reduced stress levels—something that can make us all happier. Increasing your heart rate can actually reverse stress-induced brain damage by stimulating the production of neurohormones like norepinephrine, which not only improves cognition and mood but improves thinking clouded by stressful events. Exercise also forces the body's central and sympathetic nervous systems to communicate with one another, improving the body's overall ability to respond to stress.

Increased self-esteem and self-confidence

From improving endurance to losing weight and increasing muscle tone, there's no shortage of physical achievements that come about from regular exercise. All those achievements can all add up to a whopping boost of self-esteem—and the confidence that comes with it. You may not set out for better-fitting clothes, a slimmer physique, and the ability to climb a hill without getting winded. Oftentimes it happens before you even realize it. It's just one of the many benefits of physical activity that boost your body, mind, and spirit.

Better sleep

If you have trouble getting a good night's sleep, exercise can help with that too. Physical activity increases body temperature, which can have calming effects on the mind, leading to less sheep counting and more shut-eye. Exercise also helps regulate your circadian rhythm, our bodies' built-in alarm clock that controls when we feel tired and when we feel alert. (Although improved sleep is a psychological benefit of exercise, sleep experts recommend not exercising close to bedtime.)

Brain boost

From building intelligence to strengthening memory, exercise boosts brainpower in a number of ways. Studies on mice and humans indicate that cardiovascular exercise creates new brain cells—a process called neurogenesis—and improve overall brain performance. It also prevents cognitive decline and memory loss by strengthening the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory and learning. Studies also prove that physical activity boosts creativity and mental energy.

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Ways to Be Active

Walking the dog

Do morning stretches or yoga

Dancing around the living room

Walking or biking to school. Use exercise as a form of transportation.

Join a sport

Take a hike

Be Active in the classroom

Balloon Volleyball

Make a net by tying a piece of yarn from one chair to another. Then blow up a balloon and start practicing those serving skills! Change things up a bit by kicking or head-bumping the balloon.

Book-Worm Workout

Pick a book that has a word that's often repeated. For example, choose the word "hat" if you're reading *The Cat in the Hat*. Every time the word comes up in the story, get your kid to do a jumping jack.

Yoga JENGA

Use a pencil to write down a yoga move on each JENGA block. Set up the tower and play the game as usual, but every time a block is pulled out, every player has to do the specific yoga move. If the tower falls, do the plank for 30 seconds.

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Why Give?

It's a phrase every child is used to hearing while growing up, "treat others as you would like to be treated." However, being kind goes far beyond benefiting the person who received a kind act, it can also have a wonderful impact on a person's mental health!

Research shows being kind can reduce stress, improve emotional well being and even benefit physical health. So, what exactly does it mean to "be kind"? According to Psychology Today, kindness means, "a behavioral response of compassion and actions that are selfless; or a mindset that places compassion for others before one's own interests. In performing the selfless act, a person may undercut their own selfish interests."

We know that when a young person, or anyone, feels down and someone is unkind to them it can have devastating consequences. It's the reason why many adults will never forget incidents in childhood or in school when a person was cruel or unkind to them. Youth who do not have a trusted support system to turn to are at a higher risk for self-destructive behavior like drug use and suicide. Now, more than ever, acts of kindness can help.

The positive effects of kindness are experienced by everyone who witnesses the act, improving their mood and making them significantly more likely to "pay it forward."

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Ways to Give

1. Listen
2. Smile
3. Hug
4. Hold a door for someone
5. Pick up litter
6. Compliment a friend, classmate, or family member
7. Clean up after yourself
8. Notice someone who seems lonely and invite them along with you
9. Let someone who wants to help you, help
10. Send a text to a loved one
11. Don't offer advice unless asked
12. Share silence with someone
13. Engage in random acts of kindness
14. Engage in kind acts that are not random at all
15. Send an inspirational quote to a friend
16. Put a surprise note or drawing on someone's desk
17. Make someone laugh



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Give in the classroom

Model Kindness

One of the best ways to teach kindness in the classroom is to model being kind to others. I always introduce our custodian to our class the first day of school and regularly thank her for all that she does in front of the class. It soon spreads and I hear my students begin to thank her when she's working in the room. I also make it a point to be overly kind to our cafeteria staff in front of the students. Soon, they start to treat the cafeteria staff just as respectfully and kindly. Our students look to us as models for what's expected, and if we are treating others kindly, they will follow suit.

Teach with movies!

After watching a movie together, go beyond "Did you like the movie?" and talk about the movie's themes, such as respect, friendship, or kindness. Ask your kids why they think the characters chose a certain action or what the characters could have done differently for a better outcome. Challenge them to come up with an alternate ending.

Create a Challenge to Spread Kindness

When one act of kindness is conducted between classmates, the recipient(s) of the act pass on a new act of kindness to another classmate until the entire classroom family has experienced at least one act of kindness that was bestowed upon them at closing circle (yep, like morning circle but at the end of the day). Repeat :)

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Ways to Take Notice

Take notice today, enjoy the moment and connect with your environment. Try these:

- ◆ Give the above mindfulness exercise, or something similar:
 - 1) Take a moment to close your eyes and bring your attention to your breathing.
 - 2) Now, open your eyes and look around for five things you can see. What do they look like? What thoughts or feelings does looking at them trigger? Tell yourself about what you can see.
 - 3) Next, listen out for five things you can hear. Again, describe the sounds, the thoughts they trigger and how they make you feel, to yourself. Focus as much as you can on truly listening to what you can hear.
 - 4) Repeat the above two steps for things you can smell and things you can touch. You could combine these with something like a book. What do its pages smell like? Is the cover wrinkled or smooth? Put all of your attention on being in the moment and connecting with your surroundings and the objects in them.
- ◆ Buy some plant seeds, plant them, and start looking after it.
- ◆ Tidy up your room and clear out any old junk you don't need.
- ◆ Deliberately take a different route to school, to class, or around your community. (Safety first).
- ◆ Lock your phone and look up a bit more - notice what you see!

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Take notice in the classroom

Remember the purpose of mindfulness is to reduce stress and increase positivity. Consequently, avoid using mindfulness as a disciplinary tool. Mindfulness is about increasing awareness that thoughts are "just thoughts," understanding how emotions manifest in their bodies, and recognizing when attention has wandered.

Set aside a time each day to practice mindfulness. It is a skill that takes time to develop.

Offer to practice mindfulness with your kids or students. This way, you are modeling for them how to incorporate it into their everyday lives, even when they are adults.

Select the right time to practice mindfulness. For instance, avoid planning a mindfulness activity during recess when the kids want to run and play. Pick a quiet time of day when there are few distractions the first few times you practice. Eventually, as they get better at becoming mindful, they will be able to put it to use even in the most chaotic situations.

Share some examples of how you have redirected your thoughts and encourage your kids or students to share their experiences. By discussing what works and what doesn't work, you can all learn from and support one another.

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Why Connect?

Social connection is defined as the interpersonal and interdependent closeness between people, resulting in a sense of belonging. Notably, it is not the number of or proximity to friends, or the frequency of interactions with others. Rather, social connection expresses the positivity and closeness that an individual perceives in their interactions with others. Social connection is a sense of trust and belonging in one's community. It is a feeling of being accepted and appreciated for one's best qualities, rather than tolerated or ignored. Common themes associated with social connection include an ability to be one's authentic self and a comfortable sense of peace. Because cognitive processes are inextricably linked in the brain to emotional ones, social connection is a necessary precondition for learning and wellbeing.

When students have weak social connections, learning is limited through reduced executive function. Executive function serves as the command center of the brain which nimbly sorts and applies new learning. It is depressed by the stress and cognitive load caused by low social connection, and the following capacities are greatly diminished:

Organization, planning, & time management. Students who feel isolated will have trouble planning ahead or managing their time because they are caught up in the strain of their current state.

Working memory and attention. Working memory involves the initial encoding of information and refers to the amount of information a person can hold in their head at one time without losing track or becoming confused. When students feel disconnected from their environment or believe that their teacher doesn't like them or believe in their abilities, working memory and attention are greatly diminished. Students spend more of their cognitive energy focusing on the source of their stress than on what they are learning. They are less able to listen, follow directions, and focus on complex learning.

Flexible transfer of knowledge & skills. The sorting of new information into previously held schema or adapting current schema to allow for new understanding requires an unstressed brain. Lack of social connection also limits a student's ability to creatively solve problems. Framed another way, social connection is fundamental to human happiness, and when we are unhappy, our critical thinking skills are highly depressed. The availability of the prefrontal cortex for flexible use of knowledge or skills is compromised in a person feeling lonely or rejected.

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Ways to Connect

- 1) Write a letter to a friend or distant relative.
- 2) Send a text just to say hello.
- 3) Meet up with your friends and family using social media/video conferencing.
- 4) Send a post card.

Connect in the classroom

Human Bingo

One camp favorite get-to-know-you game is Human Bingo. Create a Bingo-style sheet and give kids five or ten minutes to talk to each other, get a name to fill in for a box, and eventually get "Bingo." This is a low stress, non-embarrassing game. Have some small, fun prizes for different Bingo categories (line, blackout, etc.)

Sticky note fun

1. I haven't tried this (since we don't have white boards at camp), but I think it's a great idea in a classroom. Come up with a fun topic or question each day, then have each student write their answer on a sticky note and put it on the board. You can share some, have kids guess who answered what, etc. I've seen so many great pictures on Pinterest of fun questions you can ask and topics kids can respond to. Here are some examples:
2. Throw it away Thursday: If you could only keep one thing, and had to throw away all the rest of your possessions, what would you keep?
3. Fri-YAY: Why are you glad it's Friday?

Snowball Fight

Kids love to throw stuff, so why not have them get something out of it? You can use a "Snowball Fight" in your classroom as a get-to-know you activity or as a review for something they've learned. For a get-to-know you game, have each student write or describe what makes you a great friend, and name three things about themselves. Once everyone's ready, have them crush their paper into a "snowball." Throw papers in designated safe area of the room, without hitting anyone for 30-45 seconds, then have each student pick up the closest "snowball," find the person who wrote it, and meet them! As a way of connecting throughout the year, kids can write a question on their snowball, throw them around, and answer the question they end up with.

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Why Keep learning?

Continuous learning is your self-motivated persistence in acquiring knowledge and competencies in order to expand your skillset and develop future opportunities. It forms part of your personal and professional development in an effort to avoid stagnation and reach your full potential. Knowledge is now at everyone's fingertips. Those not making use of this opportunity will remain where they are – their capabilities diminishing in importance. These seven benefits of lifelong learning should be reason enough to never stop learning.

Remain relevant

Don't be left behind. Ensure you remain relevant to your sector by keeping up-to-date with trends and adapting your skill set. To function effectively in this rapidly changing world of technology, you need to learn new things to remain valuable.

Prepare for the unexpected

Lifelong learning will help you adapt to unexpected changes – for example, losing your job and having to depend on new skills to find work. By continuing to learn, you'll more easily step out of your comfort zone and take on new job opportunities.

Boost your profile

When you're always learning, you'll keep improving, will grow in your career, and start to receive recommendations from colleagues and managers. The chances are that you'll switch jobs multiple times throughout your life and you need to learn new skills to adapt accordingly.

Competence leads to confidence

Learning new things gives us a feeling of accomplishment which, in turn, boosts our confidence in our own capabilities; you'll also feel more ready to take on challenges and explore new business ventures.

Spark new ideas

Acquiring new skills will unveil new opportunities and help you find innovative solutions to problems.

Change your perspective

Continuous learning opens your mind and changes your attitude by building on what you already know. The more you learn, the better you'll get at seeing more sides of the same situation – helping you understand more deeply.

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Ways to Keep learning

Create your own board games.

Choose something you love (i.e. dogs, cooking, Disney, soccer, etc.), and challenge yourself to design a board game around your passion. From creating the game board and researching the topic to figuring out the rules and writing simple directions for others to follow, this hands-on activity truly puts the fun in learning.

Declare a weekly "Kid in the Kitchen" day.

Bake cookies, and double the recipe to help brush up on math skills. Invite an adult to read through a cookbook, find a dinner recipe, and write a grocery list of ingredients. As you shop, compare prices, look at price-per-unit, and calculate coupon savings. At home, prepare the meal together as they read, measure and follow directions.

Tap into the power of music.

Challenge yourself to rewrite the lyrics to some of your favorite songs or create a funny rap about your favorite TV show. Or put your "advertising hats" and create a 30-second jingle to market your favorite toy, book, snack, or hobby.

Keep learning in the classroom

Choose culturally relevant materials.

Students who don't find representations of their own cultures in texts are likely to lose interest in school-based literacies. Have your students complete a short survey on their outside interests and use that information to assist in building your lesson plans. This will help your students see the connections between what they're learning inside and outside the classroom.

Use specific everyday examples.

An easy way to help students feel personally connected to what they're being taught is to talk about how they can apply the material in real life. Demonstrate how students can apply math concepts to help them manage their personal finances, nutrition, and daily schedule.

Link routines to learning.

You can also promote learning through classroom routines. For instance, a child learning to wash hands during bathroom breaks can also be taught science concepts (body parts, hygiene and disease prevention, water conservation), reading (bathroom signage), antonyms (hot/cold, left/right), and math (counting).

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