



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Encouraging Exercise for Mental Health, Stress and Mood Relief

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Now more than ever, employee health and wellbeing is at the front of mind. In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, handwashing, social distancing, wearing masks, and monitoring physical health symptoms are now common practices as we continue to navigate both personal and workplace environments. While these recommendations are essential to the protection of our communities, there is a lack of attention to one other action that is critical to survival. For all of us, regular physical activity remains an important strategy for staying healthy.

With remote work, the change in physical regimen of working from home versus in the office may mean extended periods of sitting in a place not specifically equipped to support work styles. In the workplace, there is more likely access to ergonomic furniture and accommodations, plus the opportunity to stand up and walk around more frequently. At home, while sitting on furniture meant for everyday living, it's much easier to become entrenched and move less. Compromised posture can lead to physical discomfort or pain.

The pandemic coupled with social and political events occurring nationwide are threats to our mental health.

The transition of adapting to living where we work and working where we live can be additionally stressful. Feeling anxious, depressed, on edge or overwhelmed with feelings of being unable to escape work, especially when many employees also have others in the home who are either attending school or working virtually. No matter the work environment, lack of movement and physical manifestations of heightened stress can develop or worsen.

Stress Response

In its acute form, stress is actually good because it stimulates the brain and body for action and helps performance. However, in its chronic form, there is greater reactivity and slower recovery of the stress response. That means the physiological response is triggered more easily at lower levels of stress, and takes longer to return to a normal state. The result is taxing to the brain and body which can lead to symptoms of mental and physical illness. Just six weeks of chronic stress can lead to depressive symptoms, even in people without a prior diagnosis. We are well past that six-week point in this pandemic and many may be experiencing a depressed or changed mood unlike anything they've experienced before.

A preliminary, preprint study posted May 12, 2020 on the research publication platform Cambridge Open Engage found that Americans are exercising less than usual during the pandemic, and sitting and looking at screens more. In a sample of about 3,000 U.S. adults, people who were meeting exercise guidelines before the pandemic reported an average 32% reduction in physical activity once social-distancing measures went into effect. Those who were sedentary before tended to stay that way.

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The benefits of exercise for improving physical condition and fighting disease have long been established, with physicians consistently encouraging physical activity. Although it might be tempting to skip workouts during these challenging times, public health officials say that exercise, while undoubtedly crucial under normal circumstances, is essential to physical and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though it's technically a stressor and activates the stress response in the same way as a psychological stressor, the magnitude of the exercise stress response is acute and controllable by modifying intensity and duration.

How Does It Work?

Regular aerobic exercise can reduce anxiety by making the brain's "fight or flight" system less reactive. Studies show exercise is very effective at reducing fatigue, improving alertness and concentration, and enhancing overall cognitive function. This can be especially helpful when stress depletes one's energy or ability to concentrate. When anxious people are exposed to physiological changes of fear, such as a rapid heartbeat, through regular aerobic exercise, they can develop a tolerance for such symptoms. This makes us more resilient to all forms of stressors, even the psychological ones brought on by this pandemic.

Recommendations

Virtually any form of exercise, from aerobics to yoga, can act as a stress reliever. Whether someone is an athlete or a beginner, a little exercise can still go a long way toward stress management.

- For most healthy adults, getting at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity a week, or a combination of moderate and vigorous activity is recommended.
- Examples of moderate aerobic activity include brisk walking, swimming or dancing, and vigorous aerobic activity can include running or biking.

- Strength training exercises for all major muscle groups should be done at least two times a week also. Body weight movements such as push-ups and squats can be done without special equipment.
- Almost any form of exercise or movement can increase fitness levels while decreasing stress and boosting mental health. Greater amounts of exercise will provide even greater health benefits.
- The most important thing is to pick an enjoyable activity that can become a habit and maintained.

Encouraging physical wellness, and reminding employees to be intentional with physical activity during the workday, should be a part of your wellness plan and regular communications. A few ideas that can help get everyone moving:

- **Encourage physical exercise.** Walking, for instance, is the most common activity across every age group. It is healthy, free and current mandates allow walking outdoors.
- **Schedule "walking meetings."** If a meeting can be a phone conversation, encourage walking outdoors or moving about while on the call.
- **Check with your healthcare vendors** for free resources, discounts on fitness activities or exercise trackers, etc. to give away to employees.
- **Create virtual team running, walking or cycling contests.** Participants track their miles each week and get bragging rights for the most miles in a week or month.
- **Coordinate online yoga or fitness classes** for employees to attend.
- **Encourage eating healthily** and the importance of hydration.
- **Enjoy the benefits of not having to deal with the regular commute,** use the extra time for exercise or meditation to reduce stress.

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- **Set up the remote working environment** properly to maximize productivity and mitigate the risk of potential neck, back or repetitive strain injuries.
- **When considering indoor activities, encourage use of technology** (workout apps or videos) or portable home exercise equipment (jump ropes and elastic bands) to furniture (using a sofa edge for dips and the bottom space to support sit-ups, or chair exercises).

Looking Forward

How long will this last? No one really knows. However, prioritizing the mental and physical health of employees is key, not only during a pandemic, but in the future as well. By emphasizing the importance of the mental and physical health of your employees, and letting them know you are running this COVID marathon together, you are showing them that you care about them as people, and value their well-being in addition to their work.

First Choice Health EAP is here to partner with your organization to support employee work/life balance. For support navigating stress and emotional well-being contact our EAP experts at (800) 777-4114. We are here for you, your employees, and families 24/7, online or by phone.

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