

Want to feel happy, energised, confident, and calm under pressure – and drop a dress size along the way? This is the secret that will change the way you think about exercise for ever...

If you gave up after day one of Operation Flat Stomach, hear this. There is a reason why, for some people, exercise becomes an enjoyable, regular, life-changing habit. Their secret? Women who exercise regularly don't just do it for their bodies – they do it for their minds, too. A review of studies investigating the impact of regular exercise on mood found that it made people feel happier, calmer, more alert, relaxed and energised. And the best results aren't achieved by doing something you dislike, at a pace that makes you feel as if you're about to pass out, but by picking an activity you enjoy, at an intensity that feels good.

So welcome to your personal trainer with a difference. Instead of designing a routine around the areas of your body you'd like to change, we're here to help you find the activity that will set you on track to be happier, more relaxed and more confident. And you may just find you've lost weight without trying...

THE PROBLEM: STRESS

Your prescription:
RUNNING

Co-founder of Up and Running, a group for women with mental health issues, Shona Campbell knows just how transformational running can be for women under stress – so that's all of us, then. She explains: 'When new women join our group, I can't help but notice how physically uncomfortable they are – stress has given them hunched shoulders, high around their ears, and their body language is rigid and tight. But as soon as they start to run, you can see their bodies begin to relax.'

A study has shown that running causes the brain to release more of the neurotransmitter GABA, which helps to quieten the brain's response to stress, leading to a feeling of calm – and is similar to the way many anti-anxiety drugs work. This kind of exercise has a long-term effect too, fundamentally remodelling the brain, so fitter people are often able to recover from stressful situations more quickly.

But it's not just physical. Running outdoors with others can be emotionally restorative, too, Shona explains: 'A natural environment is a less stressful environment, and sharing the experience with others turns your focus from your spiralling worries to the world outside. At one time, I felt under so much pressure from various responsibilities that I was constantly on the verge of tears. I went out with my running group and, as we sped through the local countryside, we all shared our experiences and stresses and how we coped. I came back home with a great big smile on my face. Although the pressures were the same, I now knew I could handle them.'

Check out runengland.org/whywerun for running clubs of all levels in your area, or try on your own first with a walk-run programme. Shona advises you run for small bursts with walks in between, and gradually build up the time you spend running – you're aiming for a balance that's challenging and hard work, but achievable. If running even short distances is too tough, start with power walking to build up your stamina,

Turn it into a habit by going at the same time every week, no question – put your running clothes on before you give yourself a chance to think about it.

then introduce a 30-second jog every five minutes, and gradually increase from there.

■ **Make sure you keep a record of how long you've run for, so you can measure how you're getting stronger and fitter. That gives you the self-belief to feel in control of your situation, no matter what kind of stress you face in the coming week.**

THE PROBLEM: LOW CONFIDENCE

Your prescription: **DANCE**

Rather than just waiting for the next season of *Strictly*, maybe it's time to get a pair of dancing shoes of your own? Research has shown just how powerful dance can be when it comes to changing people's view of themselves. In a study by Sport in Mind last year, 91% of participants found regular exercise improved their self-esteem, and more studies into groups as different as teenage girls and patients with Parkinson's disease, from people with obesity to those with depression, all come to the same findings: dance classes help to boost self-confidence.

For Anne Hogan, from the Royal Academy of Dance, the impact can be felt before you

THE PROBLEM: LOST

YOUR JOIE DE VIVRE

Your prescription:
PILATES

Studies have shown that Pilates, which focuses on strengthening even the smallest muscle groups, increases serotonin levels and is a significant mood booster, even improving quality of life for cancer patients. It can have a profound effect on how we experience everyday life, as ex-office worker Jamie Clough found: 'I had a lot of family-related problems in my life for about six months, and I felt drained and low. I couldn't seem to take pleasure in life any more. I went to see my GP, expecting to be prescribed medication – but the doctor told me that I wasn't a candidate for antidepressants, and I should try doing some exercise first, and return if I didn't feel better. Well, I never did go back for that second visit.'

'I didn't feel up to going to a gym class, so I searched for work-out videos on YouTube, and I tried a Pilates routine. I decided to do one video every day, and gradually I started

noticing my strength was increasing – and I started to feel better. Everyday pleasures like breathing in the fresh air and noticing the seasons change became joyful again. I even took some enjoyment in doing the dishes! Eventually, I left my job and now I'm training to be a Pilates teacher. I'd love to be able to pass this on and help somebody else to get their mojo back.'

Don't be put off if you don't feel fit. As Jamie says: 'A good teacher will help you adapt a routine to suit you – for example, if your wrists aren't strong enough, you can lean on your elbows. No matter what your level of fitness, you can still do Pilates.'

■ **You're never too old for Pilates, either, says Winona Holl of the Pilates Foundation: 'I have a 90-year-old student who says, "You're keeping me alive!"'**

even learn your first routine. 'Think about how a person stands when they lack confidence and have low self-esteem: shoulders slumped, looking down, the body drawing into itself. Dance helps to improve your core strength and posture – in a ballet class, for example, you learn to lengthen your body, pull yourself up, look ahead, and fill up the space. Simply standing tall and proud can help people find a physical connection to an emotional sense of confidence, providing an instant hit to your self-esteem.'

■ **It may take a couple of tries to find a class and teacher you like, so don't give up after your first go.**

■ **Find a dance agency in your area at danceuk.org – it will have details of all dance classes taking place near you. Make sure your teacher has insurance.**

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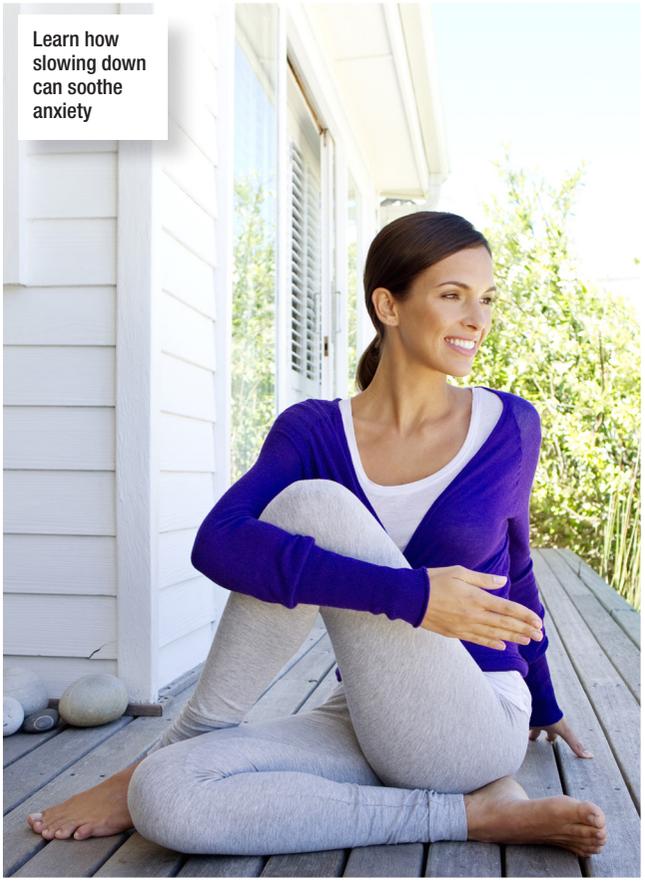
Good Housekeeping
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Why

EXERCISE

really is the answer

Learn how slowing down can soothe anxiety



practice drawn from yoga – there’s a growing body of evidence showing just how helpful yoga can be for mental health issues.’

Yoga teacher Amarajyoti was one of the first people to establish a proper training course in yoga for mental health professionals. She explains that the fastest way to feel less anxious is by slowing your breath down – but this is almost impossible if you’re already in panic mode, when your breathing automatically becomes fast and shallow. She suggests you start with this exercise:

‘You can do this sitting in a chair, standing, or lying down: raise your arms above your head as you breathe in, and lower them as you breathe out. You’ll want to do this fast if you’re feeling anxious, but the

emphasis is on allowing the movement to become slower. It sounds simple, but it can be very challenging to do it slowly, and maintain your focus – and very powerful, too.’

THE PROBLEM: FEELING ANXIOUS

Your prescription: **YOGA**

As a yoga teacher and cognitive behavioural therapist, Melanie King is well placed to understand the impact that yoga can have on the mind of a person suffering from anxiety. ‘I remember one student in my yoga class who was always in a hurry. She was always on the go and would rush her postures, raising her arms quickly instead of slowly, always striving, never relaxing,’ she explains. ‘By getting her to slow down, breathe deeply, and by bringing her body into balance, I could see her mind calming, and I watched her gradually become less anxious. Over the weeks even her speech slowed down, she started prioritising more at work, and anxiety ceased to be a problem for her.’

With its focus on breathing, yoga calms the body and the mind, slowing down the heart rate and releasing tense muscles. Studies have shown that after doing regular yoga practice, participants had increased levels of GABA, the neurotransmitter that may help reduce anxiety, and they felt significantly less anxious. And word is spreading, as Mel explains: ‘GPs are starting to recognise the benefits of yoga, in certain areas of the country. With the boom in mindfulness – a

Yoga can be adapted for people of all ages and levels of fitness and disability, Amarajyoti says: ‘Almost anyone can do yoga. I teach people who are elderly, who have MS, who can’t stand, and who have shoulder and neck problems.’

■ Many of the psychological treatments being used to help people with anxiety, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, are built on the fundamental principle that underlines yoga: awareness. Yoga helps to develop physical and mental awareness of aches and thoughts and to step back, rather than getting caught up in them and provoking a distressing emotional response.

THE PROBLEM: DEPRESSION

Your prescription: **WALKING**

Exercise can be an extremely powerful tool in helping people with depression and unlike medication, it has few side effects, costs little, and it works: a recent review of 30 randomised controlled trials concluded that exercise can be as effective as cognitive therapy or medication. But when you’re suffering from depression, the last thing you feel like doing is exercise. That’s why going for a walk outside may be the best place to start.

According to mental health charity Mind’s Information Manager, Sam Challis, exercising outdoors can be a game-changer. ‘Our research into green exercise shows that it can be invaluable – more than 90% of those who took part in our studies said it benefited their mental health. No matter how unwell you are, it will have a positive impact – and if you aren’t seriously unwell, it can be enough on its own to raise your mood,’ he explains.

For Des De Moor, from The Ramblers walking charity, simply being outdoors can have a huge impact on people’s health – both mental and physical: ‘Patients in hospitals recover more quickly if their window looks out on to a garden, rather than on to a brick wall. Time and time again, I’ve seen people walking their way out of a dark time in their lives.’

■ In one study, 71% of people found they were less depressed after going for a walk outdoors, versus 45% of those who walked indoors.
 ■ With one in nine women in England taking antidepressants, exercise could be a key part in bringing those numbers down: but medication could still be an important part of the process. As Sam explains, ‘Some people find antidepressants give them the energy to access sporting activities – the pills enable them to do the exercise that, in turn, enables them to stop taking the pills.’ □