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How Exercise Can Help You Beat Addiction

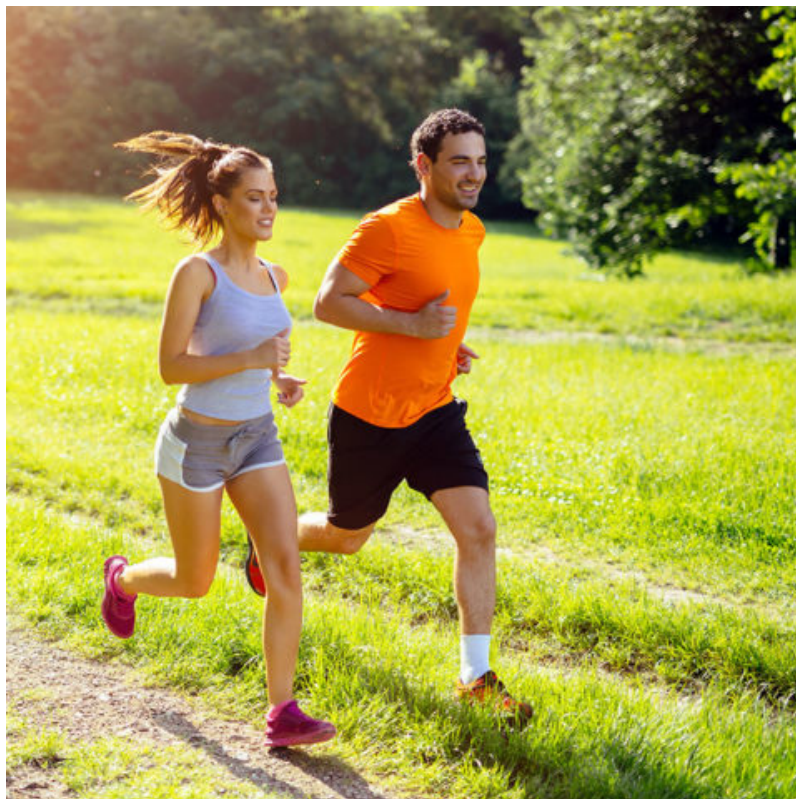
It's common knowledge that exercise is good for you, but finding the time and motivation to workout can be a challenge. For those suffering with addiction, it's especially difficult, as physical activity often takes a backseat to getting high. But what if regular exercise could give you a natural high similar to the chemical one that drugs and alcohol provide? Current research shows it can, and millions of Americans are beating their addictions with it.

A Healthier Craving

When a person is trying to overcome addiction, the mind and body crave the substance that was producing endorphins in the brain and creating the feeling of being high. Add to this the stress of daily life, and the cravings can reach unbearable levels. Vigorous exercise also releases endorphins, causing you to feel a “runner’s high” — the same sensation of euphoria that accompanies a chemical high. Although it may be less intense than what you experience with drugs or alcohol, the effects can be pleasurable both mentally and physically. In fact, one study of patients receiving treatment for substance abuse showed that exercise can lead to a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence in staying sober.[1]

It’s common for an individual to become anxious or depressed when dealing with withdrawal, but exercise can foster healthy, addiction-free living. It’s also been shown to:[2]

- Reduce cravings and use
- Decrease the effectiveness of the drugs, thus lowering susceptibility to use and abuse
- Restore brain cells damaged by intense drug abuse
- Produce “neurological rewards” and boost self-esteem
- Reduce anxiety and stress
- Promote better sleep
- Improve thinking and provide a positive outlook
- Fill a void, offering structure and routine
- Serve as a constructive coping mechanism



But how can running, weightlifting and yoga have such a significant effect on the body and mind of someone coping with the recovery process? It has much to do with the benefits that exercise has on everybody.

Physical Benefits of Exercise



Weight
loss &
management



Increased
energy
&
muscle
strength



Better
sleep



Improved
circulation



Psychological
improvements



Improved
self-
image &
mood



Reduced
depression
&
anxiety



Sharper
mental
acuity

A study published by the Scandinavian Journal of Public Health backs this up. It found that individuals who incorporated exercise into their rehab programs reported reduced intake of the drugs and improved quality of life.[3] Participants said they felt more energetic, could breathe easier and felt better about their appearance.

Finding the Motivation

While exercising may be the last thing recovering individuals want to do, they may find it encouraging to know they're not alone in their struggle with motivation. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that Americans are seriously lacking exercise. As of 2012, only about 21 percent of adults met the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines, which recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week.[4]

While exercise is not enjoyable for everyone, it can be used as a tool to help build (or rebuild) a healthy life. It's even been shown to deter the use and abuse of illicit



drugs, as evidenced by a 2011 study published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*[5]. Similarly, results from a National Institute on Drug Abuse survey indicated that high school students who exercise regularly are less likely than sedentary teens to smoke cigarettes or abuse marijuana. [6] The relationship between exercise and substance abuse, however, may be indirect. Perhaps those who exercise tend to make healthier choices in general. The initiation of drug

or alcohol abuse may be countered by the support of like-minded exercise enthusiasts, friends and family; other social aspects of engaging in consistent physical activities; and by the time management skills that accompany the activities.

Still, it may simply be that exercise and physical activities serve as a substitute. In addition to the time spent at work or school, staying active feeds the brain, giving you something healthy to focus on. The same can be said for those in recovery, with exercise helping to alleviate the symptoms of withdrawal. In essence, when you're focused on your next set of push-ups, you're less likely to be focused on your next "fix."

To take a closer look at this theory, scientists injected rats with substances like alcohol, morphine or amphetamines and found that those in a cage with an exercise wheel tapped the drug-dispensing lever far less often than the non-exercisers.

[7] Two possible conclusions can be derived from the results. The exercise became an alternative to the drugs and alcohol, making the subjects less susceptible to addiction or they replaced one pleasurable activity with another when the endorphins kicked in.

Different Exercises, Different Effects

Like addiction treatments, different exercises affect the mind and body differently. One activity may suit you better than another, so it's best to experiment with many

options. You may even find that a combination of the following types of exercise is right for you:



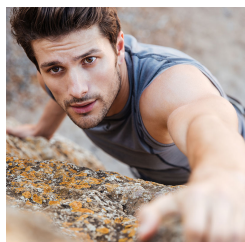
Walking/Hiking

Studies show that the Great Outdoors can increase levels of dopamine during addiction treatment and a brisk 15-minute walk can help fight cravings when they arise. [8]



Yoga

Many rehab facilities include yoga as part of recovery programs, and for good reason. Less intense than some other forms of exercise, yoga sends you into a state of meditation, alleviating anxiety and stress, which can trigger relapse.



Strength Training

Cardio exercises like running seem to get the most fanfare, but lifting weights also helps recovery. Weight training can help improve the body's sleep cycle over time, which is beneficial to many in recovery who suffer from insomnia.



Team Sports

Shooting hoops with some friends provides more than a good workout. The camaraderie and competition can aid long-term recovery, giving these individuals a way to integrate back into society.

Using exercise and fitness as a tool in addiction is likely to go a long way in decreasing addiction statistics. Many alcohol and drug addiction recovery centers recognize this and incorporate exercise and fitness into their recovery programs.

With a personalized fitness plan, recovering individuals are more likely to have success during treatment and maintain a healthy exercise habit once they re-enter society.

At Unity Behavioral health, we understand the toll that addiction takes on the body and mind. Our programs incorporate exercise and physical activity to empower you to avoid and prevent relapse. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance abuse, contact us today at 561-623-8206.

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3224086/>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21953518>
3. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1403494814561819>
4. <https://health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/adults.aspx>
5. <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsy.2011.00082/full>
6. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/nida-notes/2009/10/lower-rates-cigarette-marijuana-smoking-among-exercising-teens>
7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21953518>
8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18835411>

Does someone you care for have an addiction problem?

Give your loved one extra motivation to accept treatment by calling an admissions specialist at Unity Behavioral Health for a free consultation.

GET HELP FOR YOUR LOVED ONE, CALL US

24-Hr Helpline 561-623-8206

