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Exercise and Panic Attacks

I have talked before about the benefits of exercise and in particular the benefits of walking for sufferers of anxiety, depression, panic attacks and agoraphobia. However I want to discuss how findings demonstrate that the benefits of exercising go far beyond what was previously thought.

Dr. John Ratey, M.D. who has written a book called “Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain” explains how exercise, particularly sustained aerobic exercise, promotes improved learning, memory, and executive functioning.*

*Executive functioning refers to the ability to organize a variety of tasks in our day to day lives, for example the ability to initiate and stop actions, to monitor and change behavior as needed, and to plan future behavior when faced with novel tasks and situations.

Additionally, Dr. Ratey reports that people who perform sustained aerobic exercise are more mentally alert and attentive, less fidgety, have longer attention spans, and their ability to sort through information and take it in is increased.

How does it work?

Exercise promotes the release of brain chemicals that are very good for you such as hormones, neurochemicals and growth factors – which Dr. Ratey describes as a fertilizer to help our cells function optimally – including brain cells – which helps cells adapt and change. This is important because change is the neurological process that allows you to learn. You see it is we learn by a process whereby the brain changes.

Another way that exercise is helpful is that it promotes neurogenesis which helps the brain grow new brain cells. It turns out that exercise is the best known way to grow brain cells.

Exercise also helps you generate endorphins which are the body’s feel good chemicals which can help you feel a sense of well-being and also provide relief from pain.

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It turns out that the research and findings cited in the book written by Dr. Ratey are backed by hundreds of more studies.

I had watched a documentary on CBC which featured Dr. Ratey and looked at a particular school where many of the students had attention deficit disorder and other disorders which inhibited their learning.

By integrating an aerobic workout into regular classes students were able to increase their grades by an average of one grade point. Students also began to behave better and had longer attention spans and fidgeted much less.

My understanding is that you would want to perform sustained aerobic exercise four times a week for at least 20 minutes. Sustained aerobic exercise in this context means a level where your heart is working at at least 75% of its capacity which causes sweating.

I think that exercise is very helpful for you as a sufferer of panic attacks for all of the reasons above but also feel that it is also important because it is a situation where you are increasing your pulse in a controlled environment which demonstrates that you can deal with an increased pulse – which is of course often one of the concerns occurring during a panic attack. Often the energy that one has invested in their anxiety, so to speak, can be redirected to their wellbeing when they exercise and this can make one feel better too.

I will conclude by mentioning a German study completed at Charite-University Medicine in Berlin. This study found that 50% of subjects who completed 30 minutes of daily aerobic exercise were able to avoid having a panic attack in the experiment. Researchers wrote: "Our results for the first time suggest that exercise has an acute antipanic activity," in the December 2005 American Journal of Psychiatry.

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