

MOVEMENT FOR MENTAL HEALTH: WHY IT DOESN'T HAVE TO LOOK LIKE EXERCISE

Movement is an important tool for supporting well-being, but sometimes it can be hard to get going. Importantly, movement doesn't have to mean exercise, and it doesn't have to be all-or-nothing! Finding ways to move that you enjoy, even if they feel small, can make a big difference in supporting both your mental and physical health.

Overcoming the mental block to movement

It's no secret that moving your body is good for your mental health. Movement offers proven benefits, including feeling calm, reducing stress, boosting mood and connection with others, helping with pain, and fostering inspiration and creativity. So why don't people do it more? When most people think of "movement," thoughts of running or going to the gym are the first things that come to mind. Those things can feel overwhelming to fit into busy schedules or to do if you aren't used to exercising.

Sometimes, a mental block can make it difficult to get moving. This can be especially true when you are living with a mental health condition like depression, where symptoms like brain fog or anhedonia can make it harder to feel motivated. Dealing with mental blocks is hard, but it is possible to overcome them.

It can help to think about how you will feel after you move or how you've felt in the past after movement. This can help you push through the block and get started.

Remember that movement doesn't have to look a certain way, and what works for one person may not work for another. It is important to explore which forms of movement feel good to you and best fit your unique needs and circumstances.

Celebrating the ways you already move

When considering movement for well-being, it's worth celebrating the physical activity that is already part of your routine. You may be surprised to learn that you are more active than you realize.

Every bit of movement you do counts! Normal things like standing or walking during a work shift, carrying a baby or toddler, or using the stairs instead of the elevator are all forms of movement. You probably also don't give yourself credit for how many times you lift 10-15 pounds while carrying groceries, taking out the trash, or bringing laundry up and down the stairs.

You can support your current movement habits by drinking water throughout the day, using a pedometer on your phone, watch, or an app to track your steps, or wearing comfortable shoes.

Celebrating what you already do helps support a healthy perspective and mindset. As you consider enjoyable ways to add movement to your life, take time to praise yourself for the ways you are already moving in your day-to-day routine.

Adding movement to improve your mental health

Here are some tips for adding movement to your everyday life to improve your mental health:

Start small: Try walking down extra aisles next time you go to a store. Stretch at your desk throughout the workday. Do five push-ups, lunges, or jumping jacks at a time. Take a brief walk in the sun during your lunch break.

Dance: You'd be surprised to see how much moving to the music for a couple of minutes can boost your mood – whether in your car, at your desk, or at home.

Search YouTube: You can find many useful videos for walking or other home activities that use household items for movement. There are also playlists that can help you stay motivated. Remember to consult your doctor before starting a new or strenuous activity routine.

Pair moving with something you enjoy: You can read or watch your favorite show while using a treadmill. You can make playlists of your favorite songs or podcasts to listen to while you walk, run, or stretch. Don't be afraid to get creative!

Make movement social: Meet up with a friend to take the dog on a walk, push a young family member on a park swing, or try a TikTok dance with your child. There are also activity apps that let you add friends, make your movement competitive, or even join virtual monthly marathons just by counting your steps!

Finding opportunities to move when it feels difficult

Many factors that affect our health are beyond our control. Even when we can't change everything, noticing what we can influence is important for our well-being. In the face of difficulties – whatever they may be – remember, movement is not an all-or-nothing thing.

What you do for yourself doesn't have to look like what someone else does. For example, if you live with chronic pain or limited mobility, you could reach out to your doctor or physical therapist to discuss moves or stretches that you can do. This may even help with pain and offer moments of mindfulness.

There are also many things that you can do inside that count as movement, such as cleaning, moving while watching TV, or dancing, if being outside isn't a safe option.

Remember that even when things feel challenging, you have the power to take small steps toward improving your health and well-being. Finding ways to move that feel good to you can be one of those steps.

If having good days feels hard, know that help is available and that you are not alone.

Check on your mental health with a free, quick, anonymous test at mhascreening.org.

Explore additional resources and tools for more good days at mhanational.org/may.