Psychological Effects of Exercise

Carl Enzor, Director, Renker Wellness Center, instructs Charles Lewis during a treadmill routine.

The physical benefits of participating in a consistent exercise program are common knowledge. But one benefit that rarely gets much attention is improved psychological well-being, which is often dramatic in coronary artery disease patients.

People who experience a cardiac event (such as heart attack, surgery, or onset of angina) often have depression. This usually results from a fear of loss of life, or loss of the ability to “safely” participate in recreational or everyday activities. Plenty of evidence suggests that consistent exercise can reduce this associated depression. Once a coronary patient realizes that with exercise rehabilitation he or she can become more active than they were before the event, the fear and depression can be overcome.

Less researched, but perhaps as important, are the more tangible benefits associated with aerobic exercise and mental well-being. Runners often describe a “runner’s high” or a mood elevation after a workout. Many people also say participating in aerobic exercise clarifies their thoughts or relieves stress. Sleep patterns in individuals who practice regular aerobic exercise are reportedly more restful than non-aerobic exercisers.

An effective therapeutic exercise program must be ongoing and consider duration and intensity, since generally the greater the intensity the shorter the exercise duration. An individual’s goals and lifestyle must be evaluated and balanced with creativity to ensure the highest possible compliance rate. Developing a comfort level with monitoring intensity is important, as aerobic exercise prescriptions differ for each individual.

Always consult your physician and work with an exercise professional (physical therapist) to establish a safe and effective routine. You can measure your response to exercise by taking your pulse. If you are concerned about your ability to do this consistently, purchase a monitor. They are available at many local sporting goods stores.

Plan to exercise a minimum of three times per week, and remember that the aerobic conditioning benefits may take from six to 12 months to occur. However, the psychological benefits start immediately.

Some individuals will need the support of others to help with their compliance. A medically supervised program in a fitness center might work best for them. Others enjoy the freedom and the beauty of the outdoors — so perhaps a hiking or a bicycle club with organized activities will help ensure their participation. Still others may need to set a training goal — for example, walk in the 10K race in Palm Desert every November.

But get started today — so your mind can benefit tonight.

Renker Wellness Center Membership: $60 per month (includes full use of facilities and all classes) $75 initial evaluation fee Monday - Friday: 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. (closed 12 p.m. 1 p.m.) Saturday 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. Sunday Closed For more information on exercise, the Renker Wellness Center, or finding a personal trainer, contact the Renker Wellness Center at 760-773-2030.

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