



Herald Sun (Melbourne)  
Monday 5/09/2011

Page: 34  
Section: Extra  
Region: Melbourne, AU  
Circulation: 495000  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 446.41 sq.cms.



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# Exercise to manage depression

New research is pointing to an active way of coping, **DANIEL HOY** reports



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**P**EOPLE struggling with clinical depression may find the road to recovery begins on a running track or at the gymnasium.

New research has found that exercise is an effective second medication for people suffering depression, who have not been cured by a single antidepressant.

The research, published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, found that moderate and intense levels of daily exercise can work as well as administering a second antidepressant drug, which is often used when initial medications do not entirely prove successful.

Chris Tzar, exercise physiologist and co-developer of the Exercise The Mood program at the Black Dog Institute, says exercise is an integral treatment for the management of depression.

"It has the added benefit of not having any side-effects associated with it (unlike medication)," he says. "It's effective both as a stand-alone or combination treatment with (antidepressant) medication, and we have discovered there is a dose-response effect with exercise (just like medication), meaning there is an ideal dose of activity to achieve the best outcomes."

The findings are the result of a

four-year study by US college UT Southwestern's psychiatry department in conjunction with the Cooper Institute in Dallas.

It began in 2003 and is one of the first controlled investigations in the US to suggest that adding a regular exercise routine, combined with targeted medications, actually can relieve fully the symptoms of major depressive disorder.

Participants in the study ranged in age from 18 to 70, were suffering from depression and had not had ultimate success using antidepressant medication.

They were divided into two groups, with each group doing a different level of exercise intensity for 12 weeks.

By the end of the investigation, almost 30 per cent of patients in both groups achieved full remission from their depression.

The study found moderate exercise was more effective for women with a family history of mental illness, whereas intense exercise was more effective with women whose families did not have a history of the disease.

For men, the higher rate of exercise was more effective regardless of other characteristics.

Life-long depression sufferer Claire Stretch, 47, credits exercise, combined with antidepressants, as helping her cope.

Stretch was diagnosed as manic depressive at age 19. In her early 20s she used marijuana, then cocaine and heroin before entering rehab at 25. "I had a fiance at the time who left me; he told me he couldn't sit and watch me kill myself," she says.

After leaving rehab, she discovered exercise.

"It was the '80s, and everyone was wearing awful Jane Fonda outfits and jumping around. In a high-impact way I found the exercise was meditative; I'd go into this zone. On Sundays I'd do a two-hour and class and feel great afterwards," she says.

"If I went in feeling low it would not cure that, but it would make me feel better.

"Getting exercise is all about resilience, to give yourself the stamina to get through it."

Stretch is taking part in Spring 30 Days of Feel Good Fitness, which is aiming to raise \$500,000 for The Black Dog Institute.

People can sign up to do 30 minutes of exercise for the rest of September and they pay just \$30 for the online fitness program.

Proceeds will go to help research and treat depression.

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