



Another Science-Backed Reason to Run

by [Molly Hurford](#)

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As a runner, you likely already know exercise — especially something like running that allows you to [get out in nature](#) and out of your own head for a while — makes you feel better, physically, mentally and emotionally. Now, a [new study](#) backs up the notion that regular exercise alleviates feelings of depression and anger. Lead researcher and clinical social worker Kathleen McIntyre headed the study while sticking to her usual running routine and counseling patients at the same time. She agrees with the study's results: Exercise makes it easier for her to do her job, as she counsels patients dealing with the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The study is particularly noteworthy because while much of research around depression and exercise is conducted with a clinical population — those diagnosed with depression — this study was conducted with 119 men and women who have not been diagnosed with anger or depression. The study ran for three months and results showed a marked decrease in feelings of depression as well as anger. There have been other studies done on subclinical populations, but McIntyre notes this was the first of its kind to actually test and experiment rather than simply survey a population and analyze those results.

“We were looking for which negative emotions exercise change in normal people — your average, sedentary person who's not depressed and doesn't have chronic anger,” says McIntyre. “The ones who exercised actually significantly changed their levels of depression and hostility. Depression had decreased by 39% after 12 weeks of exercise. And then, we had them decondition — stop exercising — for four weeks and found the numbers crept back up, but they were still 27% lower than they were at the start of the study. So the effect lasts.”

THE EXERCISE BOOST

How does it work? “Depression asks us to shrink our circle and isolate and not really do very much. It asks us to pare down our behaviors and get kind of narrow and very low energy,” explains McIntyre. We've all probably experienced this to some extent: When we're feeling sad about something, getting out for a run doesn't sound as good as chilling on the couch and watching TV. “But behavioral activation says to get out and run. Set your alarm, get out of bed, go out, it doesn't matter if you don't feel good. Just do something. Call that friend, start that exercise regimen. Because, in the course of living and reengaging with your life, you end up getting all these positive experiences back or even the chance for them to happen. You also get mastery to start to learn again. You can start to see, ‘Oh, you know what, I don't feel so good about myself. But at least today I was able to run.’”

THE MINIMUM FREQUENCY

The good news, says McIntyre, is any dose of exercise is helpful. “I think there is no minimum,” she says. “It's great if you have a specific goal that you're training for, but really, anything is better than nothing. For our study, we



aimed for 40 minutes, four times a week with a warmup and cooldown. But I know with other studies, they've found that literally any running at all — even running with a child to the school bus — significantly decreased mortality risk over the course of the lifespan. So I truly believe if we're looking at general wellness, I don't think that any exercises are too little. It's always going to have an effect that's positive."

But there is a benefit to increasing regularity and [establishing training as a habit](#). Even the shift in going from someone who doesn't regularly exercise to someone who considers him or herself to be a runner or someone who trains four times a week is going to create a mental shift. "You've entered the club of people that are doing something that's actually very hard," McIntyre says. This can have positive effects that are much farther reaching than your ability to run a 5K: These positive behavioral changes can help every area of your life improve.

AND A CAVEAT

Regular running won't make you happy all the time, though, cautions McIntyre, and that's not a bad thing. "Can any lifestyle intervention make you never experience negative feelings? I don't think so," she says. "But nor do I think we would actually want that, because I think these so-called negative feelings are actually of great use to us. It's just when they become chronic or they become trait-like that they make us feel stuck."

If that isn't enough reason to schedule four runs a week, consider this: In addition to that study, another [one released this month](#) shows [regular workouts also improve cognitive function](#). So if you're feeling a little foggy during work-from-home, consider swapping your normal lunch break for a short run or walk ahead of lunch to set you up for a smarter afternoon.

Become your own experiment: If you struggle to commit to regular running, commit now to four times each week for the next three months and put it on the calendar, tell a friend, engage a coach — whatever it takes to get out the door. After each run, assess how you're feeling (you can record this note in the [MapMyRun app](#)) including details about your emotional state as well as your physical state. At the end of the three months, look at the data you've collected: Are you feeling clearer, happier, calmer and less quick to anger? These are all reasons to keep those running sessions going.