



Sweat away the blues

Can you lift your mood by raising your heartbeat?

Marty Wilson reports.

When I'm stressed or overwhelmed, my lovely wife, Allie, shoves me out the door saying, "Oi, Whingy McWhinge, go for a run!" She knows I'm much more positive and happy after an hour of sweaty exercise.

So in these difficult times – when natural disasters happen every other week, the world economy is behaving like a snotty teenager and redundancies are apparently waiting around every corner – is exercise the answer to stress and depression?

Joanna Crawford, a clinical researcher who looked into exercise and mood while working at the Black Dog Institute, says research shows time and time again exercise has a beneficial effect on depression and mood.

"We studied almost 150 people before and after they participated in a community running event," she says. "There was one group with no history of depression, one with a history but no symptoms now and one group that currently had signs of moderate to mild depression.

"After the run, all three groups experienced the same degree of mood elevation."

Crawford says these results have been repeated hundreds of times and have also been confirmed by a recent, large-scale meta-analysis.

But is exercise lifting people's mood? Or do people who are depressed exercise less?

"People with mild depression do tend to report more barriers to exercising," Crawford says. "They say they feel too tired, or embarrassed, or not in the mood to train. They also had less confidence in their ability to exercise properly. So the depression can actually be a barrier to starting."

Chad Timmermans is a sports psychologist who specialises in teaching personal trainers to help people with the mental side of fitness. He also has a deep understanding of how to help patients experiencing depression – as he has suffered from it.

"The best description I've ever heard of depression is it 'sucks the colour out of life,'" Timmermans says. "In those real down times you can feel so flat that you can't even get out of bed. So what really worked for me, and works for many



High times ... research shows people with depression benefit from exercise. Photo: iStock

of my clients, is exercising with somebody else.

"When you're depressed you don't like doing anything for yourself. But if you promise to do exercise for somebody else, that can help you get moving.

"I also tell people to exercise to the point where you feel invigorated, not until you feel totally exhausted. This can lift your energy

for the whole day, which encourages you, for example, to do the shopping, hang out the washing, give your wife or husband a kiss. And all these things are small victories that make you feel like you're in control of the illness."

Janelle Abbott, who feels she beat depression with exercise (see case study, right), agrees.

"Our bodies have evolved to

thrive on movement. So getting out the door can create its own momentum," she says.

"Once you start exercising you don't have to even try to look on the bright side any more. You don't have to try to be positive, you just are."

If you need to speak to someone, call Lifeline, phone 13 11 14.

Get moving

■ Plan to meet someone – a social support network helps.

■ Start slowly and build up gradually – a 10-minute walk every day is great.

■ Set short-term, realistic goals – often we set goals that are too difficult, then lose motivation when we don't achieve them.

■ Give yourself rewards when you meet those goals.

■ Keep an activity diary or a pedometer so you can see your activity increasing.

Source: *Exercise and Depression* (available from blackdoginstitute.org.au)



Fit for life

Like many teenagers, Janelle Abbott, pictured, experimented with drugs.

This led to a drug-induced psychosis, misdiagnosis of schizophrenia and her being put on anti-psychotic medication that caused her weight to balloon to 97 kilograms.

"I was a depressed, lonely girl who walked through life head down, desperately hoping I could be someone different," Abbott says. After trying many things, she turned to exercise.

"I thought if I got on top of my weight, I could start moving forward with my life," she says.

"Very quickly, however, I noticed benefits far beyond those of just slimming down.

"I quit smoking, started eating better and, with the help of a great doctor, began taking myself off my medication.

"After seven months, I'd lost 37 kilograms and am now a personal trainer myself."

How many of those changes does she put down to a more positive mindset created by training? "The effect exercise has on the mind is incredible. If I knew back then how effective exercise was for people experiencing depression or just being in a low mood, I could have avoided years of pity and self-doubt." **MW**