



# Using Exercise to Manage Stress

Stress is a normal human response that plays a very important role in keeping us alive. Stress allows for our body to adapt to external factors such as threats or pressures, which can be a vital survival instinct. Stress can be helpful in increasing alertness and energy levels, but it can also be unhelpful when it occurs for prolonged periods of time. Often prolonged stress will lead to being unable to switch off, reduced ability to cope, feeling an increase in aches and pains, change in dietary habits and withdrawal from specific activities. In fact, it is estimated that between 75% and 90% of visits to the GP are caused by stress-related illness! Some of these illnesses are related to cardiovascular disease, obesity, immune suppression, pain, diabetes and sleep problems.

There are a number of practical ways to manage stress and look after your health. One of these is exercise.

## How Does Exercise Help?

- ◆ Being active can improve the way in which your body handles stress. It can do this through a change in hormone responses and release specific neurotransmitters called dopamine and serotonin (“the happy hormones”).
- ◆ Exercise can act as a circuit breaker – meaning your brain has a distraction to focus on rather than stressful thoughts and emotions. It can take a holiday and focus on what exercise you are doing, the change in your heart rate and breathing and ensuring your muscles are working optimally.
- ◆ Unfortunately, prolonged stress can have negative side effects on our body’s cardiovascular system, immune system and more. However, we know through an abundance of research that exercise can increase our immune system and is instrumental in protecting our cardiovascular health. In fact, exercise has a positive influence on all our bodily systems.

## Where to Begin?

- ◆ Some exercise is better than none, and more is better than some. Engaging in exercise can be a challenge, but start small and keep building.
- ◆ An Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP) can be a useful resource in providing guidance and reassurance.

### References:

Jackson, E (2013). STRESS RELIEF: The Role of Exercise in Stress Management. ACSM Health & Fitness. 17(3).