

How Exercise Boosts Your Brain

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If you're like a lot of teenagers, you may think that exercise means playing sports. So if you're not very good at sports, you might not be motivated to try any kind of exercise.

But exercise is simply about moving your body -- which can be almost anything that gets you active, like walking, throwing a Frisbee, or vacuuming your room. It doesn't even have to involve competition.

If you're not being active, you are cheating yourself from all the benefits exercise can bring you. Like did you know that teens who are more active may do better on tests?

Yep, exercise not only builds your fitness, it also boosts your brain power, which can help you do better in school and improve your grades. Studies show that teens who do aerobic exercise - like walking and swimming -- have bigger brains. In particular, exercise enlarges your brain's basal ganglia (the part that helps you pay attention), even though another ho-hum chemistry class. One school has shown that 30 minutes of walking on a treadmill improved students' problem-solving skills by 10%. That could bump you up a letter grade!

Being active has other benefits too: It can also help you sleep better, feel more energetic, and be less stressed.

Feeling motivated to give exercise a try? Here are a few simple steps you can take to get on your way to building your brain power through fitness.

Start With a Small Goal

So you can't run a mile right now. No sweat. You don't even have to make running your goal. Studies show that just 20 minutes of walking before a test improved students' scores -- whether or not they were fit when they started.

Start exercise slowly, and go with what you know. If you can walk for 10 minutes, begin by going for a 10-minute walk every day. If you can walk longer than that, great. Go for it! Just remember it is OK to start small.

Be truthful with yourself about what you can do without stress. Setting a short-term goal that's easy to measure will keep you motivated to do it. With each success, you'll be building your confidence, too.

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Exercise in the Morning Before School, If You Can

Hitting the gym or the treadmill before class can do wonders for your grades. A high school in Naperville, Ill., implemented first-period PE classes for everyone and saw math scores improve by 20% and reading scores improve significantly, as well.

Can't do mornings? Pick another time and stick with it. Having a regular time set aside for exercise will increase the likelihood that you will follow through on your plan. When you have exercise scheduled, you don't have to worry about when you'll fit it in. Having a consistent plan can also take away the temptation of dodging exercise for the day.

When you make exercise a habit, you can start seeing and feeling the benefits -- even if you don't love it every single day. It can transform from being something you dread into something you look forward to doing for yourself.

Try Studying While You Move

Ask a teacher to let your class get up from their desks. Complicated movement stimulates thinking, so moving around the classroom while studying may help you learn. Even standing up during class can help you pay attention.

If that doesn't fly with your teacher, experiment with some active-learning tricks on your own at home. Try jumping rope as you repeat vocabulary definitions -- the rhythm and movement can help you remember them later. Or toss a ball with a friend as you study for an exam; with each toss, ask a question that's likely to be on the test.

Stick With Exercise

Once you've started working out, the next step for success is to believe that you can improve your activity levels. It might seem like the first few minutes of exercise are the hardest. Some people find that it takes 10 minutes of activity before they stop feeling like they are dragging themselves through it. But you will hit a "stride" -- a place where you're feeling good and moving more easily.

You'll probably discover that, as you start moving, you'll want to move more. To stay motivated and keep it up, make it a goal to add just a few more minutes of exercise each week. That way you'll be sure to make it past the beginning, when it is tough, and find your stride. Shoot for being active for at least 1 hour a day.

And don't forget: To boost your brain power to its max, get at least 8 1/2 hours of sleep a night and start your day with a healthy breakfast.