

SHIFT YOUR MOOD – 5 WAYS TO COMBAT DEPRESSION

With as many as one in six South Africans suffering from anxiety, depression or substance abuse (excluding more serious conditions such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia), Dr Renata Schoeman, member of the South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP) says now, this very minute, is the time for everyone to take stock of their unhealthy lifestyle to limit their chances of mental health related illnesses.

“We’ve all been there before where spending hours keeping the couch warm is far more pleasing than digging out your running shoes from the depths of the dust-laden cupboard. But once you’ve made the move, it’s unmistakable just how fantastic you feel post exercise. So why wait in making a conscious choice to be healthier? Taking care of your health will have an incredible spin-off on all spheres of your life and mental status.”

Dr Schoeman says that the link between **physical fitness** and mental health has been well proven yet many choose to focus on the busy lifestyle of modern life with its relentless fast-pace, rather than prioritise the effect that in-activity not only has on their long term health but on their state of mind.

“Exercise is a powerful means to combat mild to moderate depression. It’s a natural mood enhancer and has an incredibly positive impact on emotions.

“It releases endorphins that keep you energised, tires you physically for a good night’s sleep and improves your sense of wellbeing. It promotes neuronal growth and reduces inflammation of the brain and these biological changes provide you with some calmness. One of the most important advantages of exercise is the positive influence it has on maintaining regular sleeping cycles. Mood and anxiety disorders can affect sleep negatively – while sleep disturbances can contribute to the development of mood and anxiety disorders.”

“Another advantage of exercise is that it creates the possibility of being socially active – in a healthy way. It’s the best way to relieve stress and tension and beats anxiety by helping you to focus on other things rather than be constantly consumed by the very things that are making you anxious. “

She says that those who suffer from ADHD can greatly benefit from exercise as it improves concentration and memory, through increasing the levels of dopamine in the brain. This is

an important add-on to medication used for the treatment of ADHD – and may even reduce the medication needs of a patient.

“Exercise can actually make you cleverer! It sparks creativity and assists with quicker problem-solving abilities, allows for greater focus and concentration which in turns results in an increase in productivity. It also stimulates the growth of new neurons in memory areas in your brain such as the hippocampus.

She says once you have been able to manage 30 minutes, five times a week, you can start looking at other self-care areas of your life to improve your health completely.

“In achieving equilibrium across one’s personal and professional lives, we need to make a few changes. But start small, the idea is not to overwhelm oneself but quite the opposite! With each small change, you will note that other areas of your self-care journey will become natural as you move towards a mindful state of being a healthier you.”

Dr Schoeman says the other five pillars of **education, a balanced diet, socialising** and **adequate sleep** go hand in hand with exercise to form the seeds needed for good mental health and overall well being.

“Your brain is geared for lifelong learning and the more we think, the better our brains function, regardless of age. So start with ‘neurobics’ by stimulating your **education** with activities such as the arts, crafts, travel, playing musical instruments and volunteering.”

There’s a saying, you are what you eat and Dr Schoeman says for healthy mental state of mind, **eating a balanced diet** high in fiber, Omega 3, Vitamin B and E, will reduce the risk of dementia, improve short-term memory loss, lifts one’s mood and learning ability, increase energy and concentration.

“The next step is **socialising**. Being happy is infectious and if you surround yourself with people that increase your levels of happiness you will see a decrease in your perceived stress, in depression and even a decrease in heart disease. Physical affection improves one’s mood and laughter is the best medicine when it comes to mental health.”

Dr Schoeman says the final step is **adequate sleep**. It boots your immune system and keeps hormonal balances in check – which prevents obesity and diabetes. Sufficient and regular sleep also prevents mental health problems such as depression, through boosting emotional resilience. Sleep is also very important for concentration, memory and learning, and even the prevention of dementia, as “waste products” that accumulates during waking hours are “flushed” away during sleep.