



A GUIDE TO EXERCISE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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Disclaimer

You should consult your physician or other health care professional before starting any fitness program to determine if it is right for your needs. This is particularly true if you (or your family) have a history of high blood pressure or heart disease, if you have ever experienced chest pain when exercising or have experienced chest pain in the past month when not engaged in physical activity, if you have been prescribed drugs for your blood pressure or heart condition, or if you have a bone or joint problem that could be made worse by a change in physical activity. Do not start a fitness program if your physician or health care provider advises against it.

If you experience faintness, dizziness, pain, or shortness of breath at any time while exercising you should stop immediately.

Any physical activity carries with it an inherent risk of injury. Strength training can involve strenuous exertions of various muscles placing stress on the muscles, bones, and joints. Cardiovascular training can involve sustained physical activity placing stress on the heart, arteries, and blood pressure. Risk of injury may be minor such as soreness, sprains, strains, and bruises, or serious such as heart attack, stroke, paralysis, and death. If you engage with an exercise program, you agree that you do so at your own risk, are voluntarily participating in these activities, and assume all risk of injury to yourself.

Sharon Gam is not a licensed mental health counselor, medical doctor, or therapist. This guide is not intended as a substitute for, nor does it replace, professional medical advice, diagnosis, therapy, medication, or any other treatment. Do not disregard, avoid, or delay obtaining medical or health related advice from your health care professional because of the information in this guide.

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Introduction

If you're dealing with depression, anxiety, ADHD, high stress, or if you just feel like you're not living as the best version of yourself, exercise can help.

This guide is for adults who want to use exercise as a tool to:

- Improve mood and stress resilience
- Reduce anxiety and overwhelm
- Build confidence and a sense of control
- Create momentum and healthy routines, especially when motivation is low

You don't need to be "fit," athletic, or experienced. The focus is not on changing how your body looks, it's on how you feel and function, and how exercise can support your brain and nervous system.

You may already know that movement is good for mental health but still feel reluctant to try it, or you might feel frustrated because it's hard to stick with. Maybe exercise has helped you in the past, but consistency feels difficult when your mood is low, your nervous system is on edge, or life is overwhelming. Or maybe you've tried working out before and didn't feel better, so you're wondering if it's even worth it.

I created this guide to make exercise feel more doable, supportive, and effective for your mental health. I sincerely hope it helps you.

In this guide, you'll learn:

- The mental health benefits of exercise
- The key workout variables that matter most for mood, stress, and motivation
- How to adapt any exercise program so it supports your mental health
- Sample weekly routines for cardio and strength training, including "start small" options



An Important Note About Treatment

Exercise can be a powerful part of mental health care, but it is not a replacement for therapy, medication, or medical treatment when those are needed. Think of exercise as one tool in a larger toolbox that might also include therapy, medication, sleep, nutrition, time in nature, social support, and stress-management practices.

One more important expectation: exercise won't "fix" your mental health overnight. Some workouts will make you feel great immediately. Others won't. The most meaningful changes come from consistency over time, and from learning how to make exercise work with your nervous system, not against it.

The Benefits Of Exercise For Mental Health

A large body of research shows that exercise can significantly improve mental health.

Across many studies, physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve mood, increase energy, and support psychological well-being. In some cases, exercise can be as effective as traditional treatments like medication or therapy for improving mental health symptoms, particularly for mild to moderate depression and anxiety (1).

A 2022 report from the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation (2) analyzed the results of more than 1,200 studies on physical activity for various mental health outcomes. Nearly 90% of those studies found a positive relationship between physical activity and mental health.

Large population studies show similar results. People who engage in regular physical activity are significantly less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who are inactive (3). Exercise has been shown to be beneficial for people with diagnosed depression (4) and anxiety (5), as well as for those who experience symptoms without a formal diagnosis (6).

This doesn't mean that exercise should replace therapy or medication. For many people, those treatments are essential. What the research does suggest is that exercise is a powerful complementary tool, one that can work alongside therapy and medication to improve outcomes and support long-term mental health.

Takeaway

Exercise is not a magic fix, but it is a reliable, evidence-based way to support your mental health. When used consistently and compassionately, it can play a meaningful role in helping you feel better, cope more effectively, and build resilience over time.

How Exercise Changes Your Brain And Nervous System

Exercise doesn't just change your body, it directly changes your brain and nervous system in ways that support your mental health.

When you exercise, your body and brain release a variety of chemicals, including endorphins, neurotransmitters, endocannabinoids, and neurotrophic factors. Many of these are the same chemicals targeted by antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications. Because of their powerful effects on mood and motivation, some scientists refer to them as “hope molecules.”

These chemicals activate receptors in your brain that create feelings of calm, pleasure, and optimism: the “feel-good” effects of exercise. I like to think of this as giving your brain a bubble bath of happy chemicals every time you exercise.

But exercise doesn't just give you a temporary boost. Over time, it stimulates your brain to increase the number and sensitivity of the receptors for those happy chemicals, which means you feel the positive effects more strongly. The more consistently you move your body, the easier it can become to access those good feelings.



Exercise also supports neuroplasticity, your brain's ability to change and adapt. During exercise, your body and brain release neurotrophic factors (proteins that help repair, protect, and grow cells). One of these, called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), is sometimes described as “miracle-grow for the brain” because it helps strengthen connections between brain cells and supports the formation of new ones. This process plays an important role in learning, emotional regulation, and resilience.

In addition, exercise helps regulate your stress response system, known as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. This system controls the release of cortisol and other stress hormones and tends to be overactive in people with anxiety and chronic stress. Regular exercise helps calm this system and reduces excessive stress signaling, making it easier for your nervous system to return to a baseline state after stress.

Finally, exercise improves interoception: your ability to notice and interpret signals from your body. Your body often gives you early warnings when anxiety or depression is building. You might feel changes in breathing, heart rate, muscle tension, fatigue, or stomach discomfort. When you're disconnected from your body, you may not notice these signals until they feel out of control.

Exercise helps you tune back in. It “turns up the volume” on bodily sensations and teaches you to pay attention to how your body responds to movement, effort, and rest. As you become more aware of these signals, you're better able to intervene early, by slowing down, breathing, reframing a situation, or adjusting your environment, rather than feeling caught off guard by intense emotions.

Takeaway

Exercise doesn't just help you feel better in the moment. Over time, it trains your brain and nervous system to respond to stress more effectively, notice internal cues earlier, and recover more quickly, building a stronger foundation for mental health.

Psychological Skills You Build Through Exercise

Exercise can change the chemistry and connections in your *brain*, and it can also change your *mind*: the way you think and feel.

Here are a few of the ways that exercise can create a mindset that helps you deal with challenges and supports your mental health.

Creating Confidence

Exercise can help you build a deep confidence, the kind that has nothing to do with how your body looks. It's a confidence in your abilities and your inner strength.

Through training, you get to challenge yourself and rise to those challenges. You get the chance to practice patience, persistence, and resilience. You get to prove, through your actions, that you're powerful and capable.

When you lift a heavy weight, you don't just know that you're strong, you can feel it. When you push yourself a little harder even though your muscles are burning, you feel capable of doing hard things without giving up. If you can complete one more rep than last time or lift a slightly heavier weight, you feel yourself improving.

Takeaway

Confidence is built through action and experiences. Exercise gives you repeated, low-risk opportunities to practice being capable, and that practice carries over into the rest of your life.

Getting Comfortable With Discomfort

It's common for people with depression or anxiety to avoid discomfort, and that's totally understandable. When you already feel overwhelmed, stepping into hard or unfamiliar situations can feel exhausting or even unsafe.

The problem is that avoiding discomfort slowly shrinks your world. You pass up opportunities, experiences, and growth, not because you're not capable, but because your system is trying to protect you. Over time, that avoidance can make life feel more limited than it needs to be.

One of the most powerful mental health benefits of exercise is that it gives you the chance to practice tolerating discomfort in a safe, controlled environment.

During a workout, it's clear why you're experiencing discomfort. Your heart rate is elevated because you're moving. Your muscles burn because they're working. You can slow down, rest, or stop at any time. That sense of choice and control matters, especially for an anxious or depressed nervous system.



Over time, discomfort starts to feel less threatening. You learn, through experience, that you can feel uncomfortable and still be okay, and even come out stronger on the other side. You build confidence in your ability to face challenges rather than avoid them.

Those lessons apply to your life outside the gym as well. When you notice the urge to avoid discomfort in daily life, like skipping a social event, turning down an opportunity, or backing away from something that feels uncertain, you can draw on what you've practiced in your workouts. You've lifted a heavy weight when you were tired. You've felt out of breath and kept going. You've chosen to be uncomfortable and survived it.

Takeaway

Exercise teaches your nervous system that discomfort is not danger. With practice, that lesson helps you show up for challenges with more courage, flexibility, and self-trust.

Changing Your Thought Patterns And Self-Identity

We all have stories about who we are and what we're capable of. When you're dealing with depression or anxiety, those stories can hold you back. You might believe that you're weak, unmotivated, or "just not the kind of person who sticks with things."

These thought patterns can be deeply ingrained. But thoughts and feelings are not facts, they're just interpretations. While you might understand that intellectually, insight alone doesn't always change how you feel.

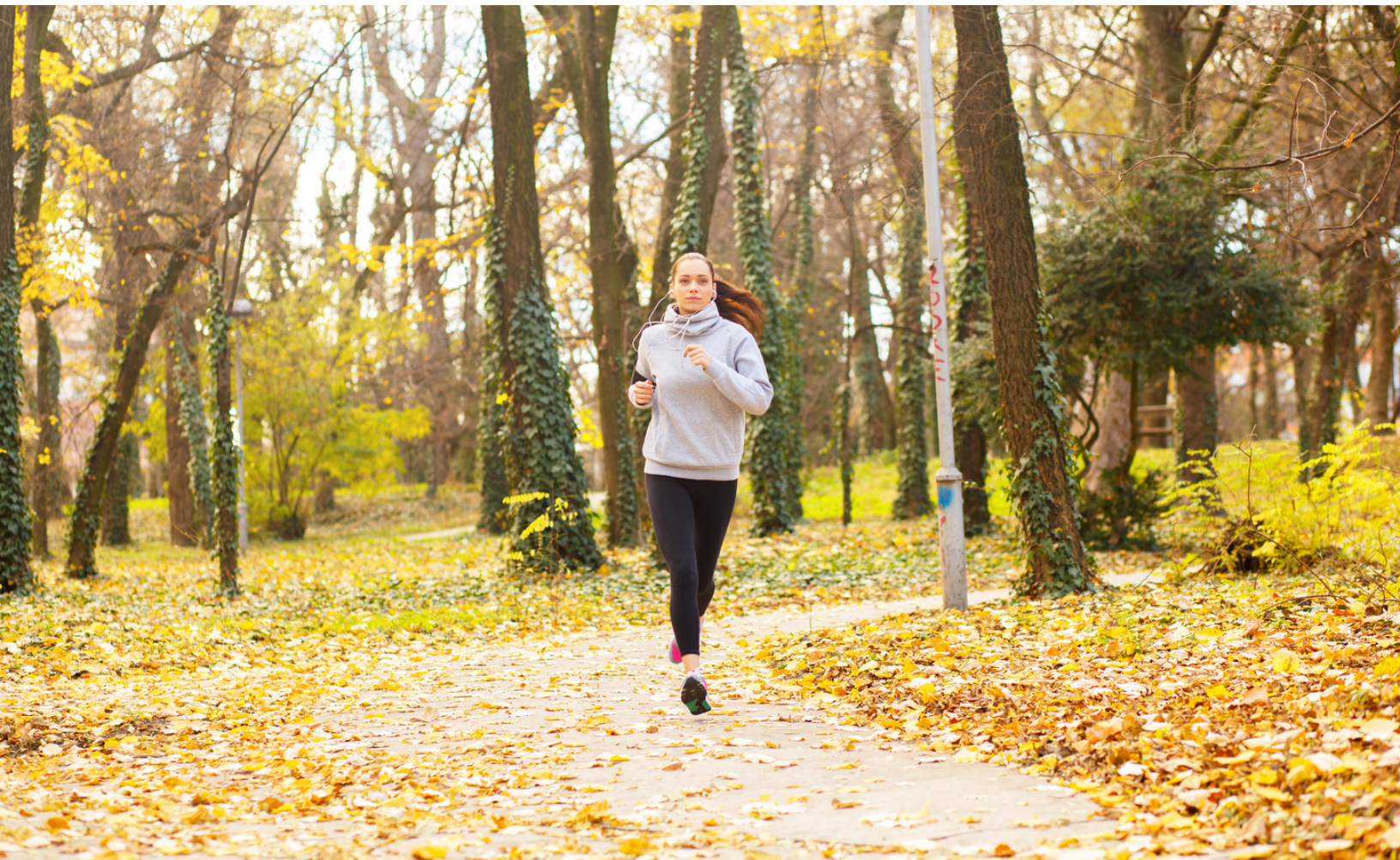
You can't always use your mind to change your mind, but you can use your body to change your mind.

When you take action and create positive, meaningful experiences, your brain starts to update its beliefs about who you are and what you're capable of. This is where exercise is especially powerful.

Each workout gives you opportunities to gather evidence that challenges your unhelpful thought patterns. Showing up when it would be easier not to. Completing something you didn't think you could do. Making small improvements over time.

As you repeat those experiences, exercise helps reshape your self-identity. You start to see yourself as someone who is capable, resilient, and able to follow through even when things feel hard. The neurochemical changes that happen during and after exercise support this process by increasing neuroplasticity, making it easier for your brain to form new, healthier patterns of thinking.

Over time, this shift becomes internalized and you start to believe that you're strong and capable. That change in identity can ripple outward, influencing how you approach challenges, relationships, and stress in your day-to-day life.



For me, this was life changing. In my long struggle with depression and social anxiety, I often knew intellectually that my thoughts weren't really accurate (something I learned in therapy), but that knowledge alone didn't change how I felt. It was repeated positive experiences in the gym that helped my confidence grow. Over time, I began to think differently about myself and relate to others and the world in a more open, positive way.

Takeaway

Lasting change comes from repeatedly doing things that show you who you're becoming. Exercise gives you a reliable way to practice being the person you want to be, one small, embodied experience at a time.

The Exercise Prescription For Mental Health

Most exercise programs can improve both physical and mental health if you follow them consistently over time. But when mental health is the goal, how you exercise matters just as much as what you do.

The purpose of this section is to show you how to take any exercise program (whether it's something you already do or something you're considering starting) and adjust it so it better supports your mood, stress levels, and nervous system.

Rather than giving you a rigid plan, I'll walk you through the key factors that make exercise more effective for mental health, including:

- Listening to your body and adjusting as needed
- Starting with small, achievable goals
- Setting clear workout intentions
- Creating progressions that build confidence
- Choosing exercise intensity deliberately

You don't need to apply all of these at once. Even small changes can make a meaningful difference over time. In the sections that follow, I'll break down each of these factors so you can experiment, adapt, and build an exercise routine that works for you.

Listening To Your Body

Mental health is deeply individual, and so is the way your body responds to exercise. What feels calming and supportive for one person may feel overwhelming or draining for another. That's why learning to listen to your body and giving yourself permission to adjust is essential.

Pay attention to how different workouts make you feel, both during and afterward. If something doesn't feel right for you, do what you need to do to feel more comfortable.

For example, some people with anxiety have sensitive nervous systems that can be overstimulated by exercise, especially early on. If increasing your heart rate or breathing makes you feel uneasy, taking short breathing breaks or slowing the pace can help your nervous system settle.

On days when your mood is low or your energy is limited, your body may need a longer warm-up, a lighter session, or a shorter workout. That's not being lazy or making excuses, it's listening to your body and giving it what it needs. Adjusting your workout based on how you feel helps you prevent exercise from becoming another source of stress.

Listening to your body also means noticing when certain movements or positions don't feel right for you. If, for example, rapid movements or lying flat on a bench triggers discomfort or anxiety, it's okay to modify or choose different exercises. You don't need to follow a workout exactly as written, especially if it wasn't designed specifically with mental health in mind.

Over time, this practice builds trust in yourself and in your body. You learn that you can move in ways that feel challenging but also safe, and that you're allowed to adapt without quitting altogether.

Takeaway

Listening to your body doesn't mean avoiding challenges. It means choosing the level of challenge that helps you feel supported, capable, and willing to come back again.

Starting With Small and Achievable Goals

Sticking to an exercise routine is hard, and it's especially hard when you're dealing with depression, anxiety, low energy, or overwhelm. That's why starting small is essential.

One of the most common mistakes people make is trying to do too much, too soon. When exercise feels like a major effort or a test of willpower, it becomes unsustainable. Starting small allows you to build consistency, confidence, and momentum without triggering avoidance.

Break your goals into steps that feel easy, realistic, and achievable, even if they seem almost too small.

At first, simply changing into your workout clothes is a win. Walking into the gym is a win. Stepping outside for a short walk is a win, even if that's all you do that day. These actions matter because they reinforce the habit of showing up.



For cardio, you might start with a two-minute walk. Put on your shoes, walk down the street for one minute, then turn around and walk back. Celebrate that success. Over time, you can gradually add distance or intensity as your fitness and confidence improve.

For strength training, starting small might mean doing a short, simple workout at home with bodyweight exercises or minimal equipment. If going to the gym feels intimidating, your first goal might be to walk in, familiarize yourself with the space, and leave. The next time, you might do just one exercise. Each step builds familiarity and reduces anxiety.

Many people resist starting this small because it doesn't feel like "enough", but that's simply not true. Small actions create positive experiences, reduce pressure, and make it easier for you to do it again the next time.

Takeaway

Starting small isn't a sign of weakness, it's a strategy for success. When you start small and allow your routine to grow over time, consistency becomes possible.

Workout Intentions

Many people focus on long-term fitness goals and overlook what exercise is giving them right now. When your motivation is low, that can make workouts feel disconnected from your daily life and harder to stick with.

Setting a workout intention helps shift that focus.

A workout intention is a short-term goal for a single session: something you want to experience or practice during that workout. Unlike long-term goals, intentions are immediate and achievable within the time you're exercising.

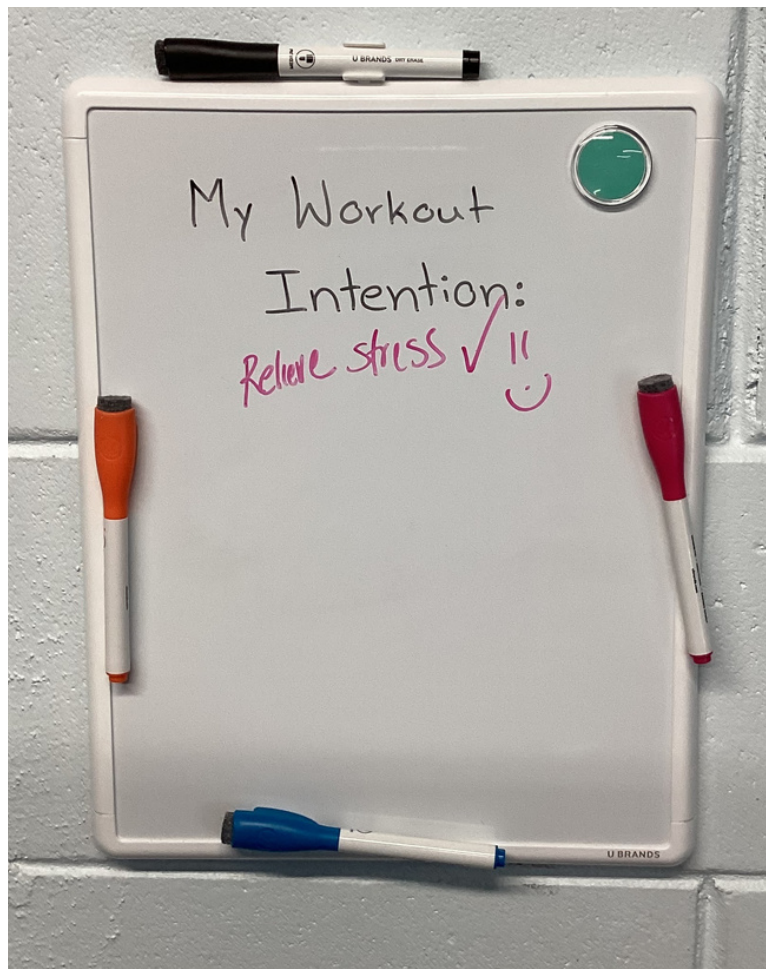
Example Workout Intentions:

- Relieve stress
- Feel more energized
- Challenge myself
- Practice consistency
- Prioritize myself
- Show up, even when it's hard
- Feel calm
- Practice getting more comfortable with discomfort
- Feel strong

It can also be performance-based, like completing one more repetition than last time or using a slightly heavier weight. What matters is that the intention feels meaningful to you in that moment.

Before your workout, take a few seconds to set your intention. Afterward, reflect on whether you followed through. Acknowledge what you did well, even if the workout was short or didn't go exactly as planned.

This process is powerful because every time you set an intention and act on it, your brain strengthens the connection between intention and follow-through. That success creates a small dopamine boost, reinforcing motivation and confidence. Over time, these small wins add up. You start to see yourself as someone who does what they say they'll do, and that shift in identity supports both your mental health and long-term consistency.



Takeaway

Workout intentions help you recognize progress that isn't visible on a scale or stopwatch. They turn each workout into an opportunity to build confidence, motivation, and self-trust, one session at a time.

Mastery Experiences and Progressions

Exercise gives you opportunities to build skills and achieve small goals. In research, these opportunities are called “mastery experiences”, and they play a powerful role in building confidence and improving mental health.

A mastery experience is when you try something that feels challenging and you succeed. It’s the experience of testing yourself and realizing: “I can do this.”

In exercise, there are many types of mastery experiences:

- Lifting a slightly heavier weight
- Completing one more repetition than last time
- Doing a more challenging variation of an exercise
- Moving with better control or confidence
- Covering the same distance with less effort

These improvements don’t have to be dramatic. What’s important is that they’re noticeable and achievable.

Over time, repeated mastery experiences change how you see yourself. You go from feeling unsure, overwhelmed, or insecure to feeling strong, capable, and in control.

Each small success becomes evidence that you can learn, adapt, and grow, even when something feels difficult at first.

Set Yourself Up For Successful Experiences And Progressions

You can create your own mastery experiences within each workout by choosing the appropriate exercises, weights, variations, distances, etc. and then intentionally aiming to improve slightly over time.

That starts with scaling your exercises to meet yourself where you are, not where you think you should be.

A common message in traditional fitness culture is that workouts should be as hard as possible all the time. That if you're not pushing yourself to the limit, it's not a good workout. This "no pain, no gain" mindset treats exercise as a way to punish or control your body, and it often does more harm than good, especially for mental health.

Pushing far beyond your current ability level can increase your risk of injury, but it can also undermine your confidence and motivation. When a workout feels overwhelming or discouraging, you don't get those mastery experiences and you're less likely to want to do it again.

The solution is to scale your exercises to your current strength, fitness, or ability level, so you feel like you can do them successfully.

For example, if you're not strong enough to perform a floor push up with good form (yet!), doing incline push ups allows you to perform the full movement properly. You can feel what it's like to do the exercise well, rather than struggling through it. That's a mastery experience.

For cardio, a mastery experience might be completing a distance that feels tough but during which you are never in doubt that you're going to be able to get to the finish line.

Once you've found the appropriate exercise or variation, try to do just a little more in each session. Keep the progressions small and achievable, so that every time you attempt to do something harder, you're able to do it successfully.

Each and every one of those successful progressions is a mastery experience. Over time, as your confidence grows, you can make the challenges a little bigger.

Track And Appreciate Your Progress

Mastery experiences can be subtle, and it can be hard to get a clear idea of how much you're actually achieving. Keeping track of your workouts and intentionally celebrating your mastery experiences is very important to getting the full mental health benefits of exercise.

Many people, especially those dealing with depression, anxiety, or chronic stress, have a strong negativity bias. That's the brain's tendency to focus on what's going wrong while overlooking what's going well.

You might brush off your accomplishments, downplay progress, or dismiss positive feedback, while even small setbacks feel very discouraging. Left unchecked, this bias can make it hard to notice improvements, even when they are happening.

Tracking your workouts is a simple but powerful way to counter this pattern and to clearly see how much you're progressing and how many mastery experiences you're having.

By keeping a record of what you do, you create objective evidence of your effort and progress. For strength training, that might include the exercises you performed, the number of sets and repetitions, and the weights you used. For cardio, you might track time, distance, or pace. You can also make brief notes about how the workout felt, like smooth, controlled, challenging, or easier than expected.

After each workout, take a moment to review what you did. When you lift a heavier weight or complete more repetitions with the same weight, you have clear proof that you've gotten stronger.

Progress doesn't always show up as numbers, though. Improvements like better form, greater range of motion, slower and more controlled movement, or increased confidence with an exercise are just as meaningful.

The key is to intentionally acknowledge and celebrate your wins, both big and small. This practice helps retrain your brain to recognize progress instead of defaulting to self-criticism.

Takeaway

By creating small, repeatable wins in your workouts, and by tracking your progress so you can see and how far you've come, you reinforce the belief that you can handle challenges, in the gym and in everyday life.

Be Deliberate About Exercise Intensity

Exercise releases chemicals in your brain that support mood, motivation, and resilience, but how strongly you feel those effects depends a lot on the exercise intensity, or how hard you're working.

Being deliberate about intensity is one of the most important ways to make exercise support your mental health.

What "Intensity" Means

For cardio, intensity is usually described in three levels:

- **Low intensity:** minimal increase in heart rate and breathing
- **Moderate intensity:** noticeable increase in heart rate and breathing
- **High intensity:** large increase in heart rate and breathing

A simple way to estimate cardio intensity is the "Talk Test":

- At **moderate intensity**, you can speak in full sentences but wouldn't be able to sing.
- At **high intensity**, you're too out of breath to say more than a few words at a time.

For strength training, intensity refers to how close you are to your maximum effort at the end of a set.

- A **10/10 effort** means you couldn't complete another repetition with good form.
- A **9/10** effort means you might be able to do one more repetition at the end of a set. 9-10/10 efforts are considered **high intensity**.
- A **7-8/10** effort means the set feels challenging, but you could still do 2-3 more reps at the end. A 7-8/10 effort is **moderate intensity**.

Learning to estimate your effort takes practice, and it doesn't have to be perfect.

Cardio Intensity

Cardio intensity is measured by how much your heart rate and breathing are elevated. You can use a heart rate monitor to determine intensity, but a simpler way is to use the "Talk Test".



Low

Definition

Very easy, no noticeable increase in heart rate and breathing

"Talk Test"

Can speak and sing normally



Moderate

Definition

Noticeably increased heart rate and breathing

"Talk Test"

Can speak in full sentences but not sing

High



Definition

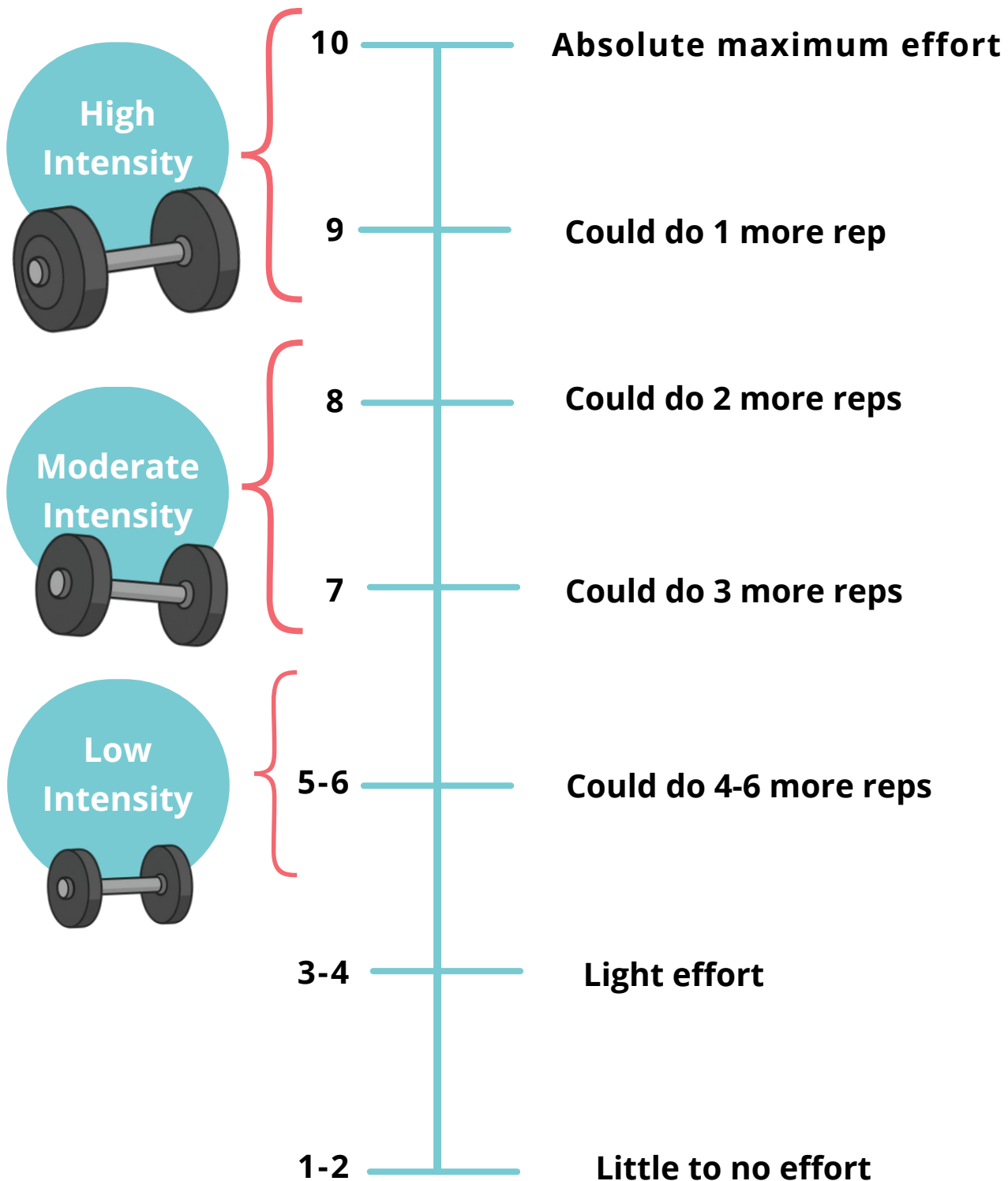
Very elevated heart rate and breathing

"Talk Test"

Can't speak in full sentences

Strength Training Intensity (Effort Scale)

Strength training effort is measured by how many more good form repetitions you feel like you could do at the end of a set.

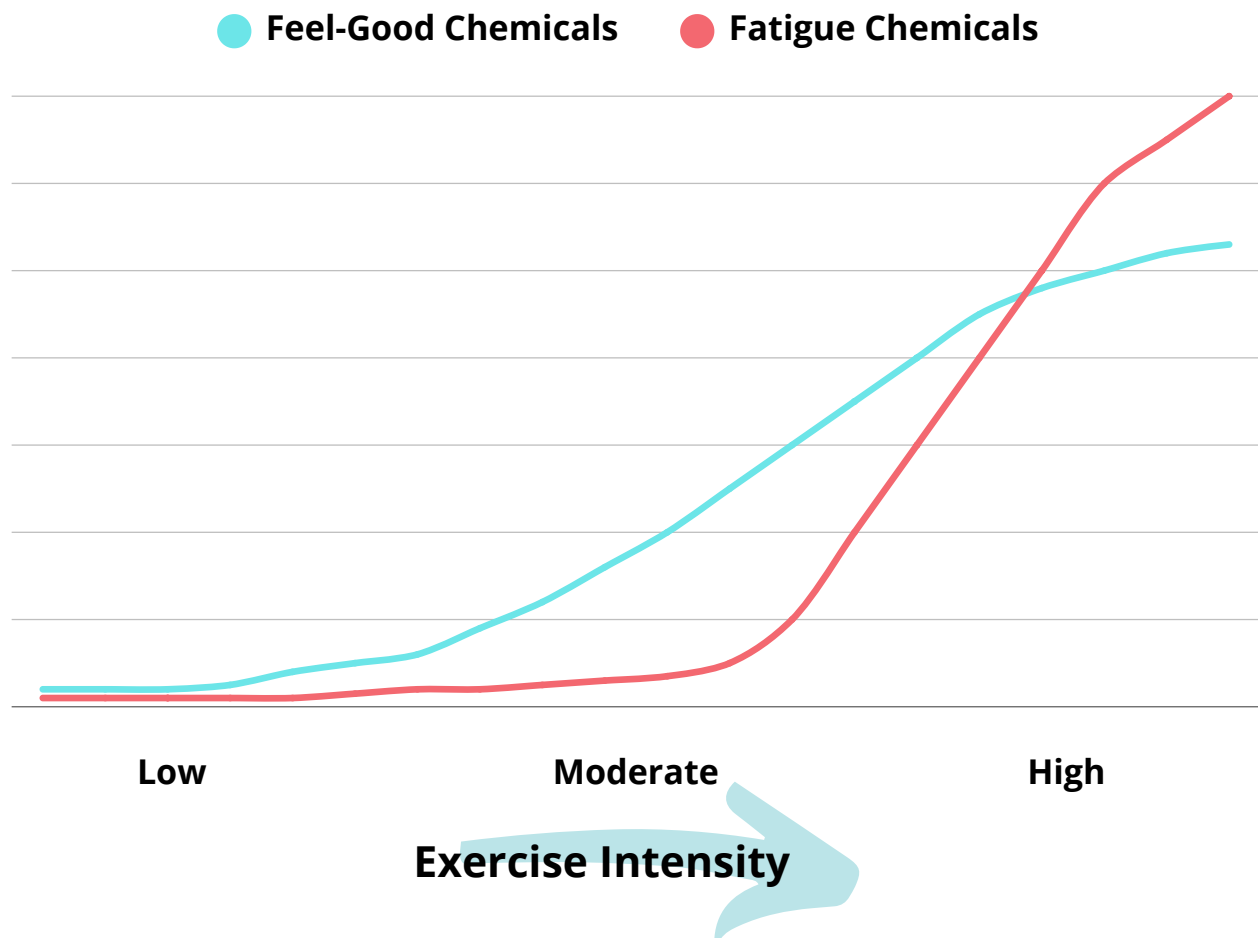


Intensity and Mental Health

As exercise intensity increases, your brain releases more and more feel-good chemicals.

At moderate intensity, many people experience the most noticeable mental health benefits: improved mood, reduced anxiety, and increased energy. Exercise often feels challenging but still pleasant.

At high intensity, things get more complicated. While even more feel-good chemicals are released, your body also produces chemicals associated with fatigue and stress. For some people, especially beginners or those with sensitive nervous systems, these unpleasant sensations can overshadow the positive effects.



In those cases, people may finish a workout feeling depleted, discouraged, or defeated rather than energized, even though the exercise was technically “good for them.”

This is one reason high intensity, push-your-limits workouts can backfire for mental health, particularly if you’ve struggled with consistency or motivation in the past.

Finding the Right Intensity for You

There is no single “best” intensity for everyone. The goal is to find the level that leaves you feeling energized and empowered.

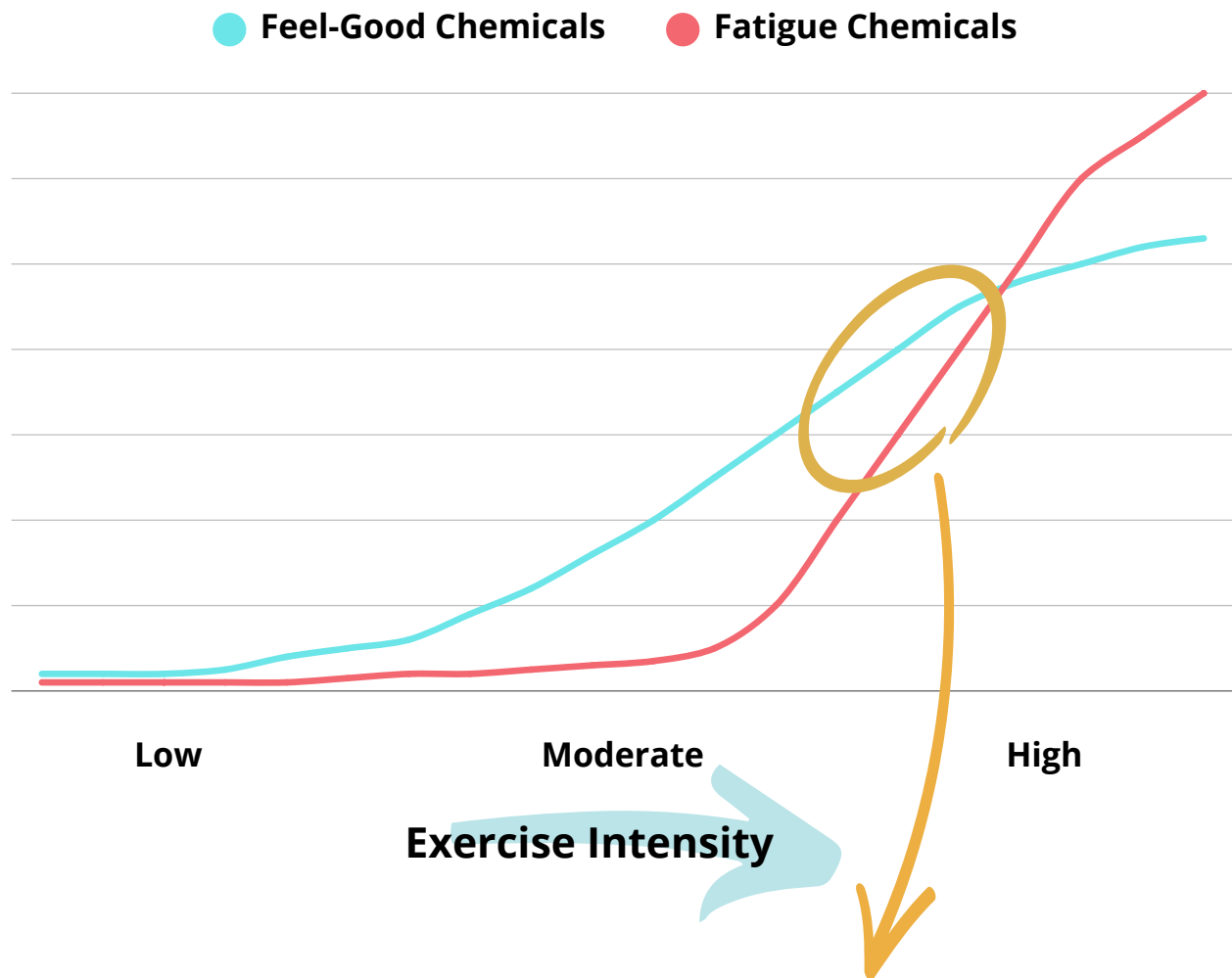
Try different intensities across a few workouts and pay attention to how each intensity makes you feel both during and afterward:

Do you feel calmer, clearer, and more energized?

Or do you feel drained, discouraged, or overwhelmed?

If high intensity feels good and leaves you feeling strong, you may choose to include it often, while allowing time for recovery.

If high intensity feels draining, focus mostly on moderate intensity and include small, intentional bursts of higher effort when you’re ready. These might look like brief faster intervals during an otherwise moderate cardio session or a single challenging set in a strength workout.



“Mental Health Zone”: High enough intensity to release a significant amount of feel-good chemicals but before the fatigue chemicals take over. The intensity at which this zone occurs is different for everyone. Experiment and see where it is for you.

Takeaway

More intensity is not always better for mental health. The best workouts are the ones that help you feel capable, energized, and motivated to do them again.

Putting It All Together

You don't need a brand-new or "perfect" workout plan to support your mental health. Almost any exercise program can be adapted to work better for your brain and nervous system.

By now, you've learned the key principles that matter most:

- Listening to your body and adjusting when needed
- Starting small and building gradually
- Setting workout intentions
- Creating mastery experiences through progressions
- Choosing exercise intensity deliberately

When these elements are in place, exercise becomes a tool for regulating stress, building confidence, and reinforcing a sense of control.

In the sections that follow, I'll walk you through how to apply some of these principles to both cardio and strength training. You'll see recommendations for which exercises to choose, how often to exercise, how hard to work, and how long sessions might last.

These are not rigid rules. Think of them as starting points.

You are encouraged to experiment, adjust, and personalize. Some days you may do more, some days less. Both count. The goal is not perfection, it's creating a routine that feels supportive, sustainable, and flexible enough to meet you where you are.

Cardio

Cardio exercise is one of the most effective ways to release mood-boosting chemicals, quiet your inner critic, and create mental clarity and relief.



How Often

Research suggests that 2–3 cardio sessions per week can meaningfully support mental health. That said, any amount of movement is beneficial. More frequent exercise is even better, but if you're going to do four or more cardio sessions each week, I suggest keeping each of them short for sustainability and motivation.

How Long

Cardio sessions lasting 30–60 minutes can be very beneficial, but that's not a requirement. Start with what feels realistic (even a few minutes counts!) and build gradually as your confidence and endurance improve.

Choosing Cardio Exercises

Cardio includes any activity that raises your heart rate for a sustained period of time. Walking is one of the most accessible and effective forms of cardio, but it's not the only option. Jogging, cycling, swimming, dancing, hiking, and kayaking are all cardio. Many people struggle with cardio so choose whatever activities feel tolerable, or even enjoyable, for you.

How Intense

Use the intensity guidelines you learned earlier and choose the level that feels best for you.

- **Moderate intensity:** you can speak in full sentences but wouldn't be able to sing
- **High intensity:** you're too out of breath to say more than a few words at a time

If moderate intensity feels best, aim to do most of your cardio at that level. You can still include small amounts of higher intensity if and when you're ready. This might look like:

- Starting a walk or ride at a faster pace for a few minutes, then slowing down
- Adding short, intentional faster intervals within an otherwise moderate session

Higher intensity can feel uncomfortable, so approach it with intention and curiosity rather than pressure. Remind yourself that it's only a small part of the workout and that you're doing it for long-term benefits, not punishment.

Mastery Experiences And Progressions

Aim to progress by making small increases in your cardio time, distance, or pace. Pick one variable (time, distance, or pace), and aim to do just a little more in that area in each workout. I do not recommend trying to progress on more than one of those in the same session.

For example, one week you might aim to increase your jogging time by one minute in each session. The following week you might jog for the same amount of time, but increase your pace slightly to cover a little more distance in that time.

Strength Training

For many people, strength training is especially powerful for mental health. It's what I specialize in as a personal trainer, because I believe it's particularly good for developing confidence and it gives you many opportunities for progressions and mastery experiences in every workout, which is essential for feeling capable and building self-belief.



How Often

Strength training 2–4 days per week is enough to support both physical and mental health. More isn't necessarily better, it's important to leave time to recover between workouts.

How Long

A strength training session lasting 30–60 minutes is usually sufficient to work all of your major movement patterns without feeling rushed.

How Intense

As with cardio, it's important to find the right intensity for you. When you're first starting out, I recommend keeping most sets moderately challenging, around a 7–8 out of 10 effort. This means the exercise feels difficult but manageable, and you could still complete a few more repetitions if needed.

As you become more experienced and confident, you can incorporate variations in intensity to support both long-term progress and short-term mood benefits (see the “ramp down sets” method on the next page).

Choosing Exercises

In each strength training session, aim to include at least one exercise from each major movement pattern:

- **Push** (push up, chest press, shoulder press)
- **Pull** (seated row, lat pulldown, 1 arm row)
- **Squat** (squat, lunge, step up)
- **Hinge** (deadlift, 1 leg deadlift, glute bridge)
- **Core** (plank, side plank, dead bug)

Focusing on movement patterns rather than individual muscles keeps workouts simple, balanced, and easier to adapt as your strength improves.

Sets and Repetitions

If you're new to strength training, start with:

- 2-3 sets of 12-15 repetitions per exercise
- Light to moderate weights
- An emphasis on learning good form and building confidence

After a month or two of consistent training:

- Gradually increase the weights
- 3-4 sets of 8-12 repetitions

With at least six months of consistent training and confidence in your technique:

- Choose heavier weights and lower repetitions
- 3-4 sets of 6-8 repetitions

There's no rush to progress through these stages. Moving slowly allows your body and nervous system time to adapt.

Choosing Weights For Mental Health: Ramp Down Sets

Ramp down sets are a simple way to balance the long-term benefits of strength training with the short-term mental health boost you want to feel after a workout.

Instead of using the same weight for every set of an exercise, ramp down sets gradually reduce the intensity after your first, most challenging set. This allows you to experience the benefits of lifting heavier weights (like confidence and long-term neuroplasticity) while still finishing your workout feeling energized rather than depleted.

How Ramp Down Sets Work

For your first set, choose a weight that feels very challenging:

- Aim to finish at a 9 out of 10 effort
- The last repetition should feel very hard, but you could still do one more with good form

For your second and third sets, slightly reduce the weight or the number of repetitions:

- These sets should feel challenging but more manageable
- Aim for an 7-8 out of 10 effort, where you could do two or three more repetitions if needed

By decreasing the intensity, you allow your nervous system to settle after the first set.

Why This Helps With Mental Health

That first challenging set provides a strong mastery experience, proof that you can do hard things. It also creates the stimulus for your body and brain to adapt and get stronger over time.

The moderate follow-up sets allow you to keep moving without triggering excessive fatigue or stress. This combination helps many people finish workouts feeling capable, confident, and mentally uplifted instead of exhausted.

Mastery Experiences And Progressions

Let's say you do five exercises in a workout, and you do three sets of each of those exercises. That's 15 opportunities for mastery experiences and progressions. Here's how to make the most of them.

I suggest choosing one variable per exercise and aiming to do a little more in that area on each set. The most straightforward ways to progress are:

- Increasing the weight
- Doing more reps
- Increasing the range of motion (bringing your knee slightly closer to the ground during a lunge, for example)

Choose one of these, and make sure you keep the progressions small and achievable. It's important that you set yourself up for success by not attempting increases that are too big.

If you're increasing the weight, choose the very next heaviest weight available. That's usually 2.5 or 5 lbs heavier (1-2.5 kg) at a commercial gym, depending on the equipment. If you're keeping the same weight but increasing the reps, aim to do just one additional rep at a time. Make sure to track, acknowledge, and celebrate each of those successful mastery experiences.

Keep an eye out for some of the less obvious indicators of progress, like feeling more in control during an exercise or moving more smoothly. Those are mastery experiences too, make sure you celebrate them.

Finally, remember to listen to your body. You don't have to progress in every exercise, or even in every session.

If simply moving your body feels like enough one day, don't put pressure on yourself to add weights, reps, or range of motion (or time, distance, or pace during a cardio session). As long as you're consistent, progressions will happen over time. You don't need to rush them.

Troubleshooting

Even with the best intentions, exercise doesn't always go smoothly, especially when mental health is involved. That's normal. Challenges don't mean you're doing something wrong; they're part of the process.

Here are some common situations and how to approach them with flexibility and self-compassion.

If You Don't Have the Energy to Do a Workout

Listen to your body and scale the workout to match what you have available that day.

That might mean:

- Doing one set instead of three
- Taking a two- or five-minute walk
- Doing a few gentle movements at home

The goal isn't to complete a "perfect" workout, it's to keep your momentum moving forward.

Sometimes, getting started with the understanding that you can stop at any time gives you more energy.

If you get started and then find that you're able to keep going, great. If not, that's okay too. Showing up in a small way still counts.



If You Feel Worse During or After a Workout

Exercise is a form of stress. It's a good stress, but it's still stress. Especially if you have a sensitive nervous system, it's possible to feel temporarily worse before you feel better.

If this happens:

- Remind yourself that your body is responding normally
- Avoid interpreting it as a sign that exercise "isn't working" or that you're broken

If workouts consistently leave you feeling worse, your sessions may be too long or too intense for your current capacity. Try scaling back duration or intensity and see how your body responds.

If You Miss a Workout

Everyone misses workouts sometimes. One missed session isn't a problem, it's just part of being human.

What matters most is avoiding a pattern of missing workouts. When you miss one workout, do everything in your power to do your next one, so that you "never miss twice."

You don't need to make up for the one you missed, that will just make it harder to do the next one. Move on and start again with your next workout as soon as possible.

If You Don't Feel Instant Relief

Exercise is not a quick fix. It won't eliminate depression or anxiety overnight, and not every workout will feel good.

Mental health benefits often build gradually. Some days exercise will feel uplifting; other days it may feel neutral or even very challenging. That doesn't mean it isn't helping. Be patient and persistent.

If You “Fall Off the Wagon”

Periods of inconsistency happen to everyone. Instead of criticizing yourself, treat this as an opportunity for curiosity.

Ask yourself:

- What got in the way?
- Was the routine too demanding?
- Did something change in my stress, energy, or schedule?

Use what you learn to adjust your approach, then restart with a small, achievable goal. You don't need to start over, you just need to start again.

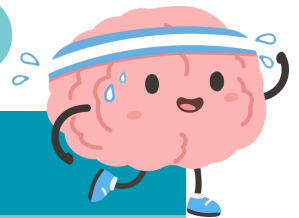
Sample Workouts

The sample workouts below are meant as starting points. You are encouraged to adjust the duration, intensity, and exercises based on your energy, experience, and preferences.

Remember: doing less than planned still counts. Consistency matters more than completing every detail exactly as written.

Cardio

Weekly Cardio Workouts



Day 1

Moderate intensity
20–30 minutes

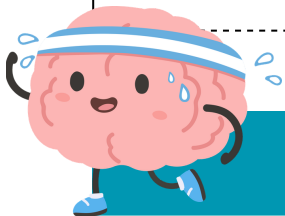
Day 2

Moderate intensity with
brief faster effort:

- 5 minutes faster pace
- 10 minutes moderate pace

Day 3

Moderate intensity
20–30 minutes



“Start Small” Weekly Cardio Workouts

Day 1

Moderate intensity
5–10 minutes

Day 2

Moderate intensity with
brief faster effort:

- 1 minute faster pace
- 4 minutes moderate pace

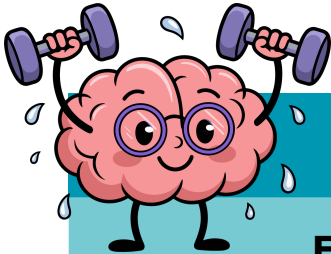
Day 3

Moderate intensity
5–10 minutes

You can repeat these sessions as long as needed before gradually increasing time or intensity.

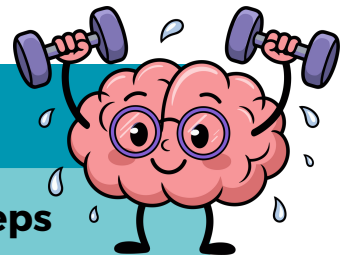
Strength Training

Click the link in the exercise name to see video and written instructions. Alternate Workout A and Workout B across the week, leaving at least one day between workouts.



Gym Workout A

Exercise	Sets	Reps
<u>Dumbbell Chest Press</u>	3	8-12
<u>Dumbbell Lunge</u>	3	8-12
<u>Seated Row</u>	3	8-12
<u>Dumbbell Deadlift</u>	3	8-12
<u>Dead Bug</u>	3	8-12



Gym Workout B

Exercise	Sets	Reps
<u>Dumbbell Single-Leg Deadlift</u>	3	8-12
<u>Dumbbell Shoulder Press</u>	3	8-12
<u>Dumbbell Squat</u>	3	8-12
<u>Lat Pulldown</u>	3	8-12
<u>Plank</u>	3	10-30 sec



"Start Small" Bodyweight Workout

Exercise	Sets	Reps
<u>Incline Push Up</u>	1	8-12
<u>Glute Bridge</u>	1	8-12
<u>Bodyweight Box Squat</u>	1	8-12
<u>One Arm Row</u> <i>(if you don't have a dumbbell, use anything heavy that you can hold in one hand, like a gallon jug)</i>	1	8-12
<u>Dead Bug</u>	1	8-12

Conclusion

If you take only one thing from this guide, I hope it's this: exercise can support your mental health, and it doesn't have to be extreme to be effective.

The most helpful exercise routine is the one you can return to, again and again. As you practice showing up in small ways, you build more than fitness.

You build:

- More positive mood and more energy
- Greater stress tolerance
- Confidence from mastery experiences
- A stronger sense of agency and self-trust
- A nervous system that learns, over time, that discomfort is survivable and temporary

Remember:

- Exercise is not a replacement for therapy or medication. If those supports are part of your care, exercise can work beautifully alongside them.
- Exercise is not a quick fix. You may not feel better after every single session, and that doesn't mean it isn't working. Progress is often subtle at first, then it compounds.
- You don't have to do this perfectly. Start small, stay curious, and adjust based on how you feel.

If you'd like a simple next step, choose one:

1. Pick a "start small" goal you can do today (a 2–10 minute walk, for example).
2. Set a workout intention before your next session (stress relief, confidence, energy, showing up, etc.).
3. Make your next workout slightly easier than you think it "should" be, so you finish feeling capable, not crushed.

One step at a time, you can build a relationship with exercise that supports your mental health and helps you feel strong, steady, and more like you.

References

Peer-reviewed journal articles on the mental health benefits of exercise (links in article names):

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- 2 John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation (2022) Move Your Mental Health: A Review of the Scientific Evidence on the Role Exercise and Physical Activity in Mental Health.
- 3 Harvey, S. B., Hotopf, M., Øverland, S., & Mykletun, A. (2010). Physical activity and common mental disorders. British Journal of Psychiatry, 197(5), 357–364.
- 4 Liu, Y., Zhao, G., Guo, J., Qu, H., Kong, L., & Yue, W. (2025). The efficacy of exercise interventions on depressive symptoms and cognitive function in adults with depression: An umbrella review. Journal of Affective Disorders, 368, 779-788.
- 5 Stubbs, B., Vancampfort, D., Rosenbaum, S., Firth, J., Cosco, T., Veronese, N., ... & Schuch, F. B. (2017). An examination of the anxiolytic effects of exercise for people with anxiety and stress-related disorders: A meta-analysis. Psychiatry research, 249, 102-108.
- 6 Rebar, A. L., Stanton, R., Geard, D., Short, C., Duncan, M. J., & Vandelanotte, C. (2015). A meta-meta-analysis of the effect of physical activity on depression and anxiety in non-clinical adult populations. Health psychology review, 9(3), 366–378.

Additional Resources

To learn more about exercise for mental health, visit my website:

www.DrSharonGam.com.

Here is a selection of my blog articles to get you started, as well as another one of my eBooks if you want more details about setting up your own strength training program.

1

Set Small Goals To Get Big Results

A practical guide to breaking goals into small, achievable steps that build consistency and confidence over time.

2

How Hard Should You Exercise If Your Goal Is To Support Your Mental Health?

A deeper look at exercise intensity, mood, and energy, and how to choose a level of effort that supports your mental health.

3

Strength Training For Mental Health: It's Not A Cure But It Can Help You Thrive

An evidence-based overview of how strength training supports mental health, confidence, and resilience, without promising quick fixes.

4

Choosing Your Weights For Mental Health

Step-by-step guidance for utilizing “ramp down sets” that feel both challenging and empowering.

5

Strength Training 101 eBook

A beginner-friendly introduction to strength training fundamentals, including exercises, structure, and progressions.

About Me



Dr. Sharon Gam, PhD

Strength Coach

I know what it feels like to struggle with anxiety and depression and to wish you felt and thought differently. Of all the tools I've used to support my mental health, exercise has been by far the most powerful. Through strength training and running, I found confidence, energy, optimism, and a renewed sense of possibility. That experience shaped the direction of my career.

I've worked in the health and fitness field for more than 19 years, providing personal training and developing large-scale educational health programs for hundreds of clients. I earned my PhD in Exercise Physiology from the University of Western Australia and hold several professional certifications, including Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) and Certified Health Coach.

Today, I specialize in strength training for mental health. I teach people how to lift weights with workouts designed to build physical strength as well as regulate the nervous system, foster resilience, and create positive, empowering experiences in the gym.