



Banish the winter blues

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

July is the real heart of winter in South Africa. The weather may be a bit milder, due to the changing climate, but there are slicks of frost on the grass, and when you walk, you can see your breath puff out like a miniature steam train.

Winter can be cruel to those with painful musculoskeletal conditions. The cold drives blood from the limbs into the torso to ensure a stable temperature around core organs. The result is stiffening tissues, which exacerbates pain in joints already stiff from inflammation.

But for many people, winter brings with it an old, familiar state of mind: low mood, or even depression. The days drag by, a long round of demands and tasks, and we can't even remember the sparkle of spring, summer and autumn.

For both conditions (joint pain and low mood), there's the same prescription: move! says Professor Witness Mudzi, President of the South African Society of Physiotherapy. "Exercise is key to keeping joints, muscles, nerves, tendons and ligaments from stiffening," he notes. "There is also a library full of research showing that regular, consistent exercise is effective in treating low mood. Even just a couple of hours a week of fairly gentle exercise, such as walking, is remarkably efficacious."

One recent research paper suggested that, even for inpatient psychiatry patients, exercise should be the first port of call for treatment, even before drugs: "Physical exercise may be a helpful way to reduce mental health disorders in the context of inpatient psychiatry by targeting anxiety, depression, anger, psychomotor agitation, and muscle tension and addressing stressors and triggers and to develop a more balanced and integrated sense of self."

A review of science studying the impact of exercise on people suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (a problem more common in the far North, where daily hours of sunshine are very reduced) concluded that "exercise intervention may facilitate effective treatment for SAD".

Exercise may also act in a preventative way, protecting you against depression before it's even begun as stated in a recently published paper: "...enhancing physical activity may be an effective prevention strategy for depression".

And the magical mood-enhancing effect is available to everyone and persists into old age as recently found by researchers at McMasters University. They found that "physical activity may help fight depression in seniors by stimulating muscle-generated mood boosters".

So if you aren't already engaging in exercise, winter might be a good time to get started.

PS: if you're very unfit, perhaps you've been recovering from an illness or injury, you may worry about overstraining your body in the early stages. Talk to your physiotherapist, suggests Professor Mudzi. Physiotherapists are highly trained to understand how bodies work, and are able to tailor-make an exercise programme which will suit your level of fitness and lifestyle, says Professor Mudzi.

To find a physiotherapist, go to www.saphysio.co.za