

# Try Exercise

If You Are Dealing with an Alcohol or Drug Problem

By

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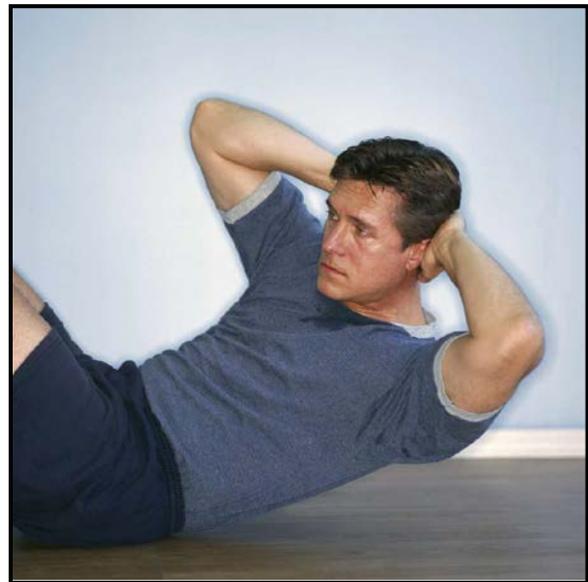
**Y**es, you are correct. As the title implies, I am recommending exercise as one strategy to deal with an alcohol or other drug problem. There is nothing new or innovative about this strategy to help arrest one's alcohol or drug affliction. I want to be clear. I am advocating exercise as a means to improve your overall quality of life—not to become a poster picture for *Fitness* magazine.

There is an abundance of research that supports exercise as just one of the many effective strategies to help mitigate emotional problems, disorders of mood, and alcohol and other drug disorders.

The Mayo Clinic published an article stating that exercise helps prevent and improve a number of health problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis. Research on anxiety, depression, and exercise shows that the psychological and physical benefits of exercise can also help reduce anxiety and improve mood. The links between anxiety, depression, and exercise aren't entirely clear, but working out can definitely help you relax and make you feel better. Exercise may also help keep anxiety and depression from coming back once you're feeling better.

I started my career as a drug and alcohol counselor with the Department of Defense, returning soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen to full duty. Full duty meant arresting/treating their difficulties with alcohol and other drugs.

One of the most important and enjoyable strategies for me in accomplishing this goal was daily PT (physical training). Typically, this exercise routine involved stretching, calisthenics, a 4- to 6-mile run followed by more stretching. For a new patient entering a 6-week inpatient program, there was a great deal of grouching about these physical workouts. You see, individuals (even if they are purportedly conditioned soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines) neglect their physical conditioning when abusing alcohol and other drugs.



I believe that, anecdotally, physical activity resulted in my patients having more energy and stamina, greater mental clarity, improved attention, increased self-confidence, and a decrease in cravings for alcohol and other drugs. Daily exercise improved the overall

effectiveness of the program. A book entitled *Aerobic Program for Total Well-Being: Exercise, Diet, And Emotional Balance* by Kenneth Cooper, MD © 1985 served as my reference for optimal health. I still retain that book in my professional library and often refer to it.

I have exercised on a semi-regular basis over the past five years—even completing a half marathon in 2009 and 2011. However, on my birthday in 2012, I made a personal commitment to exercise every day. Once I made up my mind, this choice has been a relatively easy one. The choice was easier for me for the following reasons: 1) I was physically active at a very early age, 2) I played football in high school and briefly in college, and 3) I was physically active during my career in the U.S. Navy. That is not to say that I haven't had periods in my life when I failed to make exercise a priority. During those times, I felt demoralized.

Today, exercise receives the same priority and attention as my other activities of daily living. I don't go a day without some form of physical activity--walking, running, elliptical, biking, etc. for a minimum of 45 minutes. As of the day of this article, I have exercised for over 540 consecutive days. I complete my exercise activity some time during the course of the day and before the clock strikes midnight. I *always* feel better about myself after exercising. A gym or a gym membership is not necessary to become physically active. If you have difficulty with self-motivation and discipline, team up with a friend who also values health and well-being. I caution you to avoid the exercise and health fanatics. A reasoned approach based on your individual circumstances is important.

My friend (a nurse and health advocate) has made the following observations about me since I made exercise a priority and an activity of daily life: increased stamina, weight loss, increased muscle tone, higher levels of energy, and greater attention to my overall health and

eating habits. I agree with her observations and would add that I sleep better and feel more rested, am more mentally alert, and feel more engaged in the world around me.

I believe my commitment to daily exercise makes me a more effective counselor. I consider all of these to be invaluable gains from my daily exercise. It is not difficult to exercise daily when you make it a priority just like other activities of daily living (ADLs).



When making health changes, it is always advisable to talk to your health care provider. This is extremely important if you have been involved in alcohol or other drug abuse.

It is very unlikely that most people will be able to make exercise an activity of daily living if they are abusing alcohol and other drugs. Alcohol and other drug abuse are incompatible with daily rigorous physical activity. Let me just say, I couldn't fathom exercising daily at the level I do if I were also abusing alcohol and other drugs. I would not have the energy, and exercise would not be a priority.

In addition to exercise as an activity of daily living, I work to incorporate the guidelines in the following chart into my routine.

**My Key:**  Consistent  Inconsistent  Get it going

 <b>Guidelines for Optimum Health</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Hydrate</b> (minimum 8 cups a day)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Weight training</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>De-stress</b> (meditation, relaxation)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Sleep 7-8 hours</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Ditch the alcohol and others drugs including nonprescription drug use</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Eliminate Diet Soda</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Eat Regularly</b> (high fiber, veggies, fruits, low fat cheese, crackers, Greek yogurt)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Drink Green Tea</b> (minimum of 4-5 cups for maximum benefit)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Enjoy Sunlight</b> (outdoor activities)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Work out in the Cold</b>

If you study my chart and the explanatory key immediately above it, you will see that I don't have perfection. What I do have is a chart that gives me a quick glance at what I am doing. By my estimation, I am solidly doing 60%. As time progresses, I will be doing 100% consistently.

Finally, do yourself and your family a big favor by committing yourself to making exercise a daily activity. Make it just one of the strategies you use to deal with your alcohol or other drug problem. Stick with exercise, and your overall quality of life will improve. I promise you!

