

Making Exercise Part of Your Student Schedule

By Barbara Brehm (professor of exercise and sport studies)

Success in high school and college depends on the ability to comprehend large volumes of difficult material. Comprehension, in turn, requires that you focus on what you are hearing and reading. Academic success is more often associated with mental workouts than a trip to the gym. But did you know that regular physical activity can boost your brainpower and academic productivity? Exercise has other great benefits, too.

Reduce feelings of stress

School tends to be a high-stress environment. Stress is the ultimate distraction - it's hard to concentrate when you are distracted by problems. Obviously, exercise will not make problems go away. But a good workout helps stop the worrying, anxiety and depression that easily becomes part of the stress package. Regular exercise improves your brain chemistry and relaxes your muscles, yet leaves you feeling focused and alert.

Sleep better

Many students report improvement in sleep quality once they begin exercising regularly. Academic overload can lead to late-night studying, and feeling tired and wired when it's finally time to sleep. Exercise can be part of your strategy for improving sleep quality.

Strengthen your immune system

Spending so much time in close quarters with hundreds of people increases your exposure to germs. Students must do all they can to stay healthy. Plenty of hand washing reduces the spread of germs. And adequate sleep, stress management, good nutrition and regular exercise help to keep your immune system in good shape.

Should you exercise when you are sick? You are better off in bed: Your body needs rest, not exercise, when you are sick.

Prevent obesity

Days of sitting in class and studying in the library combined with fast food and late-night pizza often result in unwanted weight gain. Obesity prevention is simple in theory: Exercise more and eat less.

Choose healthful, wholesome food, including plenty of fruits and vegetables, and limit the junk. Take a class in nutrition or health if you need more information on how to eat well (even on a budget).

Quit smoking

If you smoke, the sooner you quit, the better you'll feel. You are probably intending to quit someday, so do it now, before the addiction gets worse. Smoking really messes up your brain chemistry, and the longer you smoke, the more depressed you will feel when you quit. Exercise will help you get through the withdrawal symptoms, and reduce risk of weight gain.

Find activities you enjoy

Check out the options at your school for adding physical activity to your schedule. Take a physical education class for credit, or look for noncredit alternatives. Many schools offer a variety of activities. Try a new sport, or return to an old favorite. Learn yoga, tai chi or Pilates, or take a dance class. Join a team: You'll be forced to work out and manage your time.

Students usually have ideal conditions for active transportation -- bike and walk whenever possible. You'll save money on fuel, reduce pollution and get exercise at the same time. Take the stairs at every opportunity to classes.