How does physical exercise help my well-being?

Research shows that regular physical activity increases the production of endorphins, often known as 'feel-good' hormones, which can help improve your natural immunity and reduce pain perception. Furthermore, exercise has been shown to improve sleep, which is often negatively affected by stress and depression. It also provides a means of distraction, allowing you to find some relief from negative thoughts and enabling you to cope with depressive symptoms healthily.

Here's why gentle exercises are beneficial, especially for those experiencing symptoms of depression or general stress:

Boosts endorphins: Gentle exercises like walking, yoga, or light stretching stimulate the production of endorphins, your brain's natural painkillers and mood elevators. These chemicals are known as "feel-good" hormones because they can enhance your sense of well-being.

Reduces stress hormones: Engaging in physical activity helps reduce the levels of stress hormones in your body, such as adrenaline and cortisol. Lower stress hormone levels can lead to a calmer and more relaxed state, helping mitigate some of the physical symptoms associated with stress and depression.

Improves sleep: Regular exercise, particularly when done consistently and not too close to bedtime, can help regulate sleep patterns. Better sleep directly impacts mood, energy levels, and overall mental health. People who exercise regularly often report better quality sleep and feel more rested.

Increases energy and stamina: Although it might seem counterintuitive, spending energy on physical activities increases your overall energy levels and stamina over time. Gentle exercises help build up your endurance and can reduce feelings of fatigue.

Enhances mental focus: Physical activity helps increase blood flow to the brain, which can help sharpen your alertness and concentration. Improved focus can help manage the foggy thinking or forgetfulness that often accompanies these conditions.

Promotes neural growth: Research suggests that regular exercise can promote neurogenesis, the growth and development of new brain cells, particularly in the hippocampus—an area of the brain associated with memory and emotion. This growth can contribute to an improvement in cognitive functions and emotional resilience.

Provides structure and routine: Incorporating gentle exercises into your daily or weekly routine can give a sense of structure, which can be very helpful. The routine helps create predictability and a sense of control over one's activities.

Offers social interaction: Exercises in a group setting, such as a class or walking group, can also provide social benefits. Engaging with others in a positive environment can improve your mood and offer support, reducing feelings of isolation.

Improves self-esteem: Regular achievement in exercise, even small accomplishments like completing a daily walk, can boost self-esteem and self-confidence. Over time, these feelings can contribute to a more positive mood and better mental health.

In addition to these benefits, physical exercise plays a significant role in neuroprotection and neuroplasticity. Regular physical activity has been shown to protect the brain from degeneration and injury by reducing inflammation, oxidative stress, and excitotoxicity, thereby preserving neural integrity and function. Moreover, exercise promotes neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to adapt and reorganise itself by forming new neural connections. This is particularly important for cognitive health, as it aids in recovery from brain injuries, improves learning and memory, and enhances overall mental resilience. Exercise-induced neurogenesis, particularly in the hippocampus, supports memory and emotional regulation, improving cognitive functions and emotional stability.