

Excerpt from SMART Recovery

Exercise offers many benefits during the recovery process.

**It doesn't have to be complicated:**

It's important to recognize that working out can take many forms, from something as simple and low impact as a walk, to training for a marathon or taking up competitive power lifting. In this context low impact does not mean less effective. Extensive research shows that even walking for 30 minutes a day several days a week can reap benefits. Obviously if you want to meet specific goals like increased aerobic capacity or running a local 5K race you need to train appropriately, but throughout this blog post when we talk about working out or fitness I really mean getting out and moving – whatever *you* can do with *your* abilities and motivation.

**Exercise can help provide structure to the day:**

This can take several forms including things like a set workout plan or signing up for classes like yoga or spinning at the local gym. It can be found very effective to have a set workout plan in place that encourages you to think “hey, I can't drink tonight; I have to get up and run tomorrow morning”. Or if you're not a morning person, “hey, I can't drink tonight; I need to go to my yoga class”.

**A commitment to a regular workout or other exercise regime also takes up time:**

This is part of the thinking behind a VACI – what are you going to do with all this extra time that you used to spend thinking about, acquiring, using, and recovering from using your drugs of choice? Many people in early addiction recovery find they suddenly have a lot of time on their hands and no idea what to do with it. Working out, in whatever form, can fill some of this time. Even one aerobics class per week plus a couple of workouts on your own can take up several hours including time to get ready to work out and get cleaned up after. For more ideas of how to incorporate exercise into your life, SROL members have compiled a list of possible activities for people to consider.

In the short term, it's easy to think of exercise as a benefit of not using because of the other benefits. You're not using and instead you're working out and getting healthy. The flip side of the coin is that using will likely prevent you from working out. This can also be effective in the longer term if you set fitness based goals like a backpacking trip several months away. A cost of using is putting that backpacking trip at risk.

**Exercise can provide a general positive feeling:**

If you're anything like most people, you've been doing very bad things to your body so it may be a while before you start to enjoy working out. It's going to take time to heal your body and shift your mental frame of reference. How long will this take? Like a lot of recovery issues (like frequency or intensity of urges) it will depend on the individual. In the meantime, try and pick exercises you are likely to enjoy from the start, like walking the dog or hiking. As your body recovers and you gain fitness you'll find a lot of doors open up to you, broadening the types of activities you can enjoy.

**Exercise will help heal your body and your brain:**

Research clearly shows that exercise helps your body, whether you're in recovery or not. Improved long term fitness helps with cardio-vascular health and diabetes, lowers the risk of some types of cancers, stimulates the immune system, and can even help alleviate depression symptoms. Further research shows that exercise can increase the amount of new nerve connections in the brain, which will help your brain heal from the harm your drug of choice has been causing. As the body and mind continue to return to a more normal state many people in recovery find exercise also helps restore a normal sleep schedule.

Many, many people bemoan the idea that they're too out of shape, they lack the time, or they have some physical limitation like an old injury that keeps them from exercising. There is though something everyone can do. You just need to figure out what you can do and get started. And yes, getting started can be a difficult step.

The bottom line is that exercise can be a valuable part of the recovery process for a number of reasons, and you don't have to become a fitness fanatic to see the benefits. Just take those first steps and get out there and move.