

Viewpoint: Exercise can be as effective as antidepressants for mild to moderate depression. So why do US doctors push pills?

Here's the most important thing I learned while writing a book on running and mental health: In clinical studies, regular aerobic exercise is as effective as antidepressants in reducing symptoms of mild to moderate depression...Exercise actually causes the same structural changes to the brain as antidepressants—neuroplasticity, or creating new neural pathways, and growth in the hippocampus, a part of the brain that's generally shrunken in people with depression.

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Current guidelines by groups such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American College of Physicians don't count exercise as an initial form of treatment a physician should recommend for a patient with depression. Instead, modern antidepressants and some forms of psychotherapy are the two main first-line treatments prescribed.

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The U.S. health care system famously incentivizes procedures and pills over a holistic approach...This tendency to prescribe, and specifically to prescribe antidepressants, contributes to the aura of "they might help, and they probably won't hurt," despite warranted debate over their effectiveness for depression. A system that encourages such practices is at odds with a prescription of "get outside and move for half an hour most days" for depression.

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Still, in anecdotes and peer-reviewed surveys, once depressed people try exercise, they rate it the best treatment on the basis of perceived effectiveness to perceived burden (side effects, cost, etc.). Running is definitely the key to managing my depression. I shouldn't have had to discover that on my own.

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