

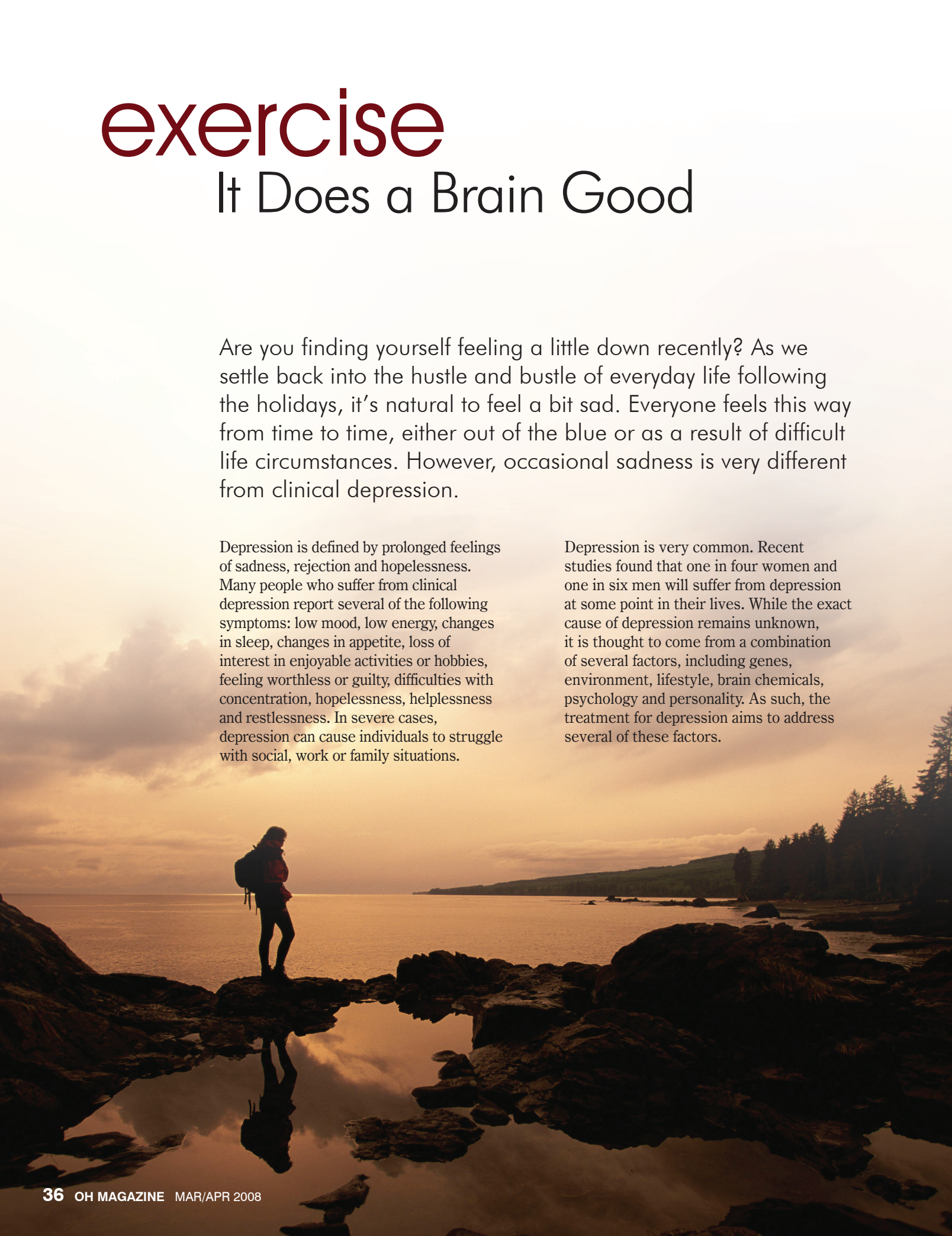
exercise

It Does a Brain Good

Are you finding yourself feeling a little down recently? As we settle back into the hustle and bustle of everyday life following the holidays, it's natural to feel a bit sad. Everyone feels this way from time to time, either out of the blue or as a result of difficult life circumstances. However, occasional sadness is very different from clinical depression.

Depression is defined by prolonged feelings of sadness, rejection and hopelessness. Many people who suffer from clinical depression report several of the following symptoms: low mood, low energy, changes in sleep, changes in appetite, loss of interest in enjoyable activities or hobbies, feeling worthless or guilty, difficulties with concentration, hopelessness, helplessness and restlessness. In severe cases, depression can cause individuals to struggle with social, work or family situations.

Depression is very common. Recent studies found that one in four women and one in six men will suffer from depression at some point in their lives. While the exact cause of depression remains unknown, it is thought to come from a combination of several factors, including genes, environment, lifestyle, brain chemicals, psychology and personality. As such, the treatment for depression aims to address several of these factors.



There's great news for many of us who suffer from anything between mild sadness and clinical depression: exercise can change chemicals in your brain to lift your mood and keep depression at bay.

New studies show that not only is exercise great for your body, it also has tremendous mood-lifting potential. One recent study compared the effects of exercise and medication in treating depression. The participants were divided into three groups who were evaluated over a four-month period. Group One took antidepressants, Group Two started exercising aerobically and Group Three used both medications and exercise. The results of the study showed that:

- All three groups improved.
- Group One (antidepressants only) improved the fastest, but had only moderate success.
- Group Three (antidepressants plus exercise) improved more slowly, but had the most success after treatment: 69 percent of them were no longer classified as clinically depressed, as opposed to groups one and two, who recovered at slightly lower rates (66 percent and 60 percent respectively).

The changes illustrated by this study have to do with an important brain chemical called serotonin. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that acts like a "messenger chemical" to regulate your sleep and wake cycles, libido, appetite and mood. Serotonin is one neurotransmitter that has been strongly linked to depression. Many of the pharmaceutical treatments for depression work by elevating the levels of serotonin in your brain, thereby influencing your mood.

Some researchers have found that regular exercise and the increase in physical fitness that comes from exercise boost serotonin levels in the brain and lead to improved mood and feelings of well-being. Other research indicates that regular exercise also boosts body temperature, which may ease depression by influencing brain chemistry. In addition to changing your brain's chemistry, exercise can help you to feel better by increasing your self-esteem,

giving you the chance to socialize, depleting stress chemicals like adrenaline and helping you to break out of negative thinking cycles.

Some ways you can use exercise to help manage depression include:

- Choosing a wide range of fun exercise activities or perhaps joining a team
- Asking a friend or family member to be your exercise partner; this will help you stay motivated and consistent, as well as adding conversation to the activity, which will make it even more enjoyable and rewarding
- Aiming to exercise two or three times per week, for at least 30 minutes, at 60 to 70 percent of your maximum heart rate
- Incorporating warm-up and cool-down times, as well as stretching and strength training activities

If you have been inactive for a while, you can still get mood benefits from exercise; you just need to go a little slower. It may be best to start with lower-intensity activities for shorter periods of time, like walking for five minutes instead of swimming for 30 minutes. You do not want to strain your body or incur any injuries, so gradually build up to your desired frequency and level of intensity.

The best news is that you can play an active role in your recovery from depression. While research suggests that regular exercise may be effective to prevent depression and also to treat mild depression, it is not a cure. If you are clinically depressed, you may also be suffering from other conditions that exercise may not help. Exercise can supplement your medication and therapy to help you get better faster, but it is not a standalone treatment; your best bet is to work with your doctors and therapists to create the most effective treatment possible, wherein exercise can play a big role. If you're not currently depressed, exercising may be one of the best things you can do to stay happy and healthy.



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