



Photography Ash Browne

“Think of movement as an opportunity not an inconvenience.”
Unknown

Exercise the black dog - don't panic

by Janine Browne

Now we've all heard how good exercise is for your body and we're starting to hear more about its positive affects on our mental health too. We've also been exposed to the 'Just 30 minutes a day' message. Just? Only thirty minutes? Trouble is, if you're feeling low, just getting out of bed in the morning is tough, let alone exercising for 30 minutes!

What can make it ever harder is if you experience anxiety or panic attacks because the physiological changes during exercise actually mimic the symptoms of both. If you're aware of this however, you can work through it—reassure yourself that it's not a panic attack coming on, you're out of breath and the heart's jumping out of your chest in response to exercise (that's if you have the all clear from a medical practitioner to partake in exercise).

Some tips that may help ease anxiety when exercising-

- Try slowing down your breathing, taking deep breaths rather than shallow gasps.
- Reassure yourself that you can stop at anytime—you're in control.
- If you're doing sport at school or working out with a trainer at the gym, let them know about your anxiety and that it's important for you to be able to back off when you need to.

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- Personally, I count to control my breathing. Yes, I'm a little obsessive compulsive but I use it to my advantage. When I walk, I breathe out for two steps and in for two steps. For a jog I breathe out for four steps, in for four. It keeps my breathing rhythmical. Counting also drowns out the voice in my head that talks me out of exercise! That, "Oh, this is too hard—I can't do it!" voice.
- Listening to music through a head set when I'm exercising helps block out the panic provoking sound of my breathing and again, that voice in my head. I use the Puff and Toot train dialogue when I'm going up hills, 'I think I can, I think I can, I think I can . . .' and the 'Just do it!' saying when I'm stuck in procrastination mode. Make up one of your own!
- Plan exercise sessions outdoors whenever possible - along the river, down the beach, in the bush. There's nothing better for the soul (and anxiety) than water and nature . . . and it's free (free of anxiety provoking mirrors too!)
- Joining a gym can send anxiety levels through the roof, so joining with a friend can help. Booking the first few sessions with one of the trainers is a worthwhile investment to ease anxiety, particularly when you're trying to nut out how to work those electronic machines!

Exercise has been proven to help reduce anxiety and improve mood, so it's well worth persevering. I find the first 10 minutes (and the 30 minutes contemplating it) the hardest bit. Once you're actually out there doing it, it's not so bad.