As reported in USA Today, January 11, 2001

A study from Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, suggests that aerobic exercise may fight depression as well as, or even better than, antidepressants.

Psychologist James Blumenthal, who lead the study, said "That doesn't mean antidepressants or psychotherapy isn't needed – we just don't know if a doctor 'prescribed' exercise, if you'd get the same results."

The study, believed to be the first of its kind, randomized 156 volunteers ages 50 and over into three treatment groups:

- Antidepressants only;
- Antidepressants plus group aerobics at 30 minutes three times a week;
- Exercise only.

After 16 weeks, the likelihood of recovery among the groups was equal – about two thirds were no longer depressed. Those on antidepressants were more likely to get better within a month. Those still depressed after the 16-week study could treat their illness in any way they saw fit.

In a follow-up six months later, the exercise group was surprisingly better. Only 8 percent of those who had recovered after 16 weeks had relapsed into depression. 38 percent of the antidepressants-only group and 31 percent of the combination group had relapsed. An overall comparison showed 30 percent in the exercise group still clinically depressed, compared with 55 percent of the combination group and 52 percent of the antidepressants-only group.

One possible cause for the long-term prospects for mental health, Blumenthal speculated, was that exercise who took no pills felt that they alone were responsible for their recovery, and experienced a sense of mastery over their own mental health.

Most of the antidepressants-only group had stopped their medication six months later, "so this isn’t an indictment of antidepressants or a claim that they don’t work, but it shows the value of exercise," Blumenthal says. "The more exercise they did, the less likely they were to be depressed," he continued. Doing on 50 minutes of exercise a week was shown to halve a person's chances of being depressed.

Depression expert M.F. (Pete) Elias of Boston University Medical School points out that exercise can produce "feel good" brain chemicals – serotonin and endorphins. This can account for its benefit.

Another benefit of exercise, according to psychologist Stephen Schlesinger of Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago, may be social. "Depressed people tend to become isolated, and exercise can be social."

Schlesinger says that medication is helpful in some cases, but too much emphasis can be put on antidepressants. "Many studies show cognitive behavioral therapy can be as effective as drugs, but there’s a push from managed care to prescribe these pills."

For more, see www.usatoday.com/life/health/mentalh/lhmhe064.htm