

# **WHY DOES OBAMA PLAY BASKETBALL?**

## **EXERCISE, SPORT, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING**

**By Ethan Bregman, Ph.D.**

We've been hearing about the president mixing it up on the basketball court. George W. Bush would drag his security guards out on gnarly mountain bike rides. The jogging habits of past presidents make national news (let's not forget those flattering photos of Bill Clinton in his jogging shorts). Why would important and busy people like our presidents take time out of their day to participate in sport and fitness activities? What is significant about this?

Answer:

Research shows that exercise and physical fitness are associated with better mental health and overall well being. When we feel good we do better in our jobs, create healthier relationships, and improve our overall day-to-day performance. Exercise is also associated with stress reduction, decreased depression, and decreased anxiety.

The amount of physical activity we get begins to decline at around age 6 for most. Yes, 1<sup>st</sup> grade is the prelude to the sedentary 6-8 hour workday. Add in homework, video games, and television and the amount of sedentary time increases. The decreases in physical activity continue with our increase in age.

Exercise, whether for fitness or sport/competition can have many positive effects on your life regardless of age or level of participation. Regular exercise may increase confidence, energy, and memory. Exercise can also assist in creating a positive body image, increasing work efficiency, and improving academic performance. Research shows that regular exercise decreases absenteeism at work and also decreases anxiety, hostility, depression, tension, and anger.

How does it work? First, exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which gives the brain more "food." A change also happens to the chemicals in the brain where neurotransmitters release feel good chemicals such as serotonin, endorphins, and norepinephrine. This also creates a reduction in muscle tension thereby promoting a more relaxed state on a daily basis.

We can all come up with many different reasons and/or excuses for not exercising or participating in sport. Here are some of the most common:

1. Perceived lack of time
2. Lack of energy
3. Lack of motivation
4. Not feeling in good enough shape to start
5. I'm too old for this stuff

*Perceived lack of time:* If you really look at your day-to-day activities, the **problem more likely lies in prioritizing**. People find time to watch television, read, and hang out. Setting goals and prioritizing fitness can become a part of your daily routine.

*Lack of energy:* **Fatigue is often more mental than physical**. Fatigue can be the product of stress and anxiety. Even just taking a brisk walk has been shown to relieve tension and stress and actually be energizing.

*Lack of motivation:* It takes commitment and prioritizing to be able to take 30 minutes of your day to engage in some form of fitness activity. An important motivator to keep in mind initially is all of the benefits you can gain from exercise, one being **an increase in motivation!** Join a team or group. The social experience can also increase the desire for participation. It comes down to making the commitment to get started. The rest will follow.

*Not feeling in good enough shape to start:* **Getting in better physical condition is the purpose!** Fitness can start with a walk around the block. From there one can slowly increase until maybe it is a jog around the block, then 2 blocks, etc.

*I'm too old for this stuff:* Being too old has become an excuse of the past. There are masters and seniors running groups, bike groups, sports teams, and even senior Olympic Games. The senior games actually consist of many different sporting events such as basketball, bowling, tennis, cycling and mountain biking, racquetball, road racing, softball, swimming, triathlon, volleyball, lawn bowls, square dance, table tennis and track and field. Divisions range from over 50 yrs young to over 70 years young. There are even people who start running in their 60's only to do their first marathon at 70. **Clearly it is never too late.**

It is New Year's resolution time. Start out with setting some short term goals. Join an established group or find people to join you. If you are having difficulty motivating, getting started, and/or setting goals for yourself, counseling can help by first identifying and then working to remove psychological barriers to participation. Commit to getting out there, finding a fitness or sport activity you enjoy, and get **MOVING FOR MENTAL HEALTH!**