



EXERCISE FOR STRESS RELIEF

This strategy is suggested in the 14-16 BrainWaves lesson: **Managing stress**

About the strategy

Exercise and physical activity—ranging from moderate-to-vigorous aerobic exercise like sports, running, dancing, or brisk walking—are ranked as the single most effective evidence-based strategy for daily mood regulation and stress relief. Physical movement acts as both an immediate buffer against short-term panic and a foundational protective shield against long-term chronic stress:

- **Short-Term Stress Relief:** In acute high-stress moments, physical activity triggers the immediate release of feel-good endorphins while rapidly burning off excess adrenaline and cortisol—the primary fight-or-flight stress hormones. Just 10 to 30 minutes of aerobic movement produces an immediate reduction in anxiety.
- **Long-Term Stress Protection:** As a foundational health practice alongside quality sleep, regular exercise builds emotional resilience over time. Routine physical activity regulates sleep patterns, stabilises mood, reduces physical muscle tension, and lowers overall vulnerability to chronic stress.

The scientific evidence behind the strategy

Recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews confirm the powerful stress-reducing effects of exercise in adolescents:

- Pascoe, M. C., Bailey, A. P., Craike, M., et al. (2020). Physical activity and exercise in youth mental health promotion: a scoping review. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, 6(1), e000677.
- Carcelén-Fraile, M. d. C., Aibar-Almazán, A., & Hita-Contreras, F. (2025). Aerobic Training on Mental Health in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review with Meta-Analysis. *Applied Sciences*, 15(17), 9572.

Further reading

This fact sheet from the World Health Organization explores in detail the benefits of physical activity (as well as the risks of sedentary behaviour and inactivity) and the levels of activity recommended for young people:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity>