

For Grand Rapids therapists, exercise and counseling promote Well Being

Published: Monday, August 01, 2011, 6:00 AM Updated: Monday, August 01, 2011, 6:24 AM



By **Paul R. Kopenkoskey | The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS — Brendan Kelly and Timothy Pieri are convinced people who want to triumph over their depression and other mental health disorders should work at breaking into a sweat.

That's why the two social workers recently launched **The Well Being LLC**, an outpatient therapy service in Northwest Grand Rapids that combines aerobic exercise with counseling, which, in their case, includes cognitive therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy and motivational interviewing therapies.

The therapists' office includes an on-site fitness center with two treadmills, an elliptical machine and a weight machine. Clients have access to the gym 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays and by appointment weekends, along with their therapy sessions that, initially, meet weekly. Kelly and Pieri expect to expand their fitness center's hours as their practice grows.

The two believe counseling, working in tandem with physical exercise, does as good a job of liberating people from their depression, addictive behaviors, anxiety disorders and attention-deficient disorders as antidepressants or other medications.

But here's the kicker: Those who go the counseling-physical exercise route have lower rates of relapse than those who opt for counseling and medications, according to an increasing body of research.

And it beats gulping antidepressants, for which Americans shell out \$10 billion annually and may come with the unpleasant side effects of nausea, tremors and body weight changes.

Think of it as a good mood game plan.



Katy Batdorff | The Grand Rapids Press

Holistic help: Kelly and Deb and Timothy Pieri sit on exercise balls in the The Well Being LLC's fitness center. Kelly and Timothy Pieri started the practice based on evidence that shows that exercise is a good complement to traditional counseling.

“Ultimately, exercise makes our brains healthier and our bodies healthier,” Kelly said. “(Neurotransmitters) serotonin and norepinephrine are extremely important to our mental health. Instead of popping a pill to actually get up and do something, the benefit to exercise is you feel you accomplished something.”

Kelly and Pieri, who also are certified advanced alcohol and drug counselors, say it’s atypical to find a fitness center in an office whose focus is on helping people overcome depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, alcohol and drug addictions, panic attacks, sleep problems and anxiety.

But a growing body of evidence is giving credence to their claims that exercise relieves depressive symptoms, which is why use of their fitness equipment is included in the cost of therapy.

Exercise helps

According to a 2000 Duke University Medical Center study, those combating depression who had been in an exercise group had significantly lower depression relapse rates than those prescribed the antidepressant Zoloft or those in combination groups who performed the same exercise regimen in addition to taking Zoloft.

Harvard Medical School clinical associate professor of psychiatry John Ratey’s book, “Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain,” makes sweeping claims that exercise is the best defense against everything from depression and attention-deficit disorder to addiction and aggression, as well as physical ailments such as menopause and Alzheimer’s disease.

Jasper Smits, associate professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and director of the school’s Anxiety Research & Treatment Program, said counseling combined with exercise is an alternative method whose time has come for those seeking relief from anxiety disorders, including shortness of breath, racing heart and dizziness, known as high-anxiety sensitivity.

“People are seeking an established intervention,” said Smits. “A lot of people like the idea of exercise. It’s kind of a mind and body approach that appeals to some people.”

Smits co-authored a book for an August release titled, “Exercise for Mood and Anxiety: Proven Strategies for Overcoming Depression and Enhancing Well-Being” (Oxford University Press), which builds on earlier research that indicates exercise improves mood and reduces anxiety, working in a similar capacity to an antidepressant drug.

It’s written for people who are interested in step-by-step guidance on how to start and maintain an exercise program geared toward improving mood, with a particular emphasis on understanding the relationship between mood and motivation.

“We don’t argue for or against the use of physical activity over medication and cognitive therapy, and research doesn’t indicate one method is better than the other, but what we can say is there’s an approach that yields comparable results,” Smits said.

“Exercise offers a modality that’s more easily accessible, and it’s something that can reach those people who might not have access to, or don’t have an interest in, those other therapies.”

It’s for similar reasons Kelly and Pieri have enlisted the help of two personal trainers: Brandi Angelosanto, who holds a master’s degree in exercise science and sports medicine; and Pieri’s wife, Deb, an elementary school teacher who’s also a personal trainer and a fitness instructor at the David D. Hunting YMCA.

The trainers will show The Well Being’s clients how to use the exercise machines in a safe and effective manner in a one-hour session. Clients also can schedule more time for an additional cost.

If clients agree to it, a fitness baseline is established before they begin an exercise program, which includes recording clients’ incoming weight, blood pressure and body mass index to help determine the exercises they’re initially capable of safely accomplishing.

“Diet and nutrition becomes an important part of their transition,” Timothy Pieri said.

Deb Pieri said The Well Being’s small exercise area is a plus for those who may be adverse to going to larger gyms that are populated with already-fit people.

“We want a non-threatening environment so they can get healthy and feel improvement over their own health,” she said.

“They wouldn’t go to a gym because of feelings of body concerns and, if they’re overweight, exercising next to someone with 6 percent body fat isn’t easy,” Kelly added. “We want to provide a safe, warm, small, welcoming environment. People working out here are in the same boat.”

No arm-twisting

Despite the benefits of aerobic exercise, clients will not be arm-twisted to work out at The Well Being.

“If somebody wanted to do counseling only, we’re OK with that,” Kelly said. “We would hope they participate in the exercise aspect.”

With a combined 30 years of clinical experience, Kelly and Timothy Pieri are convinced aerobic exercise plays a key role in treating a wide range of mental health disorders.

“Our focus is helping clients determine what they feel they can commit to,” Kelly said. “If it’s only one day, that’s OK because one day is better than no days.”

It’s an idea that’s been rumbling between the two men for more than a year. The idea of collaborating in their own practice started to gel when they worked at Arbor Circle, which provides counseling and support services to families and individuals.

“When the thing popped in my head to combine the two (counseling and exercise), it’s such a simple concept if we have outpatient counseling and some exercise equipment,” Kelly said. “Tim and Deb said to me they’ve been talking about this for years.”

“We want to help people fight back the forces that are against them,” Kelly added. “Maybe they don’t have a good support system and the internal resources they are fighting, maybe it’s depression, hopelessness and dysfunctional thoughts. We can help them.”

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