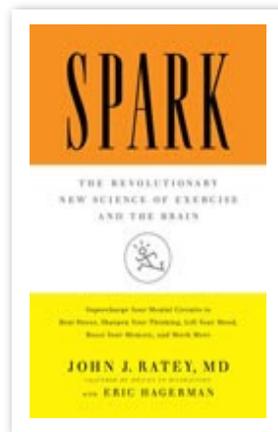




Sunday, January 30, 2011

Review: Spark



Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain

by **John J. Ratey** with Eric Hagerman

(Little, Brown and Company, 2008)

We all know exercise makes us more *physically* fit. Is it possible that exercise also makes us more *mentally* and *emotionally* fit?

In *Spark*, psychiatrist John Ratey makes a bold claim right on the book's cover: that exercise — specifically, aerobic exercise — can "supercharge your mental circuits to beat stress, sharpen your thinking, lift your mood, boost your memory, and much more."

This big promise brings to mind a favorite movie line:

It seems Elle Woods was right, though it's a little more complicated, and a lot more far-reaching than she thought.

In terms of brain chemistry, exercise gives you much more than endorphins. Exercise also increases levels of serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine — the neurotransmitters central to thought and emotion — as well as the growth factors that keep our brains healthy and functioning well.

Ratey cites research at the chemical and functional levels, as well as his own anecdotal observations, to support his thesis about exercise supercharging mental circuits, beating stress, sharpening thinking, lifting mood, and boosting memory.

And Ratey quickly expands on the cover's promise in the introduction:

To keep our brains at peak performance, our bodies need to work hard. In *Spark*, I'll demonstrate how and why physical activity is crucial to the way we think and feel. I'll explain the science of how exercise cues the building blocks of learning in the brain; how it affects mood, anxiety, and attention; how it guards against stress and reverses some of the effects of aging in the brain; and how in women it can help stave off the sometimes tumultuous effects of hormonal changes. I'm not talking about the fuzzy notion of runner's high. I'm not talking about a notion at all. These are tangible changes, measured in lab rats and identified in people. (p. 4-5)

Ratey breaks his subject down by subtopics, allowing the reader to focus on specific areas of interest. Chapter by chapter, he covers the Big Three of mental health — anxiety, depression, and addiction — as well as learning, stress, attention deficit, hormonal changes in women, and aging.

It's a big list, and the effects Ratey reveals are just as impressive. People battling addictions can combat cravings with exercise; students can retain information better when they study after exercise; the destructive effects of stress and anxiety can be minimized with exercise; depression can be managed through exercise.

As I read the book, I found myself thinking, *if exercise came in a pill, it would be a huge seller*. Ratey makes a similar observation, yet he avoids going to the extreme of claiming exercise to be a panacea. And though Ratey believes we tend to look far too often to pharmacology for the solution to life's problems, he stops shy of promoting exercise as a total replacement for medication.

However, he does observe that many prescription meds have been formulated to attempt to mimic the body's natural balance, and he shows how exercise — either alone or in tandem with medication — can often achieve that balance far more smoothly and reliably than medication alone.

I picked up this book at the recommendation of my addiction studies professor. After reading the chapter on addiction, I realized I needed to read the rest of the book. It's that good.

I'd recommend *Spark* to anyone dealing with any of the issues listed a few paragraphs up — which is to say, everyone. You might start by reading the introduction and the first chapter (*Welcome to the Revolution*) before reading the chapter of specific interest, and then follow up with the final chapter (*The Regimen*).

You'll see that endorphins are not the end. They're only the beginning.

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Other reviews:

U.S. News and World Report, [How Exercise Revs Up Your Brain](#)  
[Psychiatric Services](#)  
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I am a follower of Christ, counselor, and student... I like to read, write, sing, laugh, learn new things, travel to new places, and do homey domestic stuff... my favorite color is purple... and I always have a cherry ChapStick in my pocket.

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