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ARE THERE DAYS WHEN YOU FEEL SO STRESSED, ANXIOUS, EXASPERATED OR DOWNCAST THAT YOU JUST WISH YOU COULD RUN AWAY? GREAT NEWS – YOU CAN. IN FACT, YOU PROBABLY SHOULD.

One of the best ways to take care of your mental health is to get physical. Research confirms that moving the body also benefits the mind by increasing levels of 'feel-good' chemicals, such as serotonin and endorphins. Exercise can also help boost your energy levels, improve your self-confidence and provide an outlet for negative emotions.

The National Physical Activity Guidelines (http://tinyurl.com/8a29lqa) recommend 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most days. Long hours in a sedentary, desk-based job can make it hard to reach this goal. If you are starting from scratch, do not despair. Graeme Alford had been a Melbourne barrister and was a hefty 19 stone (120 kg) and an alcoholic when he began a stint in jail for armed robbery. He went from running laps of the prison tennis courts to completing a marathon. Whatever your goal may be, here are some relatively cheap, simple and fun ways you can get moving for your mental health.

Join a running group

Group exercise is a great way to get fit and meet people. You can get social while getting active by joining one of the numerous running groups in Victoria.

- The Crosbie Crew (www.crosbiecrew.net/Home.html) meets three times a week after work, as well as on weekends, in central Melbourne locations such as the Tan Track and Royal Botanic Gardens.

- Lululemon Athletica's Bourke Street store hosts a lunchtime running group on Fridays as well as other wellbeing classes (www.lululemon.com/melbourne/bourkestreet).

- The Running Company hosts a 5–6 km run on Tuesday evenings in Geelong (www.therunningcompany.com.au/geelong/run-club.html).

Sign up for a community fitness event

Participating in a community fitness event, such as Run for the Kids (http://www.runforthekids.com.au), will help you set a goal and give you a great sense of achievement once you reach it. It is also a good way to foster some healthy community spirit and interaction. There are plenty of events around Melbourne, many raising money for charities.

- The Step into Life de Castella Run in August (www.maprc.org.au/de-castella-run-mental-health) raises funds for mental health research at the Alfred Hospital.

- The Around the Bay bike ride (www.aroundthebay.com.au), held in October, partners with The Smith Family.

- The Bendigo Bank Fun Run in November (www.bhfoundation.org.au/Events_Bendigo_Bank_Fun_Run.asp) fundraises for the Bendigo Health Foundation.

- The LIV Legal Fun Run and Power Walk, held in November of each year, allows participants to fundraise for their chosen charity.

- The Pier to Pub swim (www.lornesurfclub.com.au/Content/PierToPub), held in Lorne in January, raises funds for the Lorne Surf Life Saving Club's volunteering activities.

For further lists of community fitness events including runs, rides, open water swims and, for the extra keen, triathlons, check out www.coolrunning.com.au, www.supersprint.com.au and http://starttofinish.com.au.

Take a walk

Exercise does not have to be a gruelling workout that simply replaces mental fatigue with physical exhaustion. If you're not up to running, grab a friend and take a walk. A 30-minute brisk walk is beneficial for your mental wellbeing and will improve cardiovascular fitness. Having a few laughs with your walking buddy will also lift your mood, and burn some extra calories to boot!

Heart Foundation Walking is Australia's largest network of community-based, free walking groups. Click onto their website (www.heartfoundation.org.au) to find the walking group closest to you (there are over 1200 Australia-wide), or start your own. ●

SARAH LENTHALL is a legal trainee at the Office of Public Prosecutions.