

Script – Print – Read a book, improve your health

Whether you're curled up on the couch engrossed in an autobiography or tucked away in bed late at night with a good mystery, experts say there's little doubt that reading is good for our health.

"It's one of the best things we can do for our mental health and our physical health," says Ashley Pratt, a psychotherapist for OSF HealthCare. "It's been shown to greatly reduce our stress levels, lower our blood pressure, improve our memory and cognition, and it improves our sleep quality."

Google the word 'reading' and there's no shortage of statistics available when it comes to the importance of picking up a book occasionally. Research shows 75% of adults participate in some form of reading. However, according to another study, the number of children between the ages of 9 and 13 reading for fun has dropped in the last decade.

But Pratt says most people need just six minutes of reading time a day to see some health benefit, especially for children. And that's good information to have this time of the year as kids head back into the classroom.

"Starting those skills and cultivating that love of reading and stories can be a great tool as they get older," she says. "Especially in childhood and adolescence, having this skill can be a nice way for kids to find a place where they maybe can understand someone else's perspective or cope with maybe similar things that they're having to go through in life, like bullying and substance use."

Pratt says reading fiction tends to be the most helpful when it comes to increasing skills such as empathy and our ability to learn and understand people. She adds that reading has been shown to increase resiliency and an ability to handle difficult emotions as readers learn about characters and the challenges they face.

Reading is also an escape. Readers can get lost in a story and go places and see things they might not otherwise experience. Pratt says: "It allows us time to be away from the things that are causing us stress, the things we ruminate on, or things that cause us to be stuck in a depressive or anxious mind and the ability to go somewhere else for a while in a healthy way. And then we can come back."

While it's easy to simply read from the comforts of home, reading is a hobby that connects us with the outside world. "It allows us to have social connections, because we can go to our libraries, bookstores, we can have book clubs, online forums," says Pratt. "I think it's an awesome place to have connections and social situations that we may not have had before books and reading."

If you simply don't like to read, no worries. Pratt explains there are other ways to reap the benefits of reading. "I would suggest starting with something they're really interested in and doing small increments, or maybe even incorporating it throughout their daily routine," she says. "Maybe it's an audiobook while they're doing chores or driving or whatever they can fit in in a day. But ultimately, trying to find something that they're interested in, and want to hear and be present for."

So, whether it's a few pages with your morning coffee to start your day or several chapters before bedtime, Pratt says go for it. In this fast-paced world we live in, who couldn't use a healthy escape to help unwind?