

Unlocking Serenity: The Mental Health Power of Saunas

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In the heart of winter and the reflective period post-holidays, it's timely to explore a topic that merges comfort with science – the profound mental health benefits associated with infrared sauna use.

Advanced Relaxation: The Neurological Impact of Infrared Heat

When you step into an infrared sauna, you're not just seeking refuge from the cold; you're engaging in a scientifically-supported relaxation technique. (1) Research has shown that the heat from an infrared sauna can significantly lower cortisol levels while elevating brain alpha waves, which are associated with a state of deep relaxation and mental alertness. This neuropsychological response is crucial for combating the effects of daily stress and overstimulation.

Stress Reduction: Understanding Heat Therapy's Role

The consistent and penetrating warmth of an infrared sauna activates the body's parasympathetic nervous system. This 'rest and digest' response is a natural counterbalance to the often dominant 'fight or flight' mode. By promoting a state of restful recovery, sauna heat therapy offers a potent, natural method for managing stress. (2) This engagement of the parasympathetic system initiates a holistic relaxation response, beneficial both mentally and physically.

Mood Enhancement: The Biochemical Shift

Regular use of an infrared sauna can lead to a natural increase in endorphins, the body's feel-good chemicals, and an uplift in mood. (3) Beyond endorphins, there's a notable increase in norepinephrine, a key neurotransmitter and hormone linked to attention and brain function. Additionally, heat stress from sauna use has been found to increase the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which supports brain health and could play a role in combating anxiety and depression.

Enhancing Sleep Quality: Thermal Regulation and Rest

The therapeutic heat of an infrared sauna aids in sleep regulation. The process of heating the body and the subsequent natural cooling down period post-session aligns with the body's circadian rhythm, promoting deeper and more restorative sleep. This aligns with scientific findings underscoring the importance of thermal regulation in sleep health, further cementing the sauna's role in enhancing overall sleep quality.

Cardiovascular Health and Mental Wellbeing

Infrared sauna therapy is not only a relaxant but also an activator of cardiovascular function. (5) As heart rate and circulation increase in response to the heat, akin to a light cardiovascular workout, there's a concurrent improvement in overall cardiovascular health. This cardiovascular engagement is essential, as a healthy heart and circulatory system are vital contributors to overall mental wellness.

A Beacon of Hope in Brain Health: Saunas and Neurological Wellness

An intriguing aspect of sauna use that's garnering attention in the health community is its potential role in preventing cognitive decline, particularly Alzheimer's and dementia. While the exploration into this area is still evolving, initial studies paint a promising picture.

Research, including a notable study from Finland where sauna use is a cultural staple, indicates that regular sauna bathing may be linked to a reduced risk of Alzheimer's and dementia. (4) While this study was on traditional saunas, we feel that whether the body is heated using hot air or infrared, the same results are possible. How does this work? The hypothesis revolves around several key factors:

- **Improved Cardiovascular Health:** Saunas enhance heart health and circulation, factors closely tied to brain health. A well-oxygenated brain is crucial for maintaining cognitive function.
- **Stress Reduction:** Chronic stress is a known risk factor for cognitive decline. Sauna use, with its stress-reducing properties, may help protect brain health over time.
- **Detoxification:** The deep sweating induced by saunas can help eliminate toxins that might contribute to neurological degeneration.
- **Heat Shock Proteins:** Exposure to sauna heat increases the production of heat shock proteins, which are known to help in repairing damaged proteins and potentially protect neurons.
- **Neurotrophic Factors:** Saunas may stimulate the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factors (BDNF), which play a role in maintaining and growing new brain cells, essential for cognitive health.

Infrared Saunas: A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health

In conclusion, the integration of infrared sauna use in a regular wellness regimen extends beyond physical health benefits; it's a scientifically-grounded approach to enhancing mental wellbeing. From neurological relaxation and stress reduction to mood improvement and sleep regulation, the infrared sauna presents itself as an invaluable tool in the pursuit of mental and emotional health.

Sources:

- 1) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24204095/>
- 2) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26180741/>
- 3) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8946909/>
- 4) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27932366/>
- 5) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2718593/>