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Mind Matters: Unveiling the Dynamics of Mental Well-Being in Adulthood Through Exercise

In the relentless rhythm of modern life, where stress and anxiety often seem like unwelcome companions, the pursuit of mental well-being has become increasingly crucial. Among the many strategies to strengthen our psychological resilience, one powerful yet often underestimated approach emerges: exercise. While most nod knowingly at the physical perks of a good workout, physical benefits are not all that are to be gained from exercise. There is way more to exercise than a good calorie burn. Exercising plays a pivotal role in emotional state and mental health of adults. There have been many studies and experiments performed by behavioral psychologists and other researchers that have put forth empirical evidence showing the influence of exercise on the mental and emotional states in adults. Many factors go into exercise that provide mental benefits. Individuals experience improved self-esteem, a sense of achievement, and gain opportunities for social interaction- all of which contribute significantly to overall emotional well-being. Now for the million-dollar question: how much exercise is the golden ticket to mental well-being? Is it a sweat-soaked marathon, or can a leisurely stroll do the trick? This paper will provide insight on such questions and provide more clarity on the different dynamics of integrating exercise for mental health.

Busting the myth that exercise must be an all-or-nothing endeavor for mental well-being, let's look at some other intriguing findings. Forget the notion that you need to morph into a gym warrior to boost your mood; according to researcher Rachel J Anderson, a mere ten minutes of

exercise can work wonders for your mental state. Yes, you read that right- ten minutes!

“Research has suggested that participating in moderate-intensity exercise, such as self-paced walking, for as little as 10 minutes can be sufficient to observe a beneficial change in mood”

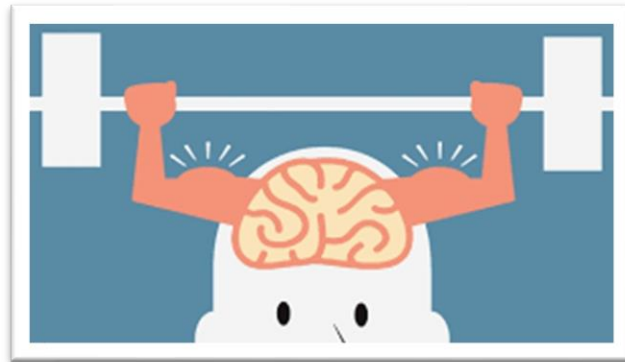


(Anderson, 2011). Another study was done in the Netherlands aiming to find a relationship with physical exercise in adults and mental health status. Throughout the course of the study, they found that “Some physical exercise is better than none, but more physical exercise is not necessarily better than some” (Have, 2011). In the study performed there was no evidence for a “dose-response relationship between physical exercise levels and mental health” (Have, 2011). The no dose-response relationship between exercise levels and mental health improvements means you do not need to morph into a fitness fanatic to revel in the benefits. While this is great news to a lot of people who do not find enough time to dedicate to hours of exercise, it invites the tricky question of the placebo effect- could your newfound exercise high be all in your mind? According to Anderson, the role of placebo, or expectancy effects, are important “psychological mechanisms that underlie exercise-related mood alteration” (Anderson, 2011). Because in recent years the favorable effects of exercise have become more and more publicized, individuals might partake in exercise expecting to gain these potential effects. In 1998 Berger, Owen, Motl, and

Parks found a positive correlation between expectancy of, and the actual mood benefits gained. (Anderson, 2011). So, if an individual were to go on a jog, or a walk with the expectancy of a mood benefit, it is possible that the effect they experience is not because of the exercise itself but rather from a psychological mechanism called the placebo effect. So, next time you are gearing up for a jog, remember, it might be as much about the power of positive thinking as it is about pounding the pavement.

We have delved into the “how much”, but what about the “where?” Is that important? An article written by Sanfra Kalperski investigates the role of different environmental characteristics and compares the effects of outdoor versus indoor exercise on mental benefits. It is not just about breaking a sweat; it is about choosing the right backdrop while exercising. Ever wondered if a trail run through the woods trumps the treadmill hustle? The argument for outdoor running and exercise is often the common side argued for, and one would think that being outdoors would be more beneficial for mental health. Kalperski referred to such exercise in natural environments as “green exercise” (Kalperski, 2019). Her study produces three significant findings. First, she found that all exercise in general leads to improvements in mood and reduced levels of stress and anxiety. Second, surprisingly, she found no correlation that either outdoor or indoor conditions producing a greater benefit. Specifically, she found that green exercise does not lead to greater well-being. However, what she did find is that the calmness of the exercise environment, not the greenness of it, has a greater stress reductive success and leads to a higher perceived sense of well-being. So, it turns out that the key is not the color of the leaves or the smell of the gym- it is the vibe. It is important to keep in mind when exercising how comfortable and how calm the environment makes you feel. Those are contributing factors to a greater benefit of mental well-being that is induced from exercise. As previously stated, exercise is not always about the

physical grind; it's about creating a mental sanctuary where stress goes to take a vacation, and your well-being gets VIP treatment. The gains are not just in the muscles.



So far, we have learned where exercise takes place, and how much exercise benefits the mind. Is it possible for exercise to not only benefit the mind, but heal the mind? Can exercise be used to treat things such as anxiety and depression? According to Peter Salmon the answer is a hopeful yes. He states, “Physical exercise is relevant to clinical psychology as a possible psychological intervention in its own right” (Salmon 2001). He writes about studies that have tested depression levels with exercise. He states that results from studies are consistent in indicating that exercise has antidepressant and anxiolytic effects. This shows that exercise provides similar effects the drugs used to treat depression and anxiety. Exercise is not just merely a mood booster; it's a powerhouse with antidepressant and anxiety-busting effects. But here's the twist: Salmon is not just stating facts about data, he's also diving into a wider truth about the popularity and face validity of exercise. Salmon explains that “The potential value of physical exercise to the clinical psychologist derives not merely from its empirical and theoretical base, but from its popularity and face validity as a way of improving well-being” (Salmon 2001). In simple terms, it is not just about the science; it is about the fact that people love it, and it works. Whether you are sweating your way through burpees or lunges, let us not just see it as a workout- it is a mind booster; it is a mental superhero, cape and all, ready to tackle anxiety and depression head-on.

Overall, Exercise is not just about the physical grind; it is a holistic journey of improving mental health. Exercise does not have to be an all-or-nothing endeavor. A mere ten minutes can kickstart a mood revolution, challenging the idea that a sweat-soaked marathon is the only path to mental well-being. The debate between outdoor and indoor exercise introduced the concept of “green exercise,” revealing that it is not just about the color of the leaves, but about the comfort and calmness in your exercise environment that contributes to mental well-being. And while exercise is great for boosting mood and mental state, it is also a tool to help battle anxiety and depression. So, when you lace up your sneakers for your next workout, try not to see it as a physical routine, but as a meeting point for both your mental and physical health.

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