

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Exercise for a healthy mind

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Regular exercise has been linked to numerous physical health benefits and reduced mortality overall. Exercise may also improve mental health, but the evidence to date has been unclear.

In a paper by Sammi Chekroud, of University of Oxford, and colleagues, the authors conducted a cross-sectional analysis of health and lifestyle data from more than one million US adults over three years. Their analysis compared self-reported occurrences of bad mental health between individuals who did and did not exercise and also examined the relationship with different exercise regimes. Participant data was carefully matched to control for sociodemographics and other potential confounding factors. The study found on average a 43% reduction or 1.49 fewer days of poor mental health per month in individuals who exercised. Although all types of exercise were associated with lower mental health burden, the largest association was with team sports and seemed optimal for 3–5 sessions of 45 minutes per week; more exercise is not necessarily better, as there was no incremental benefit to exercising beyond 90 minutes, 5 times a week.

These findings will lend greater confidence and specificity in developing physical exercise as a treatment for a variety of mental health issues.

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