



AUSactive

# **Brief Literature Review** **of the Effects of Exercise** **on Mental Illness**

## **Summary of Findings**

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# What did we find?



Exercise appears to be helpful for anxiety and depression in different age groups.



Engaging in regular exercise can help to reduce the risk of having a mental illness.



Not getting enough exercise can increase mental illness.



People who have severe mental illness can improve their health by engaging in exercise.



Group-based exercise programs can be particularly beneficial for elderly people with depression.



Children and adolescents report less symptoms of mental illness and greater self-esteem from physical activity.



Exercise programs should be tailored to the individual and their mental health needs.



Much of the research recommended exercise programs that are supervised by a professional to maximise the benefits on mental health. Fitness and exercise professions, therefore, have the opportunity to significantly influence the mental health of populations by using their expertise to implement safe, research-based exercise activities.

## Summary of Findings

### Why Are We Doing This Review?

Exercise can be a cost-effective and accessible way to improve the mental health of healthy individuals and also those with mental health conditions. Working together with AUSactive, we were interested in understanding how exercise affects mental health by looking at the findings of existing high-quality research.

### What Did We Set Out To Do?

We set out to answer four questions:

1. What is the rate of mental illness in those who regularly exercise, compared to those who do not?
2. Can regular exercise prevent or minimise the risk of developing mental illness?
3. How does/can exercise reduce or manage the symptoms of mental illness?
4. What outcomes can be identified in those with a mental illness who engage in regular exercise?

### How Did We Do It?

We looked for and reviewed high-quality research that investigated the relationship between exercise and mental health. We included research published between 2011 and April 2021 to discover the most recent trends and understandings of this relationship. Our search was not restricted to any particular type of exercise or mental illness, nor age, culture, race/ethnicity, or gender of the participants. As there is a lot of research in this area, we focused on three different types of research:

- a) Randomised Control Trials (RCT): involves allocating participants to different groups (such as an intervention or treatment group) when the researchers do not know to which groups the participants have been allocated
- b) Systematic Reviews: critically examines all the studies in a specific area according to a research question and specific literature search terms.
- c) Meta-Analyses: does the same as b) and critically examines all identified studies in a specific area according to a research question, and also conducts statistical analyses on these studies

We found 57 studies that met our criteria. We also drew on research recommended by experts in the field of health and exercise science.

### What Did We Find?

- Exercise appears to be helpful for anxiety and depression in different age groups.
- Engaging in regular exercise may help to reduce the risk of having a mental illness.
- Not getting enough exercise may increase mental illness.
- People who have severe mental illness may improve their health by engaging in exercise.
- Group-based exercise programs may be particularly beneficial for elderly people with depression.
- Children and adolescents report less symptoms of mental illness and greater self-esteem from physical activity.
- Exercise programs should be tailored to the individual and their mental health needs.
- Much of the research recommended exercise programs that are supervised by a professional to maximise the benefits on mental health. Fitness and exercise professions, therefore, have the opportunity to significantly influence the mental health of populations by using their expertise to implement safe, research-based exercise activities.



## **Where To From Here?**

Although abundant research that looks at how exercise may affect mental health, not all of that research was of a high-quality. We suggest that more high-quality data need to be collected with strong research methods so that we can make more compelling claims about the relationship between exercise and mental health.

In addition, although there is substantial published evidence that exercise can improve mental health, we need to better understand how, why, and under what conditions (e.g., what type of exercise for what type of mental health, how much exercise is needed, how intense or vigorous the exercise should be) for this improvement to be reliably measured and attributed to exercise. Finally, while much of the research looks at the level of the individual or small groups, there needs to be an increasing focus on research at the community and population levels.

Read the detailed literature review: <https://fitness.org.au/mental-health-litrv>

