

Physical activity, mood and serious mental illness

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A new study from Indiana University suggests that even meager levels of physical activity can improve the mood of people with serious mental illnesses (SMI) such as bipolar disorder, major depression and schizophrenia.

The study, published in the November issue of the "*International Journal of Social Psychiatry*," both reinforces earlier findings that people with SMI demonstrate low levels of physical activity and supports the consideration of physical activity as a regular part of psychiatric rehabilitation.

"We found a positive association between physical activity level and positive mood when low to moderate levels of physical activity are considered," said study author Bryan McCormick, associate professor in IU's Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Studies. "Physical activity interventions that require lower levels of exertion might be more conducive to improving transitory mood, or the ups and downs people with SMI experience throughout the day."

McCormick said physical activity often is advocated in addition to psychiatric treatment for people with SMI because of the significant health concerns common to this population. The low levels of physical activity also common to this population poses a major hurdle, however. For this study, physical activity is considered most forms of sustained movement, such as house cleaning, gardening, walking for transportation or formal exercise.

"The challenge is how to use naturally motivating activities that people have in their everyday lives to get them out and engaged," McCormick said.

For seven consecutive days, researchers randomly paged study participants, who then filled out questionnaires about their mood and recent activities. The responses were matched with data collected during the previous 10 minutes using small light-weight accelerometers worn by the study participants. The equipment measured activity levels and duration. McCormick said this is the first time these research methods were combined, allowing researchers to look at study participants' daily ups and downs as they occur rather than trying to average the experiences.

The study involved 11 people from the U.S. and 12 people from Serbia. Central Europe is experiencing a shift from institutional care to community care for its citizens with SMI, similar to the shift seen in the U.S. in the 1970s. McCormick's research has been examining this, too, in comparison to U.S. populations. The findings were surprising in this particular study. "I was expecting a higher level of physical activity within the population of Eastern Europeans," he said. "We didn't see any differences."

The average physical activity level for both groups was comparable to that of sedentary adults, less than that of adults with a developmental disability and considerably less than that of active adults, according to earlier research by study co-author Georgia Frey, associate professor in IU's Department of Kinesiology.

The least active experiences captured in this study correlated with less positive moods.

The study notes that walking is one of the most frequently advocated

forms of physical activity in psychiatric rehabilitation programs. Such programs, according to the study, would appear to afford both physiological and psychological benefits.

Paper: "Predicting Transitory Mood From Physical Activity Level Among People With Severe Mental Illness in Two Cultures," International Journal of Social Psychiatry. 2008, 54: 527-538.

Source: Indiana University

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