

Study: People at risk for panic buffered from stressor by high levels of physical activity

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High levels of physical activity were found to buffer panic sensations among those who are at high risk for panic disorder according to a new study, says psychologist and lead researcher Jasper Smits, Southern Methodist University, Dallas. Credit: Hillsman Jackson, SMU

Regular exercise may be a useful strategy for helping prevent the development of panic and related disorders, [a new study](#) suggests.

People with an intense fear of the nausea, racing heart, [dizziness](#), stomachaches and [shortness of breath](#) that accompany panic — known as "high [anxiety](#) sensitivity" — reacted with less anxiety to a panic-inducing stressor if they had been engaging in high levels of physical activity, said researchers at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and the University of Vermont in Burlington.

"Anxiety sensitivity is an established risk factor for the development of panic and related disorders," said SMU psychologist Jasper Smits, lead author on the research. "This study suggests that this risk factor may be less influential among persons who routinely engage in high levels of physical activity."

Regular exercise as an alternative or complementary strategy to drugs and psychotherapy

There is already good evidence that exercise can be of help to people who suffer from depression and anxiety problems, say the researchers.

"We're not suggesting, 'Exercise instead of pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy,'" Smits said. "Exercise is a useful alternative, particularly for those without access to traditional treatments. Primary care physicians already prescribe exercise for general health, so exercise may have the advantage of helping reach more people in need of treatment for depression and anxiety."

Smits reported the findings in "The Interplay Between Physical Activity and Anxiety Sensitivity in Fearful Responding to Carbon Dioxide Challenge," an article that has published online and is in press with the scientific journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*.

Co-authors include SMU psychology researchers Candyce Tart and David Rosenfield, and University of Vermont psychologist Michael Zvolensky.

New study adds to earlier research finding exercise reduces anxiety

The study builds on findings of earlier research, outlined in "[Exercise for](#)

[Mood and Anxiety: Proven strategies for overcoming depression and enhancing well-being](#)" (Oxford University Press, 2011) by psychologists Michael Otto and Jasper Smits. That research indicates exercise improves mood and reduces anxiety, working like "an antidepressant drug."

Also, a 2008 study by Smits, director of the SMU Anxiety Research & Treatment Program and an associate professor in the SMU Psychology Department, and Otto, a professor in Boston University's Psychology Department, indicated that exercise can also reduce anxiety sensitivity. That research, combined with the new findings, indicates that exercise may be an effective strategy for the prevention and treatment of anxiety disorders.

"Exercise can be a powerful addition to the range of treatments for depression, anxiety, and general stress," said Otto. "And when people [exercise](#) to feel good, they are also taking the exact steps they need to benefit their general health."

Those with high anxiety sensitivity are at greater risk of an attack

Anxiety sensitivity is the extent to which individuals fear they will be harmed by anxiety-related bodily sensations such as a racing heart, dizziness and shortness of breath, say the authors.

Research shows that the higher a person's anxiety sensitivity, the greater their risk for developing panic attacks and related psychological disorders.

"For people who have high anxiety sensitivity, the symptoms of anxiety tend to signal threat," said Smits. "They worry, 'I'll have a panic attack,'

'I'll die,' 'I'll go crazy,' 'I'll lose control' or 'I'll make a fool of myself.' That's been widely studied as one of the risk factors for development of anxiety disorders, mostly panic. And it's a robust risk factor in that it's been replicated in several studies."

Physical activity + fear of panic sensations = less reactivity to panic-relevant stressor

For the latest study, the researchers measured anxiety reactivity to a panic-related stressor, namely the inhalation of carbon dioxide-enriched air.

Study participants were 145 adult volunteers who had no history of panic attacks. After completing questionnaires measuring their physical activity and [anxiety sensitivity](#), the participants inhaled a mixture of room air enriched with carbon dioxide, a benign procedure that typically induces a number of bodily sensations, including [nausea](#), racing heart, dizziness, stomachaches and shortness of breath.

After inhalation, participants indicated their level of anxiety in reaction to the sensations.

The results showed that anxiety reactivity to the stressor was dampened among individuals who have been regularly engaging in high levels of [physical activity](#).

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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