

# Burning calories at the gym avoids burnout at work

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Obesity can be a dangerous risk to our physical health, but according to a Tel Aviv University researcher, avoiding the gym can also take a toll on our mental health, leading to depression and greater burnout rates at work.

Dr. Sharon Toker of TAU's Recanati Faculty of Management, working with Dr. Michal Biron from the University of Haifa, discovered that employees who found the time to engage in physical activity were less likely to experience a [deterioration](#) of their [mental health](#), including symptoms of [burnout](#) and [depression](#). The best benefits were achieved among those exercising for four hours per week — they were approximately half as likely to experience deterioration in their mental state as those who did no physical activity.

Drs. Toker and Biron say that employers will benefit from encouraging the physical fitness of their employees. If the fight against [obesity](#) isn't enough of an incentive, inspiring workers to be physically active lessens high health costs, reduces absenteeism, and increases productivity in the workplace. Their research was recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

## Preventing a downward spiral

Though depression and burnout are connected, they are not the same entity, says Dr. Toker. Depression is a clinical mood disorder, and

burnout is defined by physical, cognitive, and emotional exhaustion. But both contribute towards a "spiral of loss" where the loss of one resource, such as a job, could have a domino effect and lead to the loss of other resources such as one's home, marriage, or sense of self-worth.

Originally designed to examine the relationship between depression and burnout, the study assessed the personal, occupational, and psychological states of 1,632 healthy Israeli workers in both the private and public sectors. Participants completed questionnaires when they came to medical clinics for routine check-ups and had three follow-up appointments over a period of nine years.

Findings indicate that an increase in depression predicts an increase in job burnout over time, and vice versa. But for the first time, the researchers also considered the participants' levels of physical activity, defined as any activity that increases the heart rate and brings on a sweat. The participants were divided into four groups: one that did not engage in physical activity; a second that did 75 to 150 minutes of physical activity a week; a third that did 150 to 240 minutes a week; and a fourth that did more than 240 minutes a week.

Depression and burnout rates were clearly the highest among the group that did not participate in physical activity. The more physical activity that participants engaged in, the less likely they were to experience elevated depression and burnout levels during the next three years. The optimal amount of physical activity was a minimum of 150 minutes per week, where its benefits really started to take effect.

In those who engaged in 240 minutes of physical activity or more, the impact of burnout and depression was almost nonexistent. But even 150 minutes a week will have a highly positive impact, says Dr. Toker, helping people to deal with their workday, improving self-efficacy and self-esteem, and staving off the spiral of loss.

## Fighting stress at work

If they're feeling stressed at work, employees can always ask the boss to effect changes, such as providing more opportunities for emotional support in the workplace. But if the organization is unwilling to change, workers can turn to physical activities in their leisure time as an effective stress management tool.

Far-sighted employers can benefit by building a gym on company grounds or subsidizing memberships to gyms in the community, and by allowing for flexible work hours to encourage employees to make [physical activity](#) an integral part of their day, suggests Dr. Toker. Such a strategy pays business dividends in the long run.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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