

Exercise at work also has mental health benefits

October 7 2016, by Andrew Porterfield



Participants in a Bruin Health Improvement Program class workout at Drake Stadium. Credit: UCLA Recreation

Spending too many hours sitting at your desk or inside an office is known to be unhealthy, so workplace health programs have been

designed to improve employees' physical health by encouraging exercise and activity. Now researchers at UCLA have shown another important but lesser-recognized benefit to such programs: improved mental health.

With half of all employers in the United States offering workplace wellness plans, researchers at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA have demonstrated the upside of such plans emphasizing [mental health](#) benefits as well as physical ones.

For the study, which was published in the journal *Occupational Medicine*, the researchers turned to participants in UCLA's [wellness program](#), the Bruin Health Improvement Program. Using data provided by 281 volunteers, the researchers found that at the conclusion of the 12-week program, mental health improved by nearly 19 percentile points, compared to baseline levels measured at the beginning of the fitness program.

"Many employers have started to question the value of such employee wellness plans, and have sought evidence that the financial investments in the plans can result in improvements in employee health and productivity that can be measured," said Prabha Siddarth, a research statistician at the Semel Institute and the study's senior author. "This study illustrates the potential benefits that have not been well-studied, and are not the focus of most wellness plans—the value that comes from improved mental health."

The Bruin Health Improvement Program started in 2010 and is open to all UCLA staff and faculty. To date, more than 3,100 people have completed the program. It consists of three cardiovascular conditioning and strength training workouts per week for 12 weeks, with optional nutritional coaching. The exercise program, modeled after cross-fit training and designed to foster social bonding and a sense of community among participants, differs each day.

For the study, at the beginning and conclusion of the program, participants were asked to complete the Perceived Stress Scale, a psychiatric tool used by clinicians to assess the degree to which people rate their lives as unpredictable, uncontrollable and overwhelming. The survey asked questions such as, "How often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?"

Participants answered questions on a five-point scale ranging from 0 for never to 4 for very often. They also completed a questionnaire that measures physical and emotional health, vitality, social functioning, general health perceptions, bodily pain and any limitations due to physical or emotional problems.

At the conclusion of the program and after conducting an analysis of the data, "participants showed strong improvements across all domains of mental health with sizable effects," said Dr. David Merrill, a UCLA assistant clinical professor of psychiatry and a co-author of the study. For the overall mental health score, he noted, participants scoring at the 50th percentile on mental health, meaning "average" mental health, scored as high as the 69th percentile after participation in the wellness program.

"This was the first study of a workplace wellness program that showed a clear link between improvement in physical health and improvements in mental health, quality of life, stress, and energy," Merrill said.

"Participants reported improved feelings of calm, social satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, and an overall sense of well-being. They also reported improvement in their energy levels and better productivity at work."

Said Siddarth: "Mental illness accounts for more than half of all healthcare costs. This data strongly suggests that workplace wellness plans have a positive effect on people's mental state of mind as well as

their physical wellness. Targeting workplace mental health, and using such exercise and wellness programs can effectively reduce absenteeism, disability and productivity losses, and reduce the healthcare costs associated with those issues."

More information: Effects of an employee exercise programme on mental health. *Occup Med* (Lond) first published online August 23, 2016
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