

# Physical activity target needs updating for mental health

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Global physical activity guidelines should be extended to ensure they have the best impact on mental as well as physical health, according to new research involving researchers from Victoria University of Wellington.

The study, co-authored by Dr. Justin Richards at Victoria University of Wellington along with researchers at several Australian universities and the Federal University of Santa Maria, shows that even small doses of [physical activity](#) are associated with a lower risk of mental illness, and that exercise for leisure or transport, such as riding a bike to work, is most likely to provide [mental health](#) benefits.

Dr. Richards, an adjunct researcher in the University's Health Services Research Centre, says that quality of experience in physical activity is critical for [mental health outcomes](#). Exercise that is self-motivated, enjoyable, or personally important is associated with good mental wellbeing, while exercise that is undertaken due to guilt or pressure is associated with poor mental wellbeing.

"This nuance is important to consider when looking at international guidelines indicating that physical activity is good for mental health," he says.

The research authors suggest that global recommendations consider both the prevention of mental ill-being and the promotion of mental well-being, an approach Dr. Richards says is developing in New Zealand.

"Our Government is actively leading the world in this space with the recent release of its wellbeing agenda and budget. To bring this to fruition we also need to reconsider the outcomes we are measuring in health. This includes the contribution of physical activity to mental wellbeing, not just the prevention and treatment of mental ill-being," he says.

Lead author Dr. Megan Teychenne, a senior lecturer in Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), said the aim of the paper is to get mental health more firmly on the radar in the development of the WHO international physical activity guidelines.

"These international recommendations are critical in guiding researchers and policymakers in intervention and program development. They are often used as the basis for mass media campaigns to promote public health, and they're also something that are used by GPs to promote healthy behaviors to their patients," she said.

With [mental disorders](#) among the leading causes of disease and disability globally, it's critical we optimize these guidelines to better promote physical and mental health around the world."

The research paper, "Do we need physical activity guidelines for mental [health](#): what does the evidence tell us?" was recently published in the journal *Mental Health and Physical Activity*.

**More information:** Megan Teychenne et al. Do we need physical activity guidelines for mental health: what does the evidence tell us?, *Mental Health and Physical Activity* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.mhpa.2019.100315](#)

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