

How exercise and the simple act of moving your body can improve mental health

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Whether running around a track or simply stretching in your living room, physical activity can go a long way toward making you happier.

Catherine Sabiston, a professor in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, says the positive impact of exercise on mental [health](#) is well-documented.

"There is uncontested evidence that [physical activity](#) is conducive to mental health," she says.

For example, Sabiston co-authored a study in the [Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology](#) that adolescents who consistently participated in team sports during high school reported lower depression levels in early adulthood.

A Canada Research Chair in physical activity and mental health, Sabiston directs [a lab that studies the connections between physical activity and mental health](#), developing and evaluating interventions to promote physical activity and mental wellness among people who are at risk of inactivity and mental health problems.

The lab also runs a six-week program called MoveU.HappyU that provides customized coaching and training [aimed at reducing the stress and anxiety of students in the lab through physical movement](#).

She recently spoke with U of T News about why it's important to stay active during the pandemic—and how to feel good doing it.

How closely connected are physical activity and mental health?

Symptoms of mental illness such as anxiety and depression can impede physical activity and vice versa. When you are experiencing symptoms, you may also encounter feelings of low self-worth and an inability to be motivated. It's very hard to find a type of physical activity that you can engage in when you lack interest in most things. Many of the symptoms tied to mental illness are also barriers to physical activity.

On the flip side, there is uncontested evidence that physical activity is

conducive to mental health. Physical activity prevents some forms of mental illness, and, for individuals who have been diagnosed with mental illness, physical activity can help reduce those symptoms and improve their quality of life. It holds its own weight in comparison to all other forms of treatment for mental illness, including psychotherapy and even medication.

Physical activity is a potential adjunct to any other form of preventative or treatment-focused therapy.

How exactly does exercise lift our mood?

There are a number of mechanisms at play, including physical activity effects that are tied to our brain activity and brain chemistry. Physical activity increases our body temperature. When we are warmer, we are given the sense that we are comfortable and cared for. Also, from a historical perspective, we know that humans were naturally much more active in the past than we are now. So, physical activity brings us closer to that core level of movement that human bodies are meant to be.

Moreover, physical activity can mimic mental health symptoms such as anxiety. When you exercise, you may sweat or feel your heart racing. That mimics the feeling of panic, so by engaging in exercise, you are producing a similar physical effect that can make you more accustomed to those symptoms. Exercise also provides you with an opportunity, whether for two minutes or 20, to break away from your usual routines or worries. This escape can help people better cope with their symptoms while experiencing a sense of purpose or accomplishment. In fact, feelings of mastery and accomplishment are also specific ways that physical activity impacts mental health. Small goals and activities inherent to physical activity offer plenty of opportunities for positive feedback, feeling successful and achieving, which helps stave off symptoms of mental illness.

Finally, physical activity is something you can partake in outdoors, [which has a potentiating effect on mental health](#). That allows you to see other people, even if you are not interacting with them, and [feel a sense of connectedness](#).

What are some ways people can stay active and motivated during the pandemic?

We want to dispel the myth that physical activity is just running, biking and lifting weights.

Physical activity can be any movement where your heart is increasing its work capacity and your body is moving. In "MoveU.HappyU," we coach students on day-to-day strategies for how to maintain a level of physical activity. Because the program is virtual now, we have trained students who are currently all over the world. Some students who had never spoken to their families about their [mental health](#) struggles are now actually having their whole families join in on the physical activities.

The physical activity you are doing should be something that you enjoy. If you don't enjoy it, you're not going to continue to do it.

We also want people to engage in physical activity to improve function rather than appearance. It's important to uncouple the relationship between physical activity for weight and body-size reasons and move towards physical activity for enjoyment and fun reasons. If it's fun, you are more likely to do it, and more likely to do it leads to more benefits.

Do you have any tips for people looking to boost physical activity at home?

There are many ways you can innovate physical activity to make it more

varied, even when you are stuck in the same place. The best part of physical activity is thinking about the endless possibilities of ways your body can move. If you are purposeful about it, physical activity can be integrated into your everyday routines:

- Set aside time as you would if you were going to the gym or commuting. Mark it in your calendar or set an alarm to give you an actual reminder.
- Use your phone or a pedometer to measure your step count. Having something that measures how many steps you're taking gives you a baseline: If you know you walked a certain number of steps on day one, you can add five additional steps on day two. That way you'll have a tangible goal for increasing movement.
- Consciously link items or places in your home to short bouts of movement. For example, if you use the toaster oven every morning, make a habit of doing squats while you're waiting for your bread. Or when you are wheeling from one room to another, add some extra distance.
- When you're outside, use aspects of your environment to change up your physical activity. You can change the intensity of your walking or wheeling, for instance, each time that you pass a lamppost or see a blue car. Make it fun to change up the intensity, type, and timing of your activities.
- Create movement challenges for yourself and your friends, family, colleagues, or students. Set goals for taking a certain number of steps or finishing a certain number of arm raises each day. Making physical activity more like a game is a proven strategy for increasing movement—and enjoying it.

More information: Catherine M. Sabiston et al. Number of Years of Team and Individual Sport Participation During Adolescence and Depressive Symptoms in Early Adulthood, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1123/jsep.2015-0175](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2015-0175)

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