

A healthy mind: How exercise can improve your mental wellness

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As Toronto experiences a particularly gloomy January, many may be wondering what they can do to give their mental wellness a boost.

Catherine Sabiston, a professor in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education (KPE), says physical exercise is one potentially important strategy.

"If people can engage in small bouts of physical activity throughout the day—even just a minute or two at a time—and build up to 10 to 20 minutes per day, that is beneficial," she recommends.

A Canada Research Chair in physical activity and mental health, Sabiston directs KPE's Mental Health and Physical Activity Research Center (MPARC). The center studies the connections between physical activity and mental health, and develops and evaluates interventions to promote physical activity and mental wellness among people who are at risk of inactivity and mental health problems. It also runs a six-week program called MoveU.HappyU that provides customized coaching and training aimed at reducing the stress and anxiety of students through physical movement.

Writer Jelena Damjanovic recently sat down with Sabiston recently to talk about the benefits of movement to our bodies—and minds.

It's common knowledge that physical activity is good for the body, but there is growing evidence that being physically active is also good for the soul. Can you explain the science behind it? How does our brain reward us for moving?

There are probably as many ways that physical activity helps our physical health as it does our mental health. Technically speaking, mental health is the very outcome of how our brain is rewarding us for moving. Our brains are responsible for many of the processes that make us feel, think and act. When we are physically active, we improve these

systems through increases in cellular and molecular processes—[cerebral blood flow](#), circulation of neurotropic factors, a cascade of cellular mechanisms that positively affect the function of many brain regions.

When we are physically active, we are also increasing the temperature of our bodies, and feeling warmer makes us feel comforted and safe.

Warmth and comfort that result from being physically active are foundational to mental health and, specifically, taking care of ourselves. Also, as humans we were meant to be more active than we are currently. If you think back to our ancestors, the hunters, the gatherers, their days were filled with moving and working for all of their needs. Since we have become more sedentary, our brains love it when we are actually active, it brings us to a level of activity where we were meant to be. This is a homeostasis of sorts where our activity level matches our natural intent as humans.

Beyond cells and molecules, what role does our mind play in how it perceives the mental health benefits of physical activity?

Self-perception is an important indicator of mental health. By being physically active, we build a sense of mastery and confidence that not only helps us keep going, but is also conducive to mental health.

Regardless of whether we're engaged in physical activity with others, virtually or in person, or if we're outside being active and seeing other people in the environment, it all gives us a sense of support and community that helps build our mental health. In fact, being physically active outside exacerbates all of the positive benefits, as does exercising with a dog.

How much physical activity (per day or per week) do we need to reap all these benefits?

There are all kinds of different guidelines about physical activity and the most recent Canadian movement guidelines have explored mental health benefits a little bit, but not to the same extent as they have been designed for [physical health](#) benefits. The challenge with any guideline is that it is set by others and it may not be achievable by all. Therefore, from a mental health perspective in particular, being a little bit more active and engaging in a little bit more movement every day is a helpful place to start. If people can engage in small bouts of physical activity throughout the day—even just a minute or two at a time—and build up to 10 to 20 minutes per day, that is beneficial. The research is very much in its infancy in terms of dose, frequency and type of physical activity but we know generally that any activity at intermittent times is helpful.

Does it matter whether we're physically active in the morning, afternoon or evening?

In terms of benefits, we don't yet know whether one time of day is better than another—and whether the benefits would be experienced equally by all based on identity factors such as gender, race and age. It is crucial to plan physical activity at a time in the day when you can actually do it. That is more important than whether there is a best time. If I told you evening was the best time and you could never fit physical activity into your evening routine, then it wouldn't be the best time.

Is all exercise equally good for us?

Technically, all exercise is good for us in terms of movement for [mental health](#) benefits. However, exercise that is not enjoyable, that causes pain or that is done for extrinsic reasons, for example because someone else is doing it or someone told you to do it, etc., is not good for us. Also, adding small bursts of physical activity throughout the day can be beneficial if these bursts are intentional—for example, if we plan them,

notice them and pay attention to what we do and how we feel.

Is 'runners high' a real thing or a myth? Can you get a high from any exercise?

The prototypical 'runner's high' has been used to describe any state during exercise when the mind and the body are in synch, aligned and free from self-criticisms and other thoughts, and you feel effortless while blending into the environment. Time flies by and you generally feel great. It is likely that the 'runner's high' is experienced in any exercise where these conditions are met, but it's often easier to experience in longer, non-repetitive distances in the outdoors, so more conducive to running, paddling and cycling, for example. It is not likely to experience this state of flow during team sports or group activities because of the complexities of the environments and people. Also, while this runner's high or flow can be experienced in different intensities of exercise, it is more likely when you are pushing yourself at least a little bit. There has to be some effort needed to engage in the activity.

How has the MoveU.HappyU program been helping students relieve stress and anxiety?

The program is focused on tailored physical activity for each individual so that we are embracing the fact that exercise has to be enjoyable and building confidence while fostering maintenance. In the results of the six week program, we consistently see significant decreases in stress, anxiety and symptoms of depression while also seeing increases in feelings of confidence, mastery, quality of life and self-esteem after the program has finished.

What would you advise students—and others—who

want to become more physically active but can't commit to a six week program?

Here are some tips for including [physical activity](#) into your day:

- Look for drop-in programs and activities on campus offered through KPE's Sport and Recreation program. Try different activities and find your favorites that you can return to again and again.
- Try to incorporate more distance for your movement—get off the bus or subway one or two stops earlier or later, park the car further away from your destination and take the longer path to classes. Always take the stairs or ramp instead of the elevator or escalator. Schedule an extra 20 minutes into your calendar to allow for your active commuting.
- Move with intention but without a purpose. When shopping, move around the entire center or store rather than just getting what you need. For example, walk or wheel every aisle in the supermarket even if you only need vegetables. Move around the entire bookstore rather than just grabbing what you need.
- Move with your coffee/tea/juice instead of sitting in the café. Try to have movement-based meetings with others or while you are planning your group assignments. If you are working in groups a lot, assign one person per meeting to lead a 3–5 minute movement activity.
- Stand up or move as much as possible throughout the day. There is new evidence that breaks in sedentary time are very important for health. We also have some fun videos that can be used as fitbreaks during classes, too.
- Use technology to "gamify" your activity. For example, buy a pedometer and try to take a few extra steps each day. If you like competition and support, invite others to join you in the goal of

getting in more movement time or distance. If you are spending a lot of time outside, you could also use an online mapping program or smartphone applications that use GPS to show you how far you commute. You could even start mapping your routes and try to be creative about the art you can create.

Any tips on staying motivated for physical activity, especially on gray, chilly days of the sort we've been having lately?

It is important to stay active while also staying positive and removing self-criticism. You might not be able to do as much activity as you feel you need, but every little bit helps. It's also important to maintain consistent sleep patterns even if it is so dark and gloomy. Without sun, you can still be active outside and still gain the benefits of moving in nature. Natural light is really important regardless of sunshine. If you really don't like the idea of layering up and heading outside, this is a good time to try virtual fitness classes that are available more than ever before. There are many freely available workouts online and on [social media](#), including U of T's [three-minute movement break videos](#) and Sport & Rec's [virtual workout library](#).

Provided by University of Toronto

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