

Five ways women can use leisure and recreation to boost their mental health

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When women are facing challenging, stressful situations, leisure and recreation are powerful ways to boost spirits and defuse their stress, according to a recent study published in *Leisure Studies*.

A University of Alberta-led research team conducted in-depth interviews with a dozen women in Whitehorse experiencing [mental health issues](#) to learn how [leisure](#) and recreation could support their mental health during COVID-19.

"This research really showcased the power of leisure and recreation, specifically, in assisting with stress coping," says Lauren Ray, first author of the study and research assistant in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, who works as a recreation therapist in Whitehorse.

The 12 women interviewed for the study, which Ray conducted as part of her master's degree under the supervision of Tara-Leigh McHugh, were diverse in terms of their age, demographics, income and education, and had all accessed a mental health service. The participants were involved throughout the process, including analyzing the interview responses and identifying key themes.

Though the participants were responding to a specific stressor—COVID-19—within a northern context, the study identified five steps that can be applied to any stressful situation, says Ray, who offers tips women can use to harness the power of leisure to improve their mental health.

Make time to focus on yourself

Everyone faced stress during COVID-19, but many of the study participants said the stress experienced by women was exacerbated by the "caregiving burden," especially for mothers.

Engaging in leisure and recreation provided an opportunity to create space in their lives to focus inward, in whatever way best suited them.

"The beautiful thing about leisure and recreation is it's the one point in the day that you get to choose whether or not you want to engage in something, and what exactly that looks like for you," says Ray.

"Everything else is non-negotiable—you have to eat, you have to go to work, you have to go to the bathroom—but you get to choose what you want to do in your [leisure time](#)."

For some, this may involve a very social activity, like a busy fitness class with friends, while others might prefer meditation or a leisurely solo walk. In carving out time for yourself, you're exercising your self-determination.

"That self-determination pillar is so important in maintaining a sense of agency in life. Of course that's going to impact your mental health."

Find your community

Connecting with others is another important component of mental health. For some women, it can serve as a motivator to make time for leisure and recreation pursuits by making them accountable to someone else.

Everyone has a different ideal of what this looks like. For some, it may be a regular fitness class or activity where they can connect in large groups. For others, it's as simple as having one true friend by their side as an "activity partner."

The latter is the type of connection and support network that resonated most strongly with study participants, Ray says. Having someone by their side made it far less intimidating to try out a new activity—and made it far more likely that they'd keep it on their calendar rather than letting other responsibilities crowd it out.

Being a social creature doesn't mean being an extrovert with thousands of friends, Ray says. "Having some sort of meaningful connection—to the self, your community, to culture, to language, to music—those are the things that contribute to our identity and make us want to get up in the morning."

Actively chase feel-good emotions

The study participants all felt that engaging in leisure and recreation activities helped combat feelings of depression and anxiety, with many stating it made them feel relaxed, present, and offered them a sense of peace and joy.

Many also said it provided a great way to process emotions, allowing them to work through and shake off the stressors of the day.

However, Ray notes that you need to be purposeful about seeking out activities that help spark these feel-good emotions.

This could involve anything from simply blocking out daily time on your calendar for a walk or signing up for a weekly class.

"It takes effort to cultivate a genuine experience that is intrinsically motivated and aligned with your values, that creates pure joy, or a sense of accomplishment, a sense of power, whatever it is," says Ray.

Find ways around your barriers

There are many things—from money to weather—that create barriers for women seeking leisure and recreation opportunities, Ray says.

For example, countless areas in Canada deal with long stretches of

darkness and cold weather during winter, which makes outdoor activities challenging.

There might be a feeling that you need specific gear or equipment, or a particular level of skill, to participate.

"All of these gatekeepers can make activities seem really intense"—and that can discourage many from participating, says Ray.

Free drop-in classes available at community recreation centers can be a good way to try out an activity you're interested in. If you prefer to take your leisure outdoors, a walking or running group can help motivate you to head out, rain, snow or shine—and some of the group's veterans may even have tips for battling the elements.

Seek opportunities tailored to women

For women in particular, safety was often a big concern in accessing leisure and recreation opportunities.

For example, one participant mentioned that she didn't feel comfortable accessing her town's only recreation center because she encountered a former abuser there. Others may be fearful of walking on outdoor trails alone because of wildlife.

Many participants said opportunities tailored specifically for women helped alleviate some of those safety considerations.

Walking with a friend may feel less scary than venturing out alone. Or, if you have worries about a particular [recreation](#) venue, finding groups or classes that meet in locations like parks may be an appealing alternative.

"Safety means different things to different people, whether it's

psychological safety, physical safety," says Ray. "Having leisure and recreation opportunities that are safe for women is a huge variable to be considered."

More information: Lauren A. Ray et al, "We could just be what we wanted to be": The role of leisure and recreation in supporting women's mental health during COVID-19, *Leisure Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2022.2157465](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2157465)

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