

Exercise apps, a good prescription to boost health care workers' mental health

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Simple home workouts using exercise apps can effectively reduce depressive symptoms in health care workers and could be a major tool to

combat the global mental health crisis in the sector, says new University of British Columbia research.

The study, published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, divided participants into either a waitlisted control group or an exercise group who were given free access to a suite of home exercise apps called [DownDog](#), that included yoga, cardio and strength training. They were asked to aim for at least 80 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week over 12 weeks.

"The exercise group reported significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms compared to the control group as the study progressed," said first author Dr. Vincent Gosselin-Boucher, a postdoctoral fellow at UBC's school of kinesiology. "The majority of the participants in the study started very high on the scale for depressive symptoms compared to the general population so the changes were actually quite amazing to see."

The positive effects were most pronounced among participants who completed an average of at least 80 minutes of exercise per week.

In addition to [depressive symptoms](#), the researchers measured burnout symptoms and [sick days](#) over the two-week period prior to the beginning of their participation in the study, and every two weeks during the trial, while the exercise apps tracked participants' workouts.

Exercise improved two measured facets of burnout, namely cynicism and emotional exhaustion. The [exercise group](#) also reported fewer sick days than the [control group](#).

Using physical activity to boost mental health

While [previous research has shown that exercise can improve depressive](#)

[symptoms](#), researchers said behavioral approaches such as exercise were missing in the [mental health](#) initiatives offered by [health](#) care institutions around the world to address COVID-19's toll on their staff's mental health.

"Our study provides the first evidence that working out at home using exercise apps, even with limited equipment, can significantly enhance the mental health of health care workers," said lead author Dr. Eli Puterman, an associate professor at UBC's school of kinesiology and Canada Research Chair in Physical Activity and Health.

"The past three years have been incredibly difficult for health care workers. Offering accessible, easy ways to exercise could be a great tool for employers to support their staff's mental well-being, in addition to the institutional, provincial, and federal measures currently being undertaken to reduce health care workers' burnout, sick leave and resignations."

The study was conducted in collaboration with Providence Health Care and recruited participants across acute and long-term care hospitals in Vancouver, B.C. Most participants were women who worked as nurses.

For study co-investigator Agnes Black, director of Health Services and Clinical Research and Knowledge Translation at Providence Health Care, the study offers a welcome, preventative approach to mental health care.

"We recognize the incredible stress health care workers have endured during the pandemic and amid ongoing staff shortages. This is a really innovative and low-cost way to have a positive impact by putting our money upstream, before people are in crisis, are burnt out and have to call in sick. It's a way to say, "We want to make it super easy for you to fit exercise into your day so you can stay physically and mentally healthy

as you continue your vital work."

Making working out a habit

The study found that a major challenge was getting participants to stick to the program: between week two and week 12, adherence to the recommended 80 minutes of exercise per week dropped to 23% of participants, from 54%.

In the future, the researchers plan to explore whether providing motivational support such as fitness coaches can nurture the exercise habit.

"We also hope to do longer-term trials to focus on the broader mental, physical and economic impacts of this type of intervention," said Dr. Puterman.

He encourages health care institutions to think about other ways they can support health care workers to be more physically active, such as offering free gym memberships, walk breaks at work, or staff exercise rooms within hospitals.

"While our findings underscore the potential of low-barrier interventions like offering [exercise](#) apps, we also have to figure out and address factors that prevent health care workers from exercising. Whether these are work-related stressors or other factors, we need to support [health care workers](#) on multiple fronts."

More information: Effects of 12 Weeks of At-Home, Application-Based Exercise on Health Care Workers' Depressive Symptoms, Burnout, and Absenteeism, *JAMA Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2023.2706](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2023.2706)

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