



Beyond the Physical Benefits of Exercise

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In the field of sport psychology, there are two general objectives. A first objective is to better understand the effects of psychological factors on performance. Most of the articles in this Mindgames column focus on this objective. For instance, we have discussed the influence of psychological factors such as confidence, self-talk, pre-competition anxiety and goals on performance. In doing so, we have looked in detail at how to develop and use these skills to facilitate performance.

A second objective, and one we have not talked much about in this column, is to better understand how participation in sport and exercise affects psychological factors. For instance, does participation in youth sport influence psychological development? Does participation in sports increase aggressive behavior? And, a question we are going to address in the present article, what is the influence (or lack of influence) of exercise on psychological well-being?

Let's Begin by Looking at Two Common Scenarios:

Quincy is a young professional trying to make a name for himself. He works 12 hour days in a very stressful environment

but knows it will all pay off down the road. Exercise is not a part of his life. As an undergraduate, he played basketball with his friends but never on a regular basis. Now, there just is not time for it. And, he does not really need to anyway. He is young, healthy, average weight, and blessed with good genes. His family and friends tell him he should exercise but he just can not justify sacrificing work time to exercise. Is Quincy making the sacrifices all young professionals need to make or is he ill-informed?

Isabel has three final exams in the next two days plus a term paper that is only partially complete. She has never felt such anxiety about her school work. She needs to keep her grades up to be considered for the graduate assistantship. The night before two of her exams, she puts down her books, laces up her running shoes, and goes for a 30 minute jog around campus. For years she has been a habitual exerciser, now is not the time to change her ways. Is she acting irresponsibly or actually helping herself out?

In these two scenarios, we see one individual deciding that he does not need the physical benefits associated with exercise as he appears fairly healthy. So,

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based on this, he makes the decision to not make exercise a part of his life. The other individual has made exercise a priority as she recognized the multitude of benefits. What are all these benefits?

Exercise has benefits beyond the physical. When thinking of the benefits of exercise, we often think only of the physical and physiological benefits such as increased muscle mass, decreased fat, decreased resting heart rate and/ or decrease blood pressure. In most cases, these benefits are enough to get people started on an exercise program and to keep them involved in regular exercise. But, for some individuals, such as Quincy, these benefits do not have an impact on behavior; the benefits do not compel one to exercise. However, it is just as important to recognize that in addition to the numerous physical and physiological benefits of exercise, there are many psychological benefits that can be realized from engaging in regular exercise.

Think about yourself and your own exercise, what have you experienced? How do you feel after exercising? Have you experienced any psychological benefits from exercising on a regular basis? An awareness of these benefits may help Quincy start exercising or may get you



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to the gym on those days you don't want to be there.

Exercise can reduce anxiety. Both Quincy and Isabel are experiencing elevated anxiety. What impact can exercise have on anxiety? Exercise can play a role in decreasing anxiety, both short term and long term. More specifically, anxiety levels are decreased for up to 24 hours after an exercise session (something Isabel realized and used purposefully to help her manage test anxiety). Additionally, regular exercise at moderate levels has been found to decrease anxiety long-term (1). So, even though Quincy may not see the physical need to exercise it may help him psychologically to help with his stress and anxiety. What about you?

Exercise has been found to relate to more positive mood states. Exercisers, as compared to non-exercisers, have more positive moods and exercising is tied to changes (for the better) in mood (1). And, contrary to what you might think, exercise does not have to be defined as working out for hours at a time every day or being a specimen of physical fitness. Even low intensity activities can have a marked impact on mood.

Exercise has been linked to a reduction in depression. Did you know that exercise is sometimes used in therapy to help individuals with clinical depression? The benefits of exercise are not limited to those with clinical depression as aerobic and anaerobic exercises are tied to a reduction in depression—period. This effect is both immediate and long-term in that the longer someone has been exercising regularly, the less likely he or

she is to exhibit symptoms or feelings of depression.

So, exercise really is not just about the physical. While the physical benefits of exercise or sport participation are important and a source of motivation for many individuals, these benefits cross over to the psychological as well.

And, for some individuals, this knowledge can serve as a source of motivation as they look to reap these benefits. As has been highlighted above, exercise can play a role in one's mental well-being via the reduction of anxiety, enhancement of mood, and a reduction of depression.

Reference

1. Weinberg R, Gould D. (2003). *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

About the Author

Suzie Tuffey Riewald received her degrees in Sport Psychology/Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina – Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and most recently as the Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she worked with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant to several NGBs.

