

The Role of Exercise in Preventing and Treating Depression

The Objective:

The traditional treatment approach for depression has centred around pharmacological and psychological interventions. While effective, not all people will respond to these treatments, and recent literature has highlighted the positive effects of increasing physical activity levels in reducing the incidence of depression, as well as demonstrating efficacy on reducing symptoms for those individuals with depression.

This article provides a contemporary overview of the scientific literature on the utilisation of physical activity and exercise for both the treatment and the prevention of depression.

What Was Found:

Physical activity can offer protection from the development of depression in children, adults, and older adults.

Also, among people with depression, exercise can be used for acutely managing associated symptoms – such as physical health issues, fatigue, poor sleep quality – as well as a robust body of evidence from randomized controlled trials that demonstrates that exercise is effective in treating depression. This is achieved through several biological, psychological and social moderators and mechanisms.

A significant clinical challenge is physical activity adherence, and dropouts to exercise are a challenge for all clinical populations, which is not different from people with depression.

To keep exercise adherence, autonomous motivation may play a central role, and the supervision of exercise professionals can increase the chance of adherence and success to the treatment intervention.

Clinical Implications:

Despite this substantial evidence, the incorporation of exercise as a key component in treatment is inconstant and has not received the deserved attention and its use in clinical practice has not been utilised as commonly as more traditional treatment approaches such as pharmacotherapy and psychotherapies. This can be potentially attributable to the lack of awareness or scepticism.

However, addressing this issue is important and all relevant stakeholders should embrace the scientific body of evidence and leverage the skills of exercise professionals to assist in both preventing and treating depression going forward.

Reference

Schuch, F.B & Stubbs, B. 2019. The Role of Exercise in Preventing and Treating Depression. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*.

