

# The Impact of Exercise on Mental Health: A Physical Therapy Perspective.

**Bilda Akramovai\***

Department of Neurology Tashkent Medical Academy, University of Thessaly Medical, Republic of Uzbekistan

## Introduction

Mental health has gained increasing attention in recent years due to its profound impact on individuals and society. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress are becoming more prevalent, with a growing recognition that mental health is as important as physical health [1]. While various treatments, such as medication and psychotherapy, are available for managing mental health conditions, exercise has emerged as a powerful tool for improving mental well-being. From a physical therapy perspective, exercise not only enhances physical function but also plays a significant role in alleviating symptoms of mental health disorders. This short communication explores the impact of exercise on mental health, particularly in the context of physical therapy [2].

## Connection between exercise and mental health

Exercise has long been recognized for its ability to improve physical health, but its effects on mental health are equally profound. Scientific studies have shown that regular physical activity can reduce the symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress. The relationship between exercise and mental health is complex and multifaceted, involving both physiological and psychological mechanisms.

One of the most significant ways exercise impacts mental health is through the release of endorphins—neurotransmitters that promote feelings of well-being and happiness. These "feel-good" chemicals are naturally produced during physical activity, leading to what is commonly referred to as the "runner's high." The increase in endorphins can help combat feelings of sadness, anxiety, and stress, providing immediate relief from mental distress [3].

Additionally, exercise stimulates the release of other neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine, which are involved in regulating mood and emotional well-being. This biochemical effect is particularly relevant in the treatment of conditions like depression, where serotonin imbalance is often implicated. By boosting the levels of these neurotransmitters, exercise can serve as a natural mood stabilizer, promoting emotional balance and improving overall mental health [4].

## Role of physical therapy in exercise for mental health

Physical therapists are uniquely positioned to guide individuals in using exercise as part of their mental health management.

While exercise in general can have mental health benefits, the role of a physical therapist is crucial in designing safe and appropriate exercise programs that are tailored to each individual's physical abilities and mental health needs. Physical therapists assess a patient's physical condition, mobility, and limitations before creating an exercise plan that aligns with their mental health goals. For individuals experiencing anxiety or depression, low-impact exercises such as walking, yoga, or swimming may be introduced to gradually build confidence and comfort [5]. The therapist's expertise in tailoring programs ensures that the exercise routine is suitable for the patient's specific needs, minimizing the risk of injury or exacerbating mental health symptoms. For individuals with mental health conditions, the prospect of engaging in physical activity can often feel overwhelming, especially if they experience physical symptoms such as fatigue, pain, or muscle weakness. Physical therapists address these concerns by providing strategies to build physical endurance and manage discomfort. In this way, they remove barriers to exercise, fostering a positive experience that encourages individuals to continue their physical activity regimen and reap the mental health benefits [6,7]. Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety can lead to a lack of motivation and feelings of isolation. Physical therapists play an important role in motivating individuals to stay engaged with their exercise programs. The one-on-one support from a physical therapist not only provides accountability but also encourages patients to push through mental barriers, fostering a sense of achievement and self-efficacy.

## Specific exercises and mental health benefits

Aerobic exercises, including walking, jogging, cycling, and swimming, have been shown to be particularly effective in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety. These activities increase heart rate and improve cardiovascular health, while simultaneously promoting the release of endorphins. Regular participation in aerobic exercise can lead to long-term improvements in mood, energy levels, and sleep quality, all of which are critical factors in mental health management [8]. Strength training, including weightlifting and resistance exercises, has also been found to have a positive impact on mental health. These exercises promote physical strength and muscle mass, which can improve an individual's self-esteem and confidence. Furthermore,

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\*Correspondence to: Bilda Akramovai, Department of Neurology Tashkent Medical Academy, University of Thessaly Medical, Republic of Uzbekistan. E- bildaakramovai90@mail.ru

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strength training can help regulate hormones that influence mood, such as cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. By building physical strength, individuals may experience a sense of control and empowerment, which can positively influence their mental state. Yoga and other mindfulness-based exercises are becoming increasingly recognized for their mental health benefits [9,10]. These exercises combine gentle physical movement with mindfulness techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation, to reduce stress and promote mental clarity. Yoga has been shown to decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression by calming the nervous system, improving emotional regulation, and fostering a mind-body connection that enhances self-awareness.

## Conclusion

Exercise is an effective, evidence-based strategy for managing mental health, and physical therapy plays a crucial role in facilitating its benefits. By creating personalized, safe, and effective exercise programs, physical therapists help individuals with mental health conditions engage in physical activity that improves both their physical and mental well-being. From enhancing mood and reducing stress to building confidence and promoting resilience, the positive effects of exercise on mental health are undeniable. As the importance of mental health continues to rise, integrating exercise into treatment plans for mental health conditions will play an essential role in supporting long-term wellness. Physical therapists are instrumental in guiding patients through this process, ensuring that exercise is not only accessible but also therapeutic for individuals facing mental health challenges.

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