

The Importance of Diet and Exercise for Mental Health

Paul David, Ph.D.

There is a well-established link between mental health and physical health. Systemic reviews in the research literature find strong evidence for the positive effects of good health practices on mental health outcomes (Forbes et al, 2018, Clegg et al., 2012). Conversely, there is considerable evidence that poor physical health significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing mental health problems like depression and anxiety (Ohrnberger, Fichera, & Sutton, 201).

Establishing a physical health regimen in the form of a healthy diet and regular exercise are important adjunctive components to maintaining and even improving mental health. Regular exercise for adults involves engaging in moderate-intensity aerobic activity for between 2½ and 5 hours per week (Center for Disease Control, 2020). A healthy diet consists of fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk products as well as a variety of protein foods such as seafood, lean meats, poultry, eggs, soy products, nuts, and legumes. All of these foods should be low in added sugars, sodium, saturated fats, and cholesterol (U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, 2020).

Maintaining a healthy diet will not ensure long-term physical health if it is not accompanied by regular exercise. Moreover, working out obsessively at the gym cannot make up for junk-food binges and high calorie consumption. Research findings consistently show that both healthy diet and regular exercise are fundamental necessities for maintaining physical wellbeing and warding off premature illness and death.

In a recent longitudinal study (Ding, Buskirk, et. al., 2022), researchers examined the self-reported diet and exercise data from nearly 350,000 adults in Britain. The median age of the participants in this study was 57 and they were followed for over a decade. Not surprisingly, those participants with high levels of physical activity and healthy diets had the lowest mortality rates. Those who had healthy diets were associated with lower risk, but the risk was particularly low for people who engaged in regular exercise as well—anything that routinely made them break into sweat for as little as a couple hours a week.

The findings from this research make a compelling case that beyond eating right, regular physical exercise is a crucial component of overall health and longevity. These findings also highlight the importance of a healthy diet and regular exercise as equal contributing parts to preserving good physical health which, in turn, provides a solid physiological basis for helping maintain mental health.

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