

Depression linked to low sports activity

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From a friendly game of soccer to sweating it solo in the gym, most of us know that exercise is good for our health. But beyond the obvious physical benefits, research led by UniSA expert in sports sociology Dr. Katja Siefken shows that sport can also protect us from developing serious mental health disorders.

The study, conducted with colleagues at the MSH Medical School Hamburg, assessed [levels of anxiety](#) and depression among 682 German recreational athletes under different sport conditions (amount and intensity), settings (indoor vs outdoors) and contexts (individual or [team sports](#)), finding that people who exercise less than 2.5 hours a week are at risk of increased anxiety and depression.

The research indicates that athletes who meet World Health Organization's (WHO) exercise guidelines (150 minutes moderate-intensity [physical activity](#) throughout the week for [healthy adults](#) aged 18-64 years) have a better [mental health](#) status than those who are less active.

UniSA's Dr. Katja Siefken says the findings have valuable insights for mental health, particularly as mental health is often disregarded in public health recommendations around exercise.

"Mental health disorders are one of the most significant health challenges of our time, contributing substantially to the burden of global disease," Dr. Siefken says.

"Exercise is a key part of building and retaining both physical and positive mental health, but it's important to recognise that different exercise conditions can affect mental health in different ways.

"Understanding the factors that can influence or alleviate depression and anxiety are essential, but until now, there's been insufficient proof about the optimal types—or amounts—of activity needed for positive mental health.

"In this study, we found that people who did not meet physical activity recommendations, reported higher depression scores, independent of whether they practiced indoors or outdoors, individually, or in a team.

"We also found that the lowest depression and anxiety scores mostly occurred among indoor team athletes, but that athletes undertaking vigorous-intensity physical exercise often recorded higher levels of depression.

"There is also good evidence that outdoor exercise contributes to improved mental health and that doing sports together, or as part of a team, may positively impact our mental health substantially.

"So, it's really a case of monitoring physical and mental capabilities on an individual basis. And, while we often hear the phrase 'the more exercise, the better,' evidence shows that this is far more complex.

"A healthy mind and body rely upon modest, achievable levels of physical exercise. For most of us, two and a half hours a week—or, say 30 minutes a day over five days—is a reasonable ask to encourage positive mental [health](#)."

More information: Katja Siefken et al. How does sport affect mental health? An investigation into the relationship of leisure-time physical activity with depression and anxiety, *Human Movement* (2019). [DOI: 10.5114/hm.2019.78539](https://doi.org/10.5114/hm.2019.78539)

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