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The physical activity and mental health relationship – a contemporary perspective from qualitative research

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Abstract

There is a known positive relationship between physical activity and mental health, and in the treatment and maintenance of mental illness. Despite this relationship however, there still remains a lack of consensus on the mechanism responsible for the relationship. This paper explores the physical activity and mental health relationship by reviewing and critiquing the biochemical, physiological and psychological mechanisms proposed to explain this phenomenon. Through this review it becomes apparent that although there are varied explanations proposed, there is little agreement except that the relationship is complex and the responsible mechanism(s) are likely to be interrelated combining the disciplines of psychology, biochemistry and physiology. In an attempt to understand further the complexities of the relationship the paper presents findings from qualitative research that investigated the relationship from the perspectives of people that experience mental health benefits from exercise. Using grounded theory methodology the study investigated the experiences of participants on exercise programmes in the UK. The paper concludes that qualitative methodologies which explore people experiences, and what helps to facilitate them, provide further insight into the interrelated nature of the physical activity and mental health relationship.

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