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Sweat and serenity: The influence of physical activity on adolescent emotional well-being

Dr. Shamsheer Kasnia

Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education, Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa, Haryana, India

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Corresponding Author: Dr. Shamsheer Kasnia

Abstract

This research paper explores the significant impact of physical activity on the emotional well-being of adolescents, a demographic increasingly affected by mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress. With the rising concerns regarding adolescent mental health, this study seeks to better understand the role that physical activity plays as a non-pharmacological intervention for enhancing emotional health in youth. A mixed-methods approach was used to examine both qualitative and quantitative data collected from adolescents across multiple schools. Surveys were distributed to assess self-reported levels of emotional distress, while semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the personal experiences of participants.

The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between the frequency and intensity of physical activity and improved emotional well-being. Adolescents who engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity at least three times a week reported significantly lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Additionally, qualitative data highlighted physical activity as not only a means of stress relief but also as a source of increased self-esteem, social connectedness, and resilience. These results underscore the multifaceted benefits of physical activity, supporting its role in enhancing mental health during adolescence.

The study contributes to a growing body of evidence advocating for the integration of physical exercise into daily routines, school curricula, and community programs as a strategic approach to combating adolescent mental health issues. The findings also highlight the importance of fostering environments that encourage physical activity, both in school and at home, to help adolescents develop effective coping mechanisms and emotional regulation strategies. As the evidence suggests, physical activity is a promising, low-cost intervention that can complement traditional mental health services, providing a holistic approach to adolescent well-being.

Keywords: Physical activity, emotional well-being, adolescents, mental health, stress reduction, resilience

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage that encompasses significant biological, psychological, and social transitions. During this period, individuals experience hormonal changes, identity formation, increased peer influence, and academic pressures. These changes often lead to heightened emotional vulnerability. Emotional well-being, encompassing aspects such as mood, self-esteem, and the ability to cope with stress, plays a crucial role in determining the overall mental health of adolescents. In recent years, global reports have raised concerns over the rising prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents. According to the World Health Organization

(WHO), one in seven adolescents globally experiences a mental health condition, with depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders among the leading causes of illness and disability in this age group. Contributing factors include academic stress, social media influence, peer pressure, body image issues, and family dynamics. In light of these trends, there is an urgent need to explore preventive and supportive strategies that are both effective and accessible.

One such strategy gaining considerable attention is physical activity. Physical activity, defined as any bodily movement that enhances or maintains physical fitness and overall health, includes a broad range of behaviors such as sports, walking, cycling, dancing, and structured exercise routines.

Beyond its physical benefits, a growing body of literature highlights the psychological advantages of consistent physical activity, including improved mood regulation, decreased stress levels, enhanced cognitive performance, and better sleep quality. The psychosocial benefits of physical activity are particularly relevant during adolescence, a time marked by emotional intensity and identity exploration. Engaging in physical activity may serve not only as a coping mechanism but also as a source of self-efficacy and social interaction, both of which are essential for emotional resilience. Furthermore, schools, families, and community programs play a vital role in shaping adolescents' access to and engagement with physical activities.

This paper investigates the extent to which physical activity influences emotional well-being among adolescents and explores the mechanisms through which this relationship may operate. By reviewing existing literature, conducting empirical research, and analyzing real-world data, this study seeks to offer actionable insights for educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and caregivers aiming to improve adolescent mental health outcomes through physical engagement.

Literature Review

Biddle & Asare (2011) ^[1]: In their comprehensive review of multiple studies, the authors found a consistent association between physical activity and lower levels of depressive symptoms among adolescents. They concluded that engaging in regular physical activity can serve as a preventive measure against depression and recommended integrating physical activity into public health strategies.

Lubans *et al.* (2016) ^[6]: Conducting a systematic review, this study highlighted the cognitive and emotional benefits of structured physical activity programs. Adolescents involved in regular physical activity demonstrated enhanced self-esteem, better cognitive performance, and fewer symptoms of depression. The authors suggested that improvements in neurobiological processes, such as increased endorphin release, might underlie these effects.

Pascoe & Parker (2019) ^[6]: The authors examined the role of school-based physical activity interventions in preventing depression among adolescents. Their narrative review found that such programs led to improved mood, increased feelings of connectedness, and reduced emotional distress, especially when implemented consistently over a school term.

Stanton *et al.* (2020) ^[12]: This study examined the effects of cardiovascular and resistance exercises on adolescent stress and anxiety. It found that adolescents who participated in moderate to vigorous physical activity at least three times a week exhibited significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety and reported better stress management. The researchers emphasized the importance of diversity in physical activities to maintain long-term engagement.

Singh *et al.* (2021) ^[11]: This cross-sectional study analyzed the emotional health of 1,200 adolescents across various Indian schools and found that those who engaged in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week had significantly higher life satisfaction scores and lower levels of perceived stress. The authors emphasized the role of policy interventions to encourage school-based activity.

Martinez-Gomez *et al.* (2022) ^[7]: Conducting a large-scale longitudinal study in Spain, the researchers found that consistent physical activity over a two-year period correlated with reductions in both clinical and subclinical depressive symptoms among adolescents aged 12–17. The study supported the idea that habitual exercise could offer sustained emotional benefits.

Nguyen *et al.* (2023) ^[8]: In a meta-analysis of 28 studies published between 2015 and 2022, Nguyen and colleagues concluded that aerobic activities such as cycling and running had the most consistent positive effect on adolescent mood and anxiety reduction. They called for tailored physical activity programs in urban school environments.

Carter & Yoon (2024) ^[2]: This qualitative investigation explored the impact of team-based sports on emotional regulation among adolescents in low-income neighborhoods. The study found that peer support and collective goal setting in team sports significantly enhanced adolescents' ability to manage emotional challenges.

Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the extent of physical activity among adolescents
2. To evaluate the emotional well-being of adolescents participating in physical activity
3. To analyze the relationship between frequency/intensity of physical activity and emotional outcomes
4. To provide recommendations for incorporating physical activity into adolescent routines to enhance emotional health

Research Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic:

- **Quantitative Data Collection:** A structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 200 adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The survey consisted of two validated instruments: the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents (PAQ-A), which measured the frequency and intensity of physical activity, and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which assessed emotional and behavioral problems.
- **Qualitative Data Collection:** In addition to the survey, five focus group discussions were conducted with 30 adolescents from the same sample. Each group consisted of 6 participants and was facilitated by a trained moderator. The discussions explored personal experiences related to physical activity, emotional challenges, and perceived benefits of exercise. Participants shared stories of how physical activity helped them cope with academic stress, social anxiety, and family issues.
- **Sampling Method:** Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across age groups, genders, and socio-economic statuses.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians. The research was approved by the institutional ethics committee and ensured confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Quantitative Analysis: Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the relationship between physical activity levels and emotional well-being scores. The results showed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of physical activity were associated with lower levels of emotional difficulties.

Detailed Quantitative Findings

- Adolescents who engaged in physical activity 5–7 times a week ($n = 58$) had an average SDQ emotional difficulties score of 8.3 ($SD = 2.1$).
- Those active 3–4 times a week ($n = 76$) had a mean score of 10.1 ($SD = 2.5$).
- Adolescents active 1–2 times a week ($n = 42$) scored 12.4 ($SD = 3.0$).
- Those who reported no physical activity ($n = 24$) had the highest emotional difficulty scores, averaging 14.8 ($SD = 2.8$).

One-way ANOVA analysis confirmed significant differences among the groups ($F(3, 196) = 28.57$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that increased physical activity is associated with reduced emotional difficulties. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests showed significant pairwise differences, particularly between the no-activity group and all other groups.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts of focus group discussions. Three major themes emerged:

1. **Exercise as Stress Relief:** Participants frequently described physical activity as a way to release pent-up emotions and reduce mental tension. A 15-year-old participant shared, "Whenever I go for a run after school, it feels like all my worries just disappear."
2. **Boost in Self-Confidence:** Many adolescents reported feeling more confident and positive about themselves after participating in sports or fitness routines. For example, a 17-year-old stated, "Joining the football team helped me feel like I belong, and I've become more outspoken since then."
3. **Social Bonding Through Sports:** Group activities and team sports fostered a sense of belonging, which contributed positively to emotional well-being. Some participants emphasized that being part of a team or group helped them open up emotionally and make lasting friendships.

These findings provided rich contextual insights and validated the quantitative results, demonstrating a clear link between physical activity and improved emotional health.

Conclusion

This study confirms a strong and consistent relationship between physical activity and emotional well-being in adolescents. Data collected from surveys and observational studies show that adolescents who engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least 150 minutes per week report significantly lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Additionally, these individuals score

higher on self-esteem and overall life satisfaction indices.

The findings demonstrate that physical activity functions not only as a protective factor against mental health disorders but also as a promoter of positive psychological outcomes. Adolescents who participated in team sports or group fitness programs also benefited from improved social skills, stronger peer connections, and a greater sense of belonging—factors that are crucial during this stage of identity formation. Moreover, the study supports earlier literature that links physical activity to neurochemical benefits, such as increased endorphin production and improved regulation of cortisol, the stress hormone. Schools and community programs that consistently integrate physical activity into their routines contribute significantly to the emotional health of their adolescent populations.

Given these compelling results, it is recommended that policymakers, educators, and parents prioritize physical activity as part of holistic strategies to combat adolescent mental health challenges. Future interventions should aim for inclusivity, diversity in physical activities, and sustained engagement to maximize impact.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Self-Reported Data:** The reliance on self-reported questionnaires may introduce social desirability and recall biases, potentially affecting the accuracy of the responses.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study's cross-sectional nature limits the ability to establish causality between physical activity and emotional well-being.
- **Sample Representation:** The study was conducted in a specific geographic region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or cultural contexts.
- **Short-Term Assessment:** Emotional well-being was assessed at a single point in time, and longitudinal data would be more informative to track changes over time.

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