



Can physical activity promote mental health and prevent mental disorders in older people?

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Relevance

Researchers are studying the benefits of exercise on the mental health of older people.

Rapid population ageing will affect the majority of the world's developed countries in the coming decades. Managing chronic illnesses as well as the conditions and disabilities they cause in the older population involves the whole of society. The challenges of population ageing are cause for increased concern regarding the prevention and promotion of overall health (physical, mental and social well-being) in older people. A positive view of ageing must be accompanied by the possibility of good health, participation in activities and security. The World Health Organization Active Ageing approach aims at optimizing the quality of life of older people (WHO, 2002). The development of a positive ageing framework could also occur through the establishment of policies and programs implementing proven health promotion measures.

Let us mention that current national priorities mainly focus on the prevention of chronic physical illnesses (cardiovascular diseases, cancer) and disabilities affecting the older population. Themes most often prioritized are those for which there is existing consensus on the effectiveness of interventions. Furthermore, promoting the practice of physical activity was brought to the fore through the publication of the US Surgeon General's report (USDHHS, 1996) and numerous experts have since recognized its beneficial effect on the overall health of older people. Although studies on the effectiveness of regular physical activity have focused mainly on reducing risk factors for physical health, a growing number of researchers are studying the benefits of exercise on the mental health of older people. The practice of physical activity appears to be a promising approach in the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental disorders in the older population.



The benefits of physical activity on mental health and mental disorders

Regularly participating in moderate physical activity can delay the decline of functional abilities

The salutary role of adherence to regular physical activity in the prevention of chronic physical illness is significant as chronic disorders and the disabilities they incur are closely linked to mental health problems in older people (WHO, 1999). Regularly participating in moderate physical activity can delay the decline of functional abilities in healthy older people and those afflicted with chronic illness (WHO, 2002). Being active helps people maintain their independence and functional autonomy as long as possible.

Engaging in physical activity on a regular basis is associated with the preservation of certain cognitive faculties (memory, attention, psychomotor control), a state of psychological well-being, a more positive outlook of mental health and sustained social contact (Department of Health-UK, 2001). In epidemiological studies, physical activity is also linked to a decrease in anxiety, depression and sleep disorders (Hughes et al., 2009).



Intervention approaches

It is imperative to plan healthy ageing interventions based on health determinants and risk factors by targeting individuals and communities. Recommendations made by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2007) seek to guide the promotion of physical activity for optimal effectiveness. As such, it is particularly important to educate the older population on the health benefits of physical activity, and to offer programs that are accessible in the community and that respect the preferences and abilities of older people.

Cities better adapt services and structures to provide easier access for the older population.

Creating environments conducive to the practice of physical activities requires that cities better adapt services and structures to provide easier access for the older population. The Global Age-friendly Cities project promoted by the WHO, and currently implemented in Quebec, recognizes that an age-friendly physical environment (transportation system, buildings) encourages older people to participate in physical activity. In accordance with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, the project proposes to support the development of culturally adapted environments that stimulate older people into being more active.

Conclusion

Maintaining optimal mental health enables older adults to remain autonomous and active within society. Physical activity has a favourable effect on positive mental health components and on the incidence of mental disorders in the older population. It is therefore important to promote physical activity as much as possible and to direct interventions to older people as well as communities, in view of creating environments favourable to its practice.



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