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Physical activity reduces depression risk in women, but not in men – UCT study

Engaging in physical activity reduces the risk of depression in South African women, according to a study by the University of Cape Town (UCT), which suggests that health policies to ensure access and promotion of physical activity resources to prevent depression are key.

More than 264 million people globally suffer from depression. Additionally, depression has been significantly associated with comorbidities, premature mortality and a financial cost to society. The burden of depression is compounded by the gap between the need for and access to treatment, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, such as South Africa, where the lifetime prevalence of depression is 9.8%.

In the study, a team of international researchers analysed health and physical activity data of nearly 50 000 Discovery Health and Vitality members from 2013 to 2015. They found that women were almost twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression.

“Our analysis indicated that increasing physical activity from low to moderate or from low to high in the female population could prevent 19.3% and 16.3% cases of depression, respectively,” said Seranne Motilal, PhD candidate at UCT and first author of the study.

Motilal and her colleagues found that a small increase in physical activity, 5 000 steps one day in a week to one low-intensity 30-minute physical activity in a week or one gym visit in a week, can significantly reduce depression risk in women.

The study found no effect of physical activity on depression in men. Motilal said their research has several possible explanations for the sex difference, including moving from sedentary to physical activity for men, which they could not analyse.

“The diagnosis of depression in men is not made as often in men as in women, reducing the power to detect an effect in men. In our study population, 1761 women and 882 men were diagnosed with depression. This aligns with prior studies showing that depression is twice as likely diagnosed in women than in men. There may be a few factors that result in men being diagnosed less with depression than women, including biological factors and psychosocial factors that could affect how men seek help for and experience depression,” said Motilal in the *International Journal of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation*.

Based on the results, Motilal said future work in populations from other African and low to middle income countries is needed. “In addition, assessment of specific types of physical activity would also add to this analysis,” she said.

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