

NEWS, WELLNESS

March 29, 2016

Pedaling Towards Happiness: 7 Mental Health Benefits of Riding Bikes

Bicycling is great for your physical health, but did you know it has numerous positive mental health impacts as well?

Written by: Hilary Angus

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Photo by Sandra

We all know that riding bikes is great for our physical health. It improves cardiovascular fitness, reduces body fat, builds strength, and improves circulation. But what about our mental health?

The link between exercise and improved mental health is not new, many studies over the years have made the connection the two. But as the body of research grows, it becomes clear that regular exercise – especially physical activity outdoors – should not simply be a supplementary method to improve our mood, but a key part of any strategy to combat depression, anxiety, and the general stress of daily life.

While some people ride to get fit, there are many who ride bikes simply because it makes them happy, and happiness is not trivial. How you feel about yourself, your life, and the world is just as important as the mechanical workings of your body. In fact, science suggests that mental health may even be a stronger predictor of life expectancy than physical health, or even heavy smoking.

1. "Lifestyle" Exercise Improves Subjective Mood

Even half an hour of daily exercise has been observed to improve people's subjective mood and well-being. A meta-analysis of studies relating to mood and physical activity looked specifically at people who engaged in casual physical activity, rather than competitive sport, and found that those who had active lifestyles reported feeling in a better mood and having better overall well-being than those who did not. Given that we all have to get around town, biking to work is one of the easiest ways to integrate 30 minutes of non-competitive physical activity into our daily lives.



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2. Physical Activity Improves Self-Esteem

"What we think about ourselves is probably the central concept in our conscious lives," theorized William McGuire and his colleagues in 1976. Whether you buy fully into that notion or not, it would be difficult (nay, impossible) to argue that our perception of our selves isn't important to our happiness and overall satisfaction. With the incursion of social media into every facet of our lives, it's becoming increasingly difficult to have a positive view of our own lives while constantly being bombarded by the achievements of others. So if you need a cure for the Instagram blues, bicycling has your back. A meta-analysis of studies on physical activity and self-esteem determined that the former has a positive impact on the latter, and the impact was not significantly altered by the intensity or duration of physical activity. So just a little cruise here or a few days biking to work there can have an overall positive impact on your perception of yourself. And why shouldn't it, you're wonderful!

3. Physical Activity is an Effective Anti-Depressant

A long-term study of adults in Alameda County, California determined that high levels of physical activity led to a significantly decreased risk of developing clinical depression later in life, even when adjusted for other factors such as socioeconomic status, life events, social supports, and other health habits. Similarly, a meta-analysis of other studies on the subject found that, for youth and adults already suffering from depression, physical activity can be as effective as psychotherapeutic techniques to treat the disorder. Unlike most psychotherapies, there were no observed negative effects of physical activity in treating depression.

4. Aerobic Exercise Reduces Anxiety

While everyone feels a little bit anxious now and then, anxiety that endures can have real, lasting impacts on a person's quality of life. Anxiety disorders, including panic attacks and social anxiety, can be anywhere from unsettling to crippling. They can affect a person's ability to hold a job, maintain relationships, and participate in the various responsibilities of daily life. A 2001 study found that aerobic exercise can reduce generalized anxiety as well as reduce anxiety sensitivity, which is a

precursor to panic attacks and panic disorder. While high-intensity aerobic exercise was found to be more impactful, low-intensity exercise was also effective at reducing anxiety.



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5. Physical Activity Reduces Stress

Seven out of 10 American adults report feeling stress at least once daily. While everybody has different coping mechanisms for stress, exercise is the method most frequently recommended by health care professionals to reduce its symptoms. By bumping up the production of endorphins, physical activity relieves tension, elevates mood, and helps to stabilize sleep patterns disrupted by stress.

6. Exercising Outdoors is Better for Your Mental Health

While swimming laps at the local pool, hitting the gym or dropping in on a gym class are all effective ways to achieve the aforementioned mental health benefits of exercise, there's another reason biking might be the way to go. A 2011 study determined that partaking in physical activity outside was associated with greater feelings of revitalization, increased energy and positive engagement, together with decreases in tension, confusion, anger and depression. Basically, exercise is great for mental health. Exercise outside? Even better.

7. You Don't Have to Sit in the Stupid, Horrible, Soul-Crushing Scourge of Humanity that is Traffic

Admittedly, all of the above benefits of exercise are not limited to bicycling, they could also be achieved by an activity such as jogging, hiking, swimming outside, joining a sports team, or anything fun and physical of the sort. But do you know what those activities can't do for you? Get you out of the hell-on-earth that is rush hour in a city in a car. Scientifically speaking, navigating city traffic is mind-numbing, enraging, and anxiety-inducing.* Traffic is a mental health nightmare,** and driving is bad for the soul.*** The positive impacts of physical activity are compounded by the positive impacts of not having to drive a car every day. So get cycling, your mental health depends on it.

*Anecdotally speaking

- **As of uet unconfirmed by science, but a pretty good hypothesis.
- ***If anybody wants to do this research, we'll be the first to promote it.

Hilary Angus is the Online Editor at Momentum Mag. Her commute is one of the best parts of her day. @HilaryAngus

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Fernando Raymond

September 13, 2017

wow, this is quite surprising for me. Looking forward to use my cycle again.

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Nick

February 27, 2017

Only people who have actively spend lots of time in cycling can experience the positive effect of cycling.

By spending at least 1 hour doing cycling, I've improved my cardio vascular activities to the fullest. As such, I can spend more and more time with my family.

Thanks for such an educative post

Reply



Daryl Ortiz

January 28, 2017

Wow, so much nice tips. I just going to buy new cycle now. Hope it help me to focus more.

Reply



Richard Robertson

December 23, 2016

Spending hours per week slouched over in a auto seat has bad penalties for your posture and your again; cycling usually tend to record pains and aches of their backs and necks.

Thanks for your post!

Reply

Pingback: Getting Fit: Advice To Enhance Your Physique – movebulb7arminda's blog



John Smith

August 28, 2016

Hello,

I totally agree with you. There is nothing better than cycling to exercise. It really works well to burn calories. It doesn't matter what you doing; indoor or outdoor. But both have different purposes. I personally doing indoor cycling workouts in home and found it very effective. After reading your post, it will help me in my cycling.

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Helen April 25, 2016

"Non-competitive" is a very good point of what is beautiful about cycling. If only you could convince some of the Strava douchebags on my local bike path of that.

Reply



Mr R W Upton

April 19, 2016

Good ride around the benefits of getting on your bike...

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Pingback: Exercise programmes are to be used in the treatment of mental health - Fitness Teamwork



lan

March 30, 2016

Absolutely love the last paragraph! N= 2 for sample size.

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Reid

March 29, 2016

It's a lot cheaper than than buying drugs or paying a therapist. That's what I tell my mate when I need something for my bike or a new bike.

Reply



Bob

March 29, 2016

It IS confirmed by science. From 2014: http://time.com/9912/10-things-your-commute-does-to-your-body/

Reply



Hilary Angus

March 31, 2016

Ah! Amazing, thank you. Stay tuned for "7 ways driving is ruining your life"... 😌

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