

## Overview

Supported by both peer-reviewed research and federal health guidelines, regular physical activity contributes to improved mental health, reduced rates in recurrences of use, and enhanced physical and psychological well-being. This fact sheet can be used as a resource for people with lived and living experience—including those who are in and those who may be seeking recovery from a mental health, substance use, or co-occurring condition, as well as their family members, friends, and loved ones. This fact sheet was also developed for the peer workforce, clinical providers, and policymakers to promote an understanding of the critical role that physical activity plays in advancing recovery across the nation.

## Key Benefits of Physical Activity

Integrating physical activity into recovery from substance use, mental health, and co-occurring conditions can yield significant benefits:

### Improving Mental Health

- ✓ Physical activity significantly reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety. A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) found exercise can be as effective as medication in treating mild to moderate depression.<sup>1,2</sup>
- ✓ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) emphasizes that adults should engage in 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve overall mental health.<sup>3</sup>

### Promoting Substance Use Recovery

- ✓ Physical activity can help manage cravings, making it easier for people to sustain their recovery. Exercise increases the production of neurotransmitters like dopamine and endorphins, which may be depleted during substance use.<sup>4</sup>
- ✓ Regular physical activity has been shown to lead to lower rates of returning to problematic substance use for people in recovery from substance use disorder. Physical activity serves as a healthy coping mechanism from stress and may reduce reliance on substances.<sup>5</sup>

### Enhancing Cognitive Function and Wellbeing

- ✓ Exercise can improve cognitive functions like memory, attention, and executive functioning. This may be particularly beneficial for people who are in or seeking recovery from a substance use disorder, as some substances can impair these functions. Regular physical activity has also been shown to lower rates of chronic disease (e.g., coronary heart

disease, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers).<sup>6</sup>

- ✓ The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) supports including physical activity in treatment programs because of the role exercise plays enhancing brain function and supporting neuroplasticity, which is crucial for recovery.<sup>6</sup>

### Social Support and Community Engagement

- ✓ Group physical activity – such as team sports or exercise classes—foster social connections and build supportive networks that are critical for sustaining recovery.<sup>7</sup>
- ✓ Achieving fitness goals through physical activity boosts self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are essential for long-term recovery from mental health and substance use conditions.<sup>7</sup>

### Management of Co-occurring Conditions

- ✓ Physical activity provides significant benefits for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders by improving both physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Data suggest the integration of physical activity into clinical treatment for people with co-occurring conditions results in better outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

## Practical Recommendations

The following recommendations are for the practical inclusion of physical activity for those who are in or may be seeking recovery from challenges related to mental health, substance use, or co-occurring conditions.

- ✓ **Start Gradually**—begin with low-intensity exercises and gradually increase intensity and duration to ensure long-term adherence.
- ✓ **Incorporate Variety**—a combination of aerobic, strength, and flexibility exercises can help maintain interest and maximize benefits.

✓ **Focus on Enjoyment**—choosing enjoyable activities increases motivation and the likelihood of maintaining an active lifestyle.

✓ **Consult with a Medical Professional**—if you have any concerns before starting or during physical exercises, including those related to other health problems or symptoms, consult a medical professional.

## Conclusion

As noted above, data suggests that physical activity can play an important role throughout a person's recovery and wellness journey. Benefits include better mood, cognitive improvement, and preventing recurrences, making it a valuable component of recovery pathways and services. This fact sheet highlights some of the important research and identifies federal health guidelines and recommendations that support the integration of physical activity into treatment and recovery services.

## References

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