

## Exercise can help protect your mental health during COVID- 19

With a range of restrictions currently in place to keep the nation healthy from the COVID-19 pandemic, Exercise & Sports Science Australia (ESSA) is reminding all Australians about the importance of exercise and physical activity to protect our mental health during isolation.

“With exercise being deemed an essential activity by the government and the [World Health Organisation](#), it’s been encouraging to see more people do their best to maintain movement or start getting active during the current crisis,” says Anita Hobson-Powell, ESSA Chief Executive Officer.

These are uncertain times, and social isolation doesn’t discriminate when it comes to affecting someone’s mental health. Associate Professor Simon Rosenbaum, mental health and exercise researcher further explains the range of benefits exercise can offer our mental health, especially during COVID-19.

“When healthy people become inactive, levels of depression can increase after as little as [seven days](#). Keeping active whilst in isolation is crucial to protect our mental health over the short and long term,” says Simon, a Scientia Fellow in the School of Psychiatry at UNSW and ESSA National Board Director.

“In fact, as little as 60 minutes of physical activity per week could prevent [up to 17%](#) of incident cases of depression.”

Exercise offers a wide range of positive benefits for our mental health, including helping to reduce stress and keep our minds clear and focused during the pandemic.

“With the extreme stress that is being placed on all Australians, especially our front-line workers, exercise may also offer some protection against anxiety, and can help to manage symptoms for people living with an existing mental health issue like anxiety or depression.”

Exercising doesn’t need to be considered a chore either. You don’t even necessarily have to ‘get sweaty’ in order to experience mental health benefits.

“Resistance training (exercises that improve muscle strength) can be just as effective for our mental health and may be more accessible during lockdown. In fact, no one type of exercise has been shown to be better than another for improving your mental health,” explains Simon.

“Finding something that you enjoy, whether it be walking or running outside (remembering to practice physical distancing), or completing a home-workout, can benefit your mental health.”

“Prioritising enjoyment over the type or intensity of the exercise is going to ensure that you’re more likely to create a sustainable exercise habit and maximise the health benefits. This is especially true for inactive people or those new to exercise.”

Now, more than ever, it is important to stay active, and something is better than nothing.

“Every minute counts and research does indicate that acute exercise, or a single work out, can benefit mood. To help you to meet the physical activity guidelines, consider starting with ‘exercise snacks’ – short bouts of activity throughout the day,” explains Simon.

Prof Zoe Knowles, Chair of the Division of Psychology said, “The BASES Sport and Exercise Psychology Accreditation Route ([SEPAR](#)) will be incorporating specific training in mental

health from leading experts in the field as part of our core programme offer to candidates. The focus will be not only on elite athletes in the performance sport domain but also that of the general public and other target groups who can benefit from engaging in physical activity to benefit mental health outcomes.”