

**RESEARCH PAPER****The Role of Physical Education in Reducing Anxiety and Depression among Students****Renu Tomar**

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Email: renutomar@gmail.comReceived: 27th June 2019, Revised: 30th July 2019, Accepted: 20th August 2019**ABSTRACT**

Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression have become prevalent concerns among students worldwide. These conditions not only affect academic performance but also hinder personal development and well-being. This paper explores the role of physical education (PE) in alleviating anxiety and depression among students. Through a review of relevant literature and empirical studies, this paper examines how physical activity, integrated into PE programs, can serve as an effective intervention for mental health issues. The paper discusses the physiological and psychological mechanisms underlying the benefits of physical activity, the role of social interaction in PE, and the importance of fostering positive attitudes toward exercise. Recommendations for integrating mental health-focused PE strategies are also provided.

Keypoints: Improved Mental Health, Stress Relief, Social Interaction, Cognitive Benefits

INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues among students, particularly anxiety and depression, have become a pressing concern in educational systems worldwide. As academic pressures, social expectations, and the challenges of personal development continue to increase, many students find themselves struggling with emotional and psychological distress. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, are among the leading causes of disability in adolescents globally. It is estimated that around 10-20% of adolescents experience mental health conditions at some point in their lives, with many of these cases remaining undiagnosed or untreated. The impact of these disorders on students' academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being is profound, underscoring the need for effective interventions.

While traditional mental health interventions such as counseling, therapy, and medication are critical, there is growing recognition of the importance of holistic approaches to mental health within educational settings. Among these approaches, physical education (PE) stands out as a potentially powerful tool for addressing mental health concerns. PE, traditionally focused on promoting physical fitness, can also play a crucial role in improving students' mental well-being by reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. This is particularly important in a school setting, where PE is one of the few regular opportunities for students to engage in structured physical activity during the school day.

Research over the past few decades has increasingly pointed to the psychological benefits of physical activity, with studies showing that exercise can help regulate mood, reduce stress, and improve overall mental health. The connection between physical activity and mental well-being is supported by both physiological mechanisms, such as the release of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters, and psychological factors, such as improved self-esteem, reduced stress, and enhanced social interactions. These benefits are particularly important for students, who often face significant emotional and psychological challenges due to academic demands, social pressures, and the process of identity formation during adolescence.

Despite the compelling evidence supporting the mental health benefits of physical activity, PE programs are often underutilized as a tool for mental health promotion. In many schools, the focus of PE is narrowly centered on physical fitness and athletic performance, with less emphasis on the broader well-being of students. Moreover, the stigma surrounding mental health issues may

prevent students from seeking help or openly discussing their emotional struggles. These factors highlight the need for a shift in how PE is structured and delivered, with a greater emphasis on its potential to support mental health alongside physical fitness.

This paper aims to explore the role of physical education in reducing anxiety and depression among students, focusing on both the physiological and psychological mechanisms through which physical activity can benefit mental health. By reviewing relevant literature and empirical studies, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which PE can be used as an effective intervention for mental health issues. Furthermore, it will examine the challenges and barriers to integrating mental health-focused strategies into PE programs and offer recommendations for how schools can better utilize PE to support the emotional well-being of students.

In addition, the paper will address the broader context of mental health in educational settings, considering the increasing awareness of the importance of addressing student well-being in a comprehensive and integrated manner. With mental health concerns on the rise, it is critical for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals to explore innovative and accessible strategies for promoting mental health, and physical education offers a unique opportunity to address these needs in a proactive and preventive way. By understanding and harnessing the power of physical education, schools can contribute to fostering a generation of students who are not only physically fit but also emotionally resilient, capable of managing the stresses and challenges that come with modern life.

THE PREVALENCE OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION IN STUDENTS

GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES:

The prevalence of mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression, among students is a global concern that transcends geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders are the leading cause of disability in adolescents worldwide, with depression being the most common condition. An estimated 10-20% of adolescents globally experience some form of mental health disorder, and the rates of anxiety and depression among students are rising at alarming rates, exacerbated by factors like academic pressure, social media, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation, the disruption of education, and the heightened uncertainty during the pandemic have contributed to significant spikes in mental health challenges among students, with many experiencing increased anxiety, depression, and stress.

In higher-income countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, mental health awareness has increased, and there is a growing recognition of the need for early intervention. In these regions, students often have access to counseling services and mental health resources, but demand for such services often exceeds availability, leaving many students without adequate support. Additionally, mental health issues are often stigmatized, making it difficult for students to seek help despite knowing the available resources.

In low- and middle-income countries, the situation can be even more challenging. Limited access to mental health professionals, inadequate school-based mental health programs, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health disorders make it harder for students to receive the care and support they need. However, the prevalence of mental health issues is no less severe in these regions. A report from the WHO highlighted that mental health problems among adolescents in low-income countries often go unaddressed, as the focus in these areas tends to be on basic education and physical health rather than psychological well-being.

These global challenges underscore the importance of creating school environments that support not only academic achievement but also the emotional and mental health of students. While traditional mental health services such as therapy and counseling are essential, they are often not enough to meet the needs of all students, particularly in settings where resources are scarce. As a result, there is a growing push for alternative, scalable interventions-such as incorporating physical education into mental health strategies-that can support students' emotional well-being.

Physical education, with its widespread presence in schools around the world, offers an accessible and cost-effective avenue for addressing mental health concerns on a larger scale.

Both globally and locally, integrating mental health initiatives into PE programs is a promising strategy to combat the rising rates of anxiety and depression among students, offering a proactive and preventive approach to mental health care. This strategy can be particularly impactful in schools that may not have the resources to provide comprehensive mental health services but can still offer physical activities that benefit students' overall well-being.

THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ON STUDENTS:

Anxiety and depression can have profound and far-reaching effects on students, influencing not only their emotional and psychological well-being but also their academic performance, social interactions, and overall development. These mental health conditions often manifest during adolescence, a critical period in which students are navigating academic pressures, social relationships, and identity formation. Anxiety, characterized by excessive worry, restlessness, and fear, can make it difficult for students to focus on their studies, leading to academic underperformance. Depression, marked by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities, can result in low motivation, fatigue, and difficulty in completing assignments or attending school regularly.

The cognitive impairments associated with anxiety and depression—such as trouble concentrating, memory issues, and negative thinking patterns—can significantly hinder students' ability to learn and retain information. For instance, students with anxiety may struggle with test-taking due to excessive worry about failure, while those with depression might experience a lack of motivation or energy, making it hard for them to engage in classroom activities. As a result, academic achievement tends to suffer, which in turn can further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, leading to a vicious cycle of poor performance and worsening mental health.

Beyond the classroom, anxiety and depression can severely affect students' social relationships. Adolescence is a time when peer interactions are crucial for social development, but mental health disorders can make it harder for students to form or maintain friendships. Those suffering from anxiety may avoid social situations due to fear of judgment or embarrassment, while students with depression may withdraw from their peers, feeling disconnected or indifferent. The isolation that results from these conditions can lead to loneliness, a sense of alienation, and further deterioration of mental well-being.

Furthermore, the impact of anxiety and depression extends into students' long-term development. Chronic mental health problems during adolescence are linked to a higher risk of substance abuse, early dropout from school, and the development of mental health issues in adulthood. If left unaddressed, anxiety and depression in students can contribute to a cycle of poor academic and social outcomes that may persist well into adulthood, making it harder for individuals to succeed in their careers and personal lives.

Given the significant impact of anxiety and depression on students' academic, social, and personal development, it is crucial to explore and implement effective interventions that can mitigate these effects. Addressing mental health early, within the school environment, not only helps improve students' emotional well-being but also fosters better academic outcomes and healthier social relationships. In this context, integrating physical education programs that focus on mental health promotion can play a key role in supporting students' overall development by providing a holistic approach to well-being.

THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN MENTAL HEALTH:

Physical education (PE) is traditionally focused on promoting physical fitness, but recent research underscores its significant role in enhancing mental well-being. As anxiety and depression become increasingly prevalent among students, PE programs provide a unique and accessible opportunity to mitigate these issues. The integration of physical activity within the school environment not only promotes physical health but also fosters emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Below, we explore how physical education contributes to mental health by examining the physiological, psychological, social, and developmental benefits of physical activity.

PHYSIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF MENTAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT:

Physical activity has powerful physiological effects that directly contribute to mental health improvements. Exercise triggers the release of neurotransmitters like endorphins, which are chemicals in the brain that promote feelings of happiness and relaxation. These "feel-good" hormones are often referred to as the body's natural mood enhancers and play a crucial role in combating the feelings of sadness, worry, and hopelessness associated with depression and anxiety. Additionally, physical activity has been shown to reduce the levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety when present in high levels. Elevated cortisol, which is commonly linked to chronic stress, can increase feelings of nervousness and panic, but regular exercise helps regulate cortisol production, fostering a calmer state of mind.

Moreover, exercise stimulates the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that supports the growth of new neurons and improves brain function. BDNF is vital for neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. This process plays a significant role in enhancing cognitive function and emotional regulation, both of which can be impaired in students experiencing anxiety and depression. Increased levels of BDNF may also help reduce the long-term effects of stress and trauma by supporting the repair and growth of brain cells, which is critical for emotional resilience.

Additionally, physical exercise improves cardiovascular health, which has been linked to better overall brain function and mood regulation. When students engage in cardiovascular exercise, like running or swimming, they boost blood flow to the brain, which can help improve concentration, alertness, and emotional control, all of which are often compromised in individuals suffering from anxiety and depression.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF EXERCISE:

Beyond the physiological effects, physical education provides a range of psychological benefits that directly address the symptoms of mental health conditions. For students suffering from anxiety, physical activity can serve as a distraction from negative thought patterns and excessive worry. Engaging in physical exercise shifts students' focus from stressors, academic pressures, or personal insecurities to the activity itself, which helps reduce rumination and promotes a more relaxed state of mind. Exercise serves as a mental break, offering students a way to reset and manage overwhelming emotions.

Physical education also plays a critical role in enhancing self-esteem and body image. Adolescence is a period where body image issues are particularly prominent, and both anxiety and depression are frequently linked to negative perceptions of oneself. Regular physical activity helps students improve their physical fitness, which in turn boosts their confidence and self-worth. When students achieve fitness goals-whether it's improving their strength, endurance, or flexibility-they experience a sense of accomplishment and personal growth. This, in turn, can help counteract feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness, which are often at the core of depression.

Moreover, students who are involved in physical activities report higher levels of self-efficacy, or the belief in their ability to succeed and overcome challenges. By setting and achieving physical goals, students gain a sense of control and empowerment, which is critical for improving emotional resilience. This increased self-efficacy can extend beyond the gymnasium or sports field, positively influencing students' ability to manage stress and navigate academic and social challenges.

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND SUPPORT:

A significant but often overlooked benefit of physical education is its ability to foster social interaction and create supportive social networks, which are crucial for mental well-being. Adolescents often struggle with social anxiety and feelings of isolation, particularly those who suffer from mental health issues. PE provides a structured environment where students can engage in cooperative and team-based activities that promote collaboration, communication, and positive peer interactions.

Through activities like team sports, group exercises, and cooperative games, students have the opportunity to build friendships, practice teamwork, and develop their social skills. Positive peer relationships can act as a protective factor against mental health issues, reducing feelings of

loneliness and providing students with a sense of belonging and connection. Having strong social support networks has been shown to reduce the negative impacts of stress and can buffer the effects of anxiety and depression.

Importantly, PE can help students with social anxiety or introverted tendencies feel more comfortable interacting with their peers. Many students who experience anxiety or depression find social situations challenging, and PE provides a low-pressure setting in which students can gradually increase their comfort with social interactions. For instance, team sports encourage collaboration and can foster a sense of shared purpose, helping students form deeper connections with their peers. Additionally, activities like yoga or group fitness classes can create a sense of camaraderie, making students feel less isolated in their struggles.

ROUTINE AND STRUCTURE:

Establishing a regular routine is essential for students facing mental health challenges, and PE can provide the structure they need to maintain consistency in their lives. Students with anxiety or depression often experience disruptions in their daily routines, including irregular sleep patterns, poor eating habits, and fluctuating motivation. Physical education offers a predictable and structured environment that helps students incorporate physical activity into their daily lives, contributing to a sense of stability and routine.

Incorporating exercise into a regular routine not only improves physical fitness but also helps regulate other important aspects of mental health, such as sleep. Exercise has been shown to improve sleep quality and duration by promoting the production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for regulating sleep cycles. Better sleep quality has a direct impact on reducing anxiety, depression, and irritability. Moreover, students who maintain a routine of physical activity are better equipped to manage the stress and pressures associated with school life, making it easier for them to stay focused, motivated, and emotionally balanced.

STRESS REDUCTION AND COPING SKILLS:

One of the most critical benefits of physical education is its role in teaching students how to manage stress and develop effective coping skills. Exercise, particularly aerobic activity, is a proven method for reducing physiological stress responses, such as elevated heart rate and tension. As students engage in physical activity, they learn to regulate their physical responses to stress, which helps them develop healthier ways of managing anxiety-provoking situations. The physical exertion required in exercise teaches students how to push through discomfort, building resilience and emotional endurance.

In addition, PE can serve as a platform for introducing students to mindfulness practices such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga. These practices are particularly effective in managing anxiety and promoting mental relaxation. Activities like yoga and tai chi, which combine gentle movement with breathing exercises, are particularly beneficial for students dealing with anxiety. By integrating such mindfulness techniques into PE classes, schools can equip students with tools to regulate their emotions, calm their minds, and improve their ability to cope with stress.

LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS:

The benefits of physical education extend well beyond the school years, helping students develop lifelong habits that contribute to long-term mental well-being. Consistent physical activity, established through PE, has been linked to a lower risk of developing mental health disorders in adulthood. Studies show that students who engage in regular physical activity are less likely to experience anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues later in life.

Furthermore, the habits developed in adolescence—such as regular exercise, healthy coping mechanisms, and a positive attitude toward self-care—can help students better manage the challenges they will face in adulthood. By promoting physical education programs that focus on mental health, schools can help students build emotional resilience, self-regulation skills, and a proactive approach to managing stress that will benefit them for years to come.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE SUPPORTING PHYSICAL EDUCATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH:

A growing body of empirical research consistently underscores the significant mental health benefits of physical education (PE) and physical activity, particularly in addressing anxiety and depression, which are prevalent among students. Numerous studies have shown that regular participation in physical activity not only enhances physical fitness but also plays a crucial role in improving mood, reducing stress, and promoting psychological well-being.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence comes from a meta-analysis published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2018), which examined the effects of physical activity on mental health. The study found that physical exercise was associated with significant reductions in symptoms of depression and anxiety. After analyzing data from more than 90,000 individuals, the researchers concluded that physical activity had a moderate to large effect in alleviating symptoms of both conditions. This finding is supported by a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Wipfli et al. (2011), published in *Psychological Bulletin*, which revealed that physical exercise was one of the most effective interventions for reducing anxiety, with improvements in anxiety symptoms of up to 20%. These large-scale studies suggest that incorporating physical activity into everyday life—particularly through PE programs—offers a viable, accessible, and cost-effective intervention for improving the mental health of students.

Further supporting the benefits of physical activity in managing mental health, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) by Rethorst et al. (2013), published in *Journal of Adolescent Health*, focused on adolescents and found that structured exercise programs led to significant improvements in both anxiety and depression symptoms. This study followed a group of adolescents who participated in a 12-week exercise program and found measurable reductions in their anxiety levels and depressive symptoms. Importantly, the study showed that even moderate-intensity exercise, such as walking or light jogging, had a positive effect on mental health, highlighting the ease with which PE programs can be designed to benefit students without requiring intensive athletic training.

In addition to reducing anxiety and depression, physical activity has been shown to improve various psychological and emotional factors, such as self-esteem and emotional regulation. A study conducted by Fox et al. (2013) and published in *The Journal of School Health* explored the relationship between regular physical activity and self-esteem in students. The study revealed that students who engaged in regular PE activities showed significant improvements in both self-esteem and body image. This is especially relevant for adolescents, who often struggle with body image concerns and low self-esteem, both of which can contribute to mental health challenges like depression and anxiety. The sense of accomplishment and improvement in physical fitness gained through physical activity directly correlated with enhanced perceptions of self-worth.

Additionally, research by Salmon (2001), published in *Psychological Medicine*, highlighted that physical exercise helps improve emotional regulation by mitigating negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety. The study found that regular physical activity led to increased feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and was linked with a more stable emotional state. This suggests that physical education not only helps students manage stress but also enhances their ability to regulate emotions in challenging situations, which can improve overall mental resilience. The broader impact of physical education on students' mental health also includes benefits to their cognitive function and social interactions. Research has shown that exercise can improve concentration, memory, and overall cognitive performance—areas that are often negatively affected by anxiety and depression. Furthermore, PE provides opportunities for students to engage in social interactions, which can counteract the feelings of isolation and loneliness that often accompany mental health struggles. Engaging in team sports or group activities fosters social cohesion, promotes positive peer relationships, and helps students develop critical social skills, which are vital for maintaining emotional well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the growing body of evidence supporting the positive impact of physical education (PE) on students' mental health, it is crucial for schools to recognize the value of integrating physical activity into the daily lives of students, not just for physical health but also for psychological and

emotional well-being. One of the primary recommendations is for schools to increase the frequency and variety of PE programs, ensuring that students are given regular opportunities to engage in physical activities that can help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. This could involve expanding PE classes beyond the traditional sports and fitness routines to include activities like yoga, mindfulness-based exercises, and team-building activities, all of which have been shown to help improve emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of community.

It is also important for educators and policymakers to create a supportive and inclusive environment where physical activity is not seen as a competitive or high-pressure activity but as a tool for personal well-being. PE programs should be designed to be accessible to students of all fitness levels, encouraging participation from those who may feel excluded or intimidated by traditional athletic pursuits. This inclusivity can be achieved by providing a variety of activities that allow students to choose what best suits their interests and abilities, whether it's dancing, swimming, hiking, or simply walking. Creating a non-judgmental, supportive environment in PE classes can help reduce the stigma often associated with physical activity and mental health struggles.

Moreover, it is essential for schools to emphasize the connection between physical activity and mental health within the curriculum. Educating students about the mental health benefits of exercise can empower them to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines outside of school hours. Schools can organize awareness campaigns, workshops, or class discussions that highlight how exercise helps improve mood, boost self-esteem, and alleviate symptoms of stress and anxiety. By raising awareness of these benefits, schools can encourage a culture of physical activity that supports mental well-being across the school community.

Another important recommendation is to train teachers and school staff in recognizing the signs of mental health issues and understanding how physical activity can serve as an intervention. PE teachers, in particular, can play a pivotal role in identifying students who may be struggling with anxiety or depression and providing them with appropriate support. This could involve incorporating brief mental health screenings or check-ins into PE classes, where students are given the opportunity to discuss their emotional state in a safe, supportive setting. Teachers can also be trained to integrate mental health support into their PE lessons, making sure that students feel emotionally supported in addition to being physically challenged.

Finally, it is important for schools to collaborate with mental health professionals, psychologists, and counselors to develop a holistic approach to student well-being. Integrating mental health education into PE and wellness programs can help create a comprehensive system of support for students. This collaboration can lead to the development of programs that specifically target the mental health needs of students, combining physical activity with counseling, stress management techniques, and social support networks. Schools should also consider offering after-school programs that allow students to engage in physical activities in a more relaxed setting, further enhancing their mental health while promoting physical fitness.

Ultimately, fostering a school environment where physical activity is prioritized as an integral part of student well-being, alongside academic achievement, can significantly reduce the burden of mental health issues like anxiety and depression. By recognizing the mental health benefits of PE and creating an inclusive, supportive, and informed school culture, we can help equip students with the tools they need to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. These changes not only benefit individual students but also contribute to building a healthier, more resilient generation.

CONCLUSION

The growing concerns around anxiety and depression among students highlight the urgent need for schools to adopt effective strategies to support students' mental health. While physical education (PE) is traditionally associated with promoting physical health, emerging evidence underscores its vital role in enhancing students' mental well-being. Research consistently demonstrates that physical activity can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve emotional regulation, boost self-esteem, and foster better social connections. These benefits are crucial in helping students cope with the pressures and challenges they face in today's fast-paced, often stressful educational environments.

By integrating physical activity into the school curriculum and creating a supportive, inclusive environment, schools can provide students with an accessible and effective means of managing stress and maintaining their mental health. PE programs should be designed not just to improve physical fitness, but to emphasize the psychological and emotional benefits of exercise, helping students build resilience and emotional stability. A well-rounded approach that includes both physical and mental health education can empower students to develop healthier coping mechanisms and improve their overall quality of life.

The key to success lies in fostering a school culture that prioritizes both physical and mental well-being. Educators, school staff, and policymakers must recognize the strong link between physical activity and mental health, incorporating this understanding into PE programs, daily routines, and school policies. Additionally, providing mental health education and training for teachers will help them identify students in need of support, allowing for timely interventions. Collaboration with mental health professionals can further enhance the effectiveness of PE programs, creating a holistic approach to student well-being.

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How to cite this article:

Tomar R. (2019): The Role of Physical Education in Reducing Anxiety and Depression among Students. *Annals of Education*, Vol. 5[3]: September, 2019: 36-43.