



## Media Release - 18 June 2024 - ExerciseNZ

### Boosting Mental Health: Exercise Proves a Powerful Mental Health Tool

As we observe World Men's Mental Health Month this June, the spotlight turns to the mental wellbeing of men in Aotearoa. National statistics reveal that one in eight men will experience depression and one in five will face anxiety at some point in their lives, making it more critical than ever to address these issues. Alarming, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young men under 25, and Aotearoa has one of the highest youth suicide rates globally. Overall, men are three to four times more likely to die by suicide than women.

A [recent comprehensive study from the British Journal of Sports Medicine](#) provides compelling evidence on the benefits of exercise for improving mental health outcomes. Key findings show that exercise has been shown to be the most effective intervention for improving three key branches that contribute to mental health and wellbeing: 1) Depression, 2) Anxiety, and 3) Psychological Distress.

1. **Depression:** Physical activity helps reduce symptoms of depression. Exercise increases the production of endorphins and serotonin, chemicals in the brain that improve mood and promote a sense of wellbeing. Regular physical activity can also help reduce feelings of hopelessness and fatigue, commonly associated with depression.
2. **Anxiety:** Regular exercise alleviates anxiety symptoms. Engaging in physical activity helps lower the body's stress hormones, such as cortisol, and triggers the release of endorphins, which act as natural painkillers and mood elevators. Exercise also promotes better sleep and can help alleviate the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as muscle tension.
3. **Psychological Distress:** Exercise significantly reduces psychological distress. Physical activity can serve as a healthy distraction, helping to break the cycle of negative thoughts that feed psychological distress. It also provides a sense of accomplishment and can improve self-esteem and cognitive function, making it easier to cope with stress.

Given the robust evidence, physical activity and exercise should be integrated as a primary approach in managing depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Exercise New Zealand CEO Richard Beddie argues that "mental health has been neglected in Aotearoa for too long, with far too much emphasis on prescribing drugs, which has now been proven to be far less effective than exercise in the largest global study of its kind". Additionally, "we commend the Government on appointing a Minister of Mental Health. The challenge for the Minister will be making sure the focus is on addressing root causes and giving people real tools to help kiwis deal with life's challenges rather than just supporting the status quo of funding more drugs" says Beddie.