



## Media Release – 9 October 2024

### Exercise Benefits Mental Wellbeing At All Ages: Utilise Physical Activity & Exercise this World Mental Health Day

October 10 marks World Mental Health Day, a time to highlight and celebrate the importance of mental well-being. ExerciseNZ is emphasising the significant impact that regular physical activity has on mental health and overall wellness. Research has shown that exercise can often be more effective than medication or cognitive behavioural therapy for mild to moderate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. In what many regard as the definite meta analysis of interventions for mental health, the [British Journal of Sports Medicine](#) provides compelling evidence that exercise was shown to be the most effective intervention for depression, anxiety and stress, reinforcing that exercise is not only preventative and protective for mental health, but is an effective treatment tool too. Therefore, ExerciseNZ urges everyone in Aotearoa to incorporate regular physical activity into their lives as a proven method to enhance mental well-being.

In early childhood, activities involving risk—such as climbing, swinging, and jumping—are vital for developing mental resilience and confidence. However, many children face barriers to active play, including limited access to safe environments, parental safety concerns, and sedentary lifestyles. Research from Dartmouth College, published in [Science Daily](#), shows that engaging in physical activities significantly enhances children's ability to face challenges and recover from setbacks, building essential components of good mental health. Allowing children to test their limits not only develops physical skills but also improves their resilience for future challenges.

In young adulthood, individuals often encounter stressors such as academic pressure, job-related anxieties, and relationship challenges, which can increase feelings of anxiety and depression. Regular physical activity, especially resistance exercise training (RET), can significantly improve mental health. A study in [Psychiatry Research](#) found that RET, aligned with [WHO](#) and [ACSM](#) guidelines, led to substantial reductions in depressive symptoms among young adults. Participants in an eight-week RET program experienced clinically meaningful mood improvements within weeks. Regular exercise not only mitigates stress but also fosters a sense of accomplishment and boosts self-esteem, countering mental health challenges during this life stage.

As individuals enter middle age, they face significant life transitions—career changes, parenting challenges, and concerns about ageing—that can contribute to mental health

struggles. Research published in [International Psychogeriatrics](#) indicates that regular physical activity enhances mental health resilience (MHR). Those who maintain an active lifestyle report better physical performance and overall well-being, equipping them to handle midlife stressors. Exercise serves as a protective factor against declining mental health, providing physical and psychological benefits that help navigate these challenges.

Furthermore, in older adulthood unique challenges such as health concerns, social isolation, and loss can negatively impact mental well-being. Many elderly individuals struggle with daily physical activities, leading to decreased quality of life. A study in [Current Clinical and Medical Education](#) highlighted a significant link between health-related quality of life and the ability to perform daily physical activities. Despite these challenges, regular exercise is essential for improving mental health in older adults. Maintaining a routine of daily activities is crucial; only about 5% of individuals aged 65 and older require institutional care. Engaging in regular exercise enhances mood, cognitive function, and social connections, alleviating feelings of loneliness and depression. By promoting physical activity and overcoming societal barriers, older adults can significantly improve their mental well-being as they age.

*ExerciseNZ urges everyone to take a proactive approach to mental health by incorporating regular physical activity into their daily lives. By recognising the critical benefits of exercise for mental well-being at all ages, we can foster a healthier, more resilient Aotearoa. For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Richard Beddie at [richard@exercisenz.org.nz](mailto:richard@exercisenz.org.nz) or call 0800 66 88 11 or 027-520-5744.*