



What activities have the best health outcomes?

Lucy Ramasawmy

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Abstract

We all know that we feel good after doing something engaging and fulfilling. This briefing looks at the evidence for which kinds of activities have the best outcomes for our physical and mental health. Psychology and personal accounts from people who engage in different activities show that the best activities involve some key elements: they are challenging and absorbing; they give us a chance to express ourselves and be creative, they allow us to interact with the natural world; and they help us engage with other people. Doing activities in a group is likely to be better for you than doing them alone, but every person is different and in running activities we need to cater for people who prefer quiet and solitude as well as people who are more outgoing. In fact, how activities are run and who we do them with can be as important as what we're doing.

Keywords

Activities, hobbies, mental health, wellbeing, nature, exercise

Key points

- Benefits of hobbies are many and varied and include: personal fulfilment through self-expression and creativity, and positive feelings generated by absorption in a rewarding task; relief from pain and anxiety; meeting people and sharing a sense of purpose; improvements in physical health, and learning practical skills which enhance everyday life.
- Physical activities in a group are likely to have better health outcomes than doing them alone.
- How activities are run and how they fit into people's lives is important to health outcomes.

This briefing looks at how engaging in hobbies and activities can impact on our health and wellbeing. The first half of the briefing examines what it is that makes an activity likely to have good outcomes for us. The second half suggests some activities that combine a number of positive elements and looks at examples of successful activity projects involving these activities.

Health benefits may be physical or mental or both. Indeed, much of recent research encompasses both in measuring outcomes in terms of 'wellbeing'. Attempts have been made to set up controlled trials (RCTs) to generate robust evidence on the benefits of various activities on health. This has been done both in relation to activity programmes (see, for example, Stuckey and Nobel,

2010) and ‘social prescribing’, in which doctors prescribe social, rather than more traditional medical, remedies for health problems (Bickerdike et al., 2017). RCTs in this area have been found problematic, however, and have often failed to show any significant differences in outcomes. The lack of research data is not surprising, as the activities individuals want to do, and will enjoy, depends on their personal characteristics; their likes and dislikes. How you experience an activity also depends on who you do it with, as well as where and when you do it. It is much more straight-forward to measure the physical health benefits of exercise in a random controlled trial than it is to test whether, for example, singing in a choir has significant effects on mental health, due to its subjective nature. Therefore, you cannot allocate people randomly to hobbies and expect everyone to have the same experience and outcomes. Similarly, you cannot run activities that are ‘the same’ in different places, run by different organisations, with different social groups. Finding evidence that activities are good for you requires a different approach, such as using knowledge from psychological theory to look at the effects of different activities and environments on individuals (Stevenson and McNamara, 2019), or interviewing people participating in activities about their experiences (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010; What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2017).

So, what is it that makes engaging in an activity or hobby a positive experience? There are a number of key elements that can be identified in activities that do us good. These include: spending time totally absorbed in something that is fulfilling and perhaps challenging, finding a vehicle for expressing

personal emotions and identity; being outdoors and experiencing the natural environment. Furthermore, mentally, activities may provide calm and focus through an environment that provides an escape from worrying issues and anxiety. Physically, being active is clearly linked to good outcomes in terms of physical health. Finally, sharing an activity with a group of people who you can identify and engage with may be the most positive part of your experience of group activities, particularly when the group, and the way it is run, work well for those involved. The next section looks at these aspects in turn.

Flow

In the 1990s, Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihaly had the idea of testing people’s experience of different activities using ‘the experience sampling method’. Participants were given a pager which beeped at regular intervals throughout the day and asked to record what they were doing at each moment it beeped, and how much they are enjoying it. Csikszentmihaly found that many people felt happiest doing activities which required total focus, were demanding on their abilities, and in which they received continuous feedback of their progress. Csikszentmihaly named the mental state achieved ‘flow’. We can experience flow doing activities like sports, creative arts and music performance. (Csikszentmihaly, 1990, in Haidt, 2006).

Personal expression

Research also highlights the mental health benefits of activities that enable self-expression, particularly where participants have been through negative

experiences. In this context, participating in groups who share similar experiences is beneficial (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010).

Being outdoors in the natural world

Being outdoors in the natural world is well-established as having a positive effect on our mental state. Physical outdoor activities also of course have the benefit of providing exercise, but beyond this, psychologists suggest that we have an innate need to engage with the natural environment. Two theories have been proposed to explain this. Attention restoration theory (Bell et al., 2015) proposes that we have a natural fascination for nature, and therefore easily become absorbed in outdoor activities. They similarly suggest that activities in an outdoor natural environment are beneficial since they remove us from the concerns of the complexities and demands of normal daily life and that the natural world provides us with a sense of connection with the larger world. Furthermore, Psycho-physiological stress reduction theory (Ulrich in Chatworthy et al., 2013), argues that the natural world has a calming effect on us, reducing stress through a parasympathetic nervous system response. Particular natural environments may be associated with positive experiences for different people, for example, coasts or woodland may be associated with positive personal experiences in the past.

Calm

In apparent contrast to the exhilaration or fulfilment of flow and energetic engagement in activity, positive

outcomes may result from activities that provide calm and an escape from the demands and pressures of everyday life (e.g. Chatworthy et al., 2013)

How activities are run

A review of outcomes of physical and dance activities with young people by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2017) highlights the importance of how activities are run. They conclude that the context and organisation of an activity influence its effectiveness in generating positive feelings and social connectedness.

Whether activities are engaged in as part of a group or individually has been shown to have implications for their impact on health outcomes. There is strong evidence that group physical exercise is more likely to be associated with positive health outcomes than exercising alone (Radcliffe, 2017; Steinhilber, 2017). This conclusion has similarly been noted in relation to other activities. For example, a Japanese study with middle-aged men showed better outcomes on mental health for men participating in cultural activities in groups, as opposed to on their own. However, the same result was not found among women (Takeda et al., 2015). More generally, participants in activities involving 'flow' have been shown to describe their experience more positively afterwards when done as a group (Walker, 2010).

The benefits of solo versus group activities raise other issues. Individual people vary on a spectrum from the highly gregarious and outgoing, to extreme introverts. Some mental and neurological health problems, such as social anxiety or autism, also inhibit

group engagement. If we want to be inclusive in enabling everyone to take part in activities, we need to offer the option of one-to-one support in activities, as well as group options.

A second, critical, consideration in setting up group activities is the mix of people in the group and inter-personal relationships generated. Peer-support and developing an atmosphere conducive to feelings of competency among participants are highlighted in findings from a number of researchers, to increase the likelihood positive health and wellbeing outcomes (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010; What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2017). This is particularly relevant for people in vulnerable groups or who have mental or physical health issues that restrict activity.

Activities may be most effective in providing positive health outcomes when they are targeted at people who are most likely to benefit from them. For example, tai chi was shown to improve 'ambulation' for elderly people. Research with cancer patients in hospital found that listening to music had the potential to provide pain relief, while creative art was found to help reduce anxiety and improve self-esteem (examples from Stuckey and Nobel, 2010)

A final consideration about group activities is that particular activities are likely to appeal to particular kinds of people. While singing in choirs is often cited as having positive outcomes for mental wellbeing, researchers also acknowledge that it is largely middle class older white women who participate (Coulton et al., 2015). This doesn't mean that choirs can't have good outcomes for other groups, but work would be required to access and engage with

people who might not naturally choose to participate.

Activities with positive outcomes

The best activities to pursue might then be those that combine several of the elements found to be associated with positive outcomes discussed above. Particularly successful projects include:

Gardening & woodcraft

Gardening and woodcraft combine being outside in the natural world, engaging with natural materials, physical exercise and the potential for 'flow' in activities which challenge participants to learn new skills and exert themselves physically. As TV gardener David Domoney points out, gardening also involves caring for something and "sometimes just the satisfaction of keeping a houseplant alive, and the responsibility that comes with it, is enough to give us a sense of purpose and pride" (Domoney, 2019). Two successful schemes in the UK have been targeted at people who are referred by mental health services. 'The Goodwood project' in Edinburgh (now closed) and 'The Sydenham Garden' in London, both involved a year of group sessions designed for learning and practising varied horticultural and woodcraft skills in a natural environment. A 'Sydenham Garden' volunteer says of the garden: "It's an oasis of calm. You can come here and, for however long you are here, the outside world stays outside" (Johnson, 2019).

Photography, art, writing & poetry

Photography, art, creative writing, journal writing and poetry enable self-expression

as well as allow people to develop skills and become absorbed in using them, offering potential for 'flow'. Learning and practising creative skills in groups and sharing creative output online also provide ongoing social engagement (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010; Brewster and Cox, 2019; What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2019).

Drama

Drama groups provide a context that's particularly conducive to social engagement and self-expression (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010). A project by Smashing Times called 'Acting for the Future' is based around the mental health benefits, using 'participative drama workshops, professional performances, and post-show panel discussions with counsellors and clinical psychologists to promote active healthy lifestyles, positive mental health, and suicide prevention (Moynihan et al., 2019).

Walking groups

Walking groups have positive physical and mental health outcomes for participants (Hanson and Jones, 2015).

Yoga & Baduanjin-qigong

Yoga and Baduanjin-qigong were found to improve 'feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, attention and overall subjective wellbeing among young people (What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2017).

Cooking or practical crafts

Cooking or practical crafts lessons provide social interaction as well as

education and inspiration in practical daily living activities (Horghagen et al., 2014; Hasan et al., 2019).

Reading groups

Reading groups in which a group of people, with a trained leader, read a novel, short story or poem aloud, and discuss it (see, for instance, thereader.org.uk).

Choirs & singing

Choirs and singing may be helpful for specific groups. For example, 'Melodies for mums', a project in London (Breathe Arts Health Research, 2019) involving singing and music-making for mothers with post-natal depression had demonstrable positive outcomes on participants' mental states.

Conclusion & recommendations

Psychological theory and research with group activity projects, identifies some key factors in those activities that have the best outcomes for mental and physical health. These factors include: being a vehicle for self-expression, being challenging and absorbing, allowing for progression and giving us continuous feedback about our success – that is giving us 'flow'; being outdoors and interacting with the natural world; and engaging with other people in a meaningful way. Activities that involve physical exercise are similarly likely to have good outcomes for physical health.

There is evidence that engaging in activities within a group can have better health outcomes than doing them alone, but to be fully inclusive we also need to provide for people who find group

participation problematic.

Group activities are most successful when participants get to know each other and support each other, so that they can build self-confidence and a sense of competency. There are a number of elements involved in making this happen. In setting up programmes for group activities, it is worth considering whether an activity would be best targeted at a particular group who seem most likely to benefit. Who runs the group, where it

happens and how it is organised are all going to affect the chance of generating a positive, supportive atmosphere and the best outcomes for everyone involved.

Organisations can harness the health benefits of activities within their projects. People Know How is one such organisation. Their Wellbeing Calls and Walking Befriending projects use indoor and outdoor activity to improve health and wellbeing in adults across Edinburgh.

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Contact People Know How

525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

contactus@peopleknowhow.org

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