

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER & EXERCISE

PUBLIC

WHAT IS POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

PTSD can develop after exposure to a potentially traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious injury or sexual assault. PTSD may occur after one traumatic event, or after repeated exposure to potentially traumatic events. Evidence from Australia suggests more than half the population will be exposed to a traumatic event, with around 12% developing PTSD [1]. However, occupations including first responders (e.g. fire, ambulance and police) and military personnel at high risk of developing PTSD [2].

Symptoms include nightmares or flashbacks, avoidance of people, places or things associated with the trauma, heightened reactivity, and changes in mood [3]. While PTSD is a recognised mental health condition, it also can impact someone's physical health including an increased risk of heart disease and diabetes.

WHY IS EXERCISE OR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IMPORTANT IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PTSD [4,5]

Regular physical activity in addition to usual care offers a number of benefits including:

- » Decreased symptoms of PTSD;
- » Improved sleep quality;
- » Improved quality of life;
- » Decreased risk of physical health comorbidities (e.g. diabetes).

WHAT TYPE OF EXERCISE OR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY MIGHT BE BENEFICIAL FOR PEOPLE WITH PTSD

Research shows that many types of exercise are beneficial for people with PTSD including mind-body exercises (yoga), aerobic, or resistance exercise. However, the best type is the one that you enjoy [5]. The amount of activity you should do really depends on your current activity levels, exercise and health history, and goals. The Australian Physical Activity Guidelines (Box 1) provide excellent guidance on recommended activity levels for people with PTSD.

Box 1: Australia's Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults

- » Accumulate 150-300 min of moderate intensity physical activity or 75-150 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity, or an equivalent combination of both moderate and vigorous activities each week

AND

- » Do muscle strengthening activities on at least 2 days each week

HOW DO I COMMENCE AN EXERCISE PROGRAM?

Talk to your treating specialist about an exercise program that suits your personal preferences and circumstances. It may help to see an Accredited Exercise Physiologist or Physiotherapist who have specialised training in the design and delivery of exercise programs for people experiencing mental health conditions including PTSD.





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RELATED INFORMATION AND REFERENCES

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au
Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

Find a Physiotherapist www.choose.physio
Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). Stress and trauma. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/stress-and-trauma>
2. Commonwealth of Australia The people behind 000: mental health of our first responders. The Senate Education and Employment References Committee. 2019.
3. Pheonix Australia. Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Complex PTSD. 2020.
4. Hegberg, N.J., J.P. Hayes, and S.M. Hayes, Exercise intervention in PTSD: A narrative review and rationale for implementation. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2019. 10(MAR): p. 133.
5. Rosenbaum, S., et al., Physical activity in the treatment of Post-traumatic stress disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychiatry Research*, 2015. 230(2): p. 130-136.