

Using running to escape everyday stresses may lead to exercise dependence instead of mental well-being

January 25 2023



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Recreational running offers a lot of physical and mental health benefits—but some people can develop exercise dependence, a form of

addiction to physical activity which can cause health issues. Shockingly, signs of exercise dependence are common even in recreational runners. A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* investigated whether the concept of escapism can help us understand the relationship between running, well-being, and exercise dependence.

"Escapism is an everyday phenomenon among humans, but little is known regarding its motivational underpinnings, how it affects experiences, and the [psychological outcomes](#) from it," said Dr. Frode Stenseng of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, lead author of the paper.

Running to explore or to evade?

"Escapism is often defined as 'an activity, a form of entertainment, etc. that helps you avoid or forget unpleasant or boring things.'" In other words, many of our [everyday activities](#) may be interpreted as escapism," said Stenseng. "The psychological reward from escapism is reduced [self-awareness](#), less rumination, and a relief from one's most pressing, or stressing, thoughts and emotions."

Escapism can restore perspective, or it can act as a distraction from problems that need to be tackled. Escapism which is adaptive, seeking out positive experiences, is referred to as self-expansion. Meanwhile maladaptive escapism, avoiding negative experiences, is called self-suppression. Effectively, running as exploration or as evasion.

"These two forms of escapism are stemming from two different mindsets, to promote a positive mood, or prevent a negative mood," said Stenseng.

Escapist activities used for self-expansion have more positive effects but also more long-term benefits. Self-suppression, by contrast, tends to

suppress positive feelings as well as negative ones and lead to avoidance.

Self-suppression associated with exercise dependence

The team recruited 227 [recreational runners](#), half men and half women, with widely varying running practices. They were asked to fill out questionnaires which investigated three different aspects of escapism and [exercise](#) dependence: an escapism scale which measured preference for self-expansion or self-suppression, an exercise dependence scale, and a satisfaction with life scale designed to measure the participants' subjective well-being.

The scientists found that there was very little overlap between runners who favored self-expansion and runners who preferred self-suppression modes of escapism. Self-expansion was positively related with well-being, while self-suppression was negatively related to well-being. Self-suppression and self-expansion were both linked to exercise dependence, but self-suppression was much more strongly linked to it. Neither escapism mode was linked to age, gender, or amount of time a person spent running, but both affected the relationship between well-being and exercise dependence. Whether or not a person fulfilled criteria for exercise dependence, a preference for self-expansion would still be linked to a more positive sense of their own well-being.

Although exercise dependence corrodes the potential well-being gains from exercise, it seems that perceiving lower well-being may be both a cause and an outcome of exercise dependency: the dependency might be driven by lower well-being as well as promoting it.

Similarly, experiencing positive self-expansion might be a psychological motive that promotes exercise dependence.

"More studies using longitudinal research designs are necessary to

unravel more of the motivational dynamics and outcomes in escapism," said Stenseng. "But these findings may enlighten people in understanding their own motivation, and be used for therapeutical reasons for individuals striving with a maladaptive engagement in their activity."

More information: Frode Stenseng et al, Running to Get "Lost"? Two Types of Escapism in Recreational Running and Their Relations to Exercise Dependence and Subjective Well-Being, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1035196](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1035196)

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: Using running to escape everyday stresses may lead to exercise dependence instead of mental well-being (2023, January 25) retrieved 4 May 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-everyday-stresses-mental-well-being.html>

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