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Recommended Citation

Shear, Debbie, "Working Out Your Emotions: The Effect of Physical Activity on Positive Emotion Regulation" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 118.

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WORKING OUT YOUR EMOTIONS: THE EFFECT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON POSITIVE EMOTION REGULATION

Debbie Shear

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Physical activity has been shown to promote psychological benefits, including both lowering negative affect (NA) and increasing positive affect (PA). While much research has been done to understand the relationship between physical activity and NA, there is little known about how the mechanisms of physical activity work to influence PA. Given that PA is essential for beneficial life outcomes and has important clinical applications, further work is necessary to explore the relationship between PA and physical activity to promote healthy behaviors. The current study aimed to assess whether physical activity increases PA through the improvement of pro-hedonic positive emotion regulation (PER), i.e., more upregulation and less downregulation of PA. Thus, the study focused on emotion regulation goals, or regulatory direction, to determine whether physical activity may motivate individuals to more frequently regulate in a way pro-hedonic direction, thereby increasing PA. Participants were randomly assigned to engage in low intensity activity (stretching; control) or high intensity activity (gym class; treatment), and completed a day reconstruction survey measuring affect and emotion regulation at each episode of that day. Activity level differences were used to predict differences in use of PER as well as overall positive affect levels. While overall upregulation of positive emotion was significantly correlated with greater levels of PA as expected ($r = 0.33, p < 0.01$), there were no significant group differences regarding the frequency of upregulation of PA ($t(76) = 0.86, p = 0.39$) between treatment and control conditions. Participants also exhibited no differences in overall levels of PA due to physical activity level, inconsistent with previous evidence ($t(86) = -0.58, p = 0.56$). Results suggest inconclusive evidence that positive emotion regulation may be influenced by physical activity. However, future research implementing controlled activity conditions and more nuanced assessment of positive emotion regulation is warranted.