

OSU research uncovers impact of leisure activities on mental health during pandemic

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As people have turned to hobbies like reading and outdoor recreation to fill their days during the COVID-19 pandemic, recent research from Oregon State University found that engagement in leisure activities can help lower the risk of depression and improve mental well-being.

“Leisure is so crucial to our mental health. Despite all the disruptions to daily life, physical distancing, movement restrictions and closures of indoor leisure facilities, we found that people continue to use leisure to help them cope with stress and as a way to navigate life during COVID-19,” said Xiangyou Shen, lead author on the study and an assistant professor in OSU’s College of Forestry.

For the study, researchers surveyed 503 participants from Feb. 3-15, 2021, a time when vaccines were slowly rolling out in the U.S. and before the delta and omicron variants had emerged in full force. They measured participant stress, depressive symptoms, general health and well-being, and asked participants to list their favorite leisure activity and how frequently they were able to engage in it.

They also asked participants how their engagement with that activity had changed since COVID, and how their current level of engagement compared with their ideal level.

The study sample was representative of the overall U.S. population in terms of gender, age, race and vaccination status.

Researchers grouped respondents' activities into 19 categories under three broad domains. Home-based offline activities were most popular, with 43.4% citing a favorite within this domain; then screen-based digital/online activities, with 32.1%; and lastly physical or outdoor activities, with 24.5%.

The study revealed a general increase in at-home activities like reading, writing, and computer or video games, but a decrease in most physical and outdoor activities, with the exception of walking and gardening.

On the mental health side, 24% of respondents reported major depressive symptoms, 13% reported severe or extremely severe stress, and 7% reported poor mental well-being.

The results showed that changes in engagement level compared with pre-COVID engagement, as well as the gap between respondents' current engagement in that activity and their ideal engagement, were significantly associated with mental health, more so than the frequency of their activities.

The results suggest that people lean more heavily into their preferred leisure activity in response to stress.

"We see that people who reported higher stress also reported increased engagement in their leisure activity. But if they were able to increase their engagement or maintain it, they did not report more depressive symptoms," Shen said. "It's OK if you experience higher stress, if you also maintain or adapt what you do in leisure time as a protective buffer. Failing to maintain or make adaptive changes, you are at higher risk for depression."

The key takeaway here is that leisure matters, said Megan MacDonald, co-author and an associate professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences.

"It's a reminder for all of us that it really is important to take time for yourself and make sure that you're engaging in those activities and don't beat yourself up for taking that time," she said. "We need rest and relaxation as well, but leisure and play can be more engaging and redirect in a different way, one that's helping us take a breath away from some of that other stress."

But the results also show that leisure is not equally accessible by all. For example, parents reported significantly lower leisure participation than non-parents. And this study found a much lower rate of engagement in outdoor activities than previous COVID leisure studies, raising questions about how accessible outdoor recreation is in different parts of the country and at different times of the year.

"This pandemic exposes some of the social problems we already have and the disparities in how much time people have for self-care," Shen said. "Parents, especially women, as caregivers who don't have enough child care support and are also working full-time — these people are among the most vulnerable."

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