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A systematic review of physical activity policy recommendations and interventions for people with mental health problems in Sub-Saharan African countries

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Abstract

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Introduction

There is a need for interventions to address the escalating mental health burden in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Implementation of physical activity (PA) within the rehabilitation of people with mental health problems (PMHP) could reduce the burden and facilitate recovery. The objective of the current review was to explore (1) the role of PA within mental health policies of SSA countries, and (2) the current research evidence for PA to improve mental health in SSA.

Methods

We screened the Mental Health Atlas and MiNDbank for mental health policies in SSA countries and searched PubMed for relevant studies on PA in PMHP in SSA.

Results

Sixty-nine percent (=33/48) of SSA countries have a dedicated mental health policy. Two of 22 screened mental health policies included broad physical activity recommendations. There is clear evidence for the role of PA in the prevention and rehabilitation of depression in SSA.

Conclusion

Despite the existing evidence, PA is largely a neglected rehabilitation modality in the mental health care systems of SSA. Continued education of existing staff, training of specialized professionals and integration of PA for mental health in public health awareness programs are needed to initiate and improve PA programs within the mental health care systems of SSA.

Keywords: Physical activity, exercise, mental health services, Sub-Sahara Africa



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