

Beyond Psychotherapy and Medication:

Wellness, Wellbeing and Fun
Interventions Should be Part
of Robust Systems of Care
for Youth and Young Adults



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March, 2023

In 2021, the Surgeon General released a [report](#) detailing the “devastating” impacts of mental health challenges on youth and young adults in the United States. In an [interview](#) this year, he characterized mental health as “the defining public health crisis of our time.” The [most recent statistics](#) from the federal government show that the percentages of adolescents and young adults experiencing mental health challenges continues to rise, with a majority of these young people not receiving any mental health treatment at all. What is more, many young people who do access treatment [drop out](#) before completing it. [Treatment drop-out rates among racial and ethnic minority young people](#) are particularly high.

Studies among [adolescents](#) and [young adults](#) have identified a range of factors that contribute to the mental health treatment gap. Key factors include difficulty accessing treatment—due to cost and/or availability—as well as fear of stigmatization and doubts about the effectiveness of treatment. More recently, young people’s access to mental health treatment has been further limited by the increasingly acute [shortage of mental health providers](#)—a situation that is unlikely to improve quickly.





Social Prescribing for Improving Mental Health

Amid these discouraging reports, one hopeful theme is the potential of interventions *other than* psychotherapy or medication to provide substantial mental health benefits. In particular, interventions that directly promote wellness and wellbeing include a range of activities that are likely to be attractive to young people, and that are *unlikely* to be perceived as stigmatizing or to have negative side effects. What is more, these kinds of interventions do not need to be delivered by mental health providers, so making them available will not put additional demands on the already overstretched workforce. [A promising approach called “social prescribing”](#) is being tried in the United Kingdom, with primary care health workers giving young people prescriptions to participate in [activities including surfing, roller skating, gardening and dance](#), with the aim of improving mental and physical health, wellbeing and social connectedness.

Evidence for the effectiveness of some of these interventions among youth and young adults is well developed. This is particularly true of interventions that promote different types of physical activity, which have been shown to have positive outcomes across a variety of mental health conditions. Other interventions have only limited evidence, evidence of effectiveness for only specific mental health conditions, and/or evidence only among a general population of adults. Regardless, the potential of these kinds of interventions to help address the mental health crisis among young people argues strongly for broader implementation and further research.

Studies on Specific Activities that Reduce Psychological Distress

Following are some examples of recent relevant studies. Most of these synthesize multiple research studies using systematic reviews or meta-analyses. Several are syntheses of multiple reviews/meta-analyses. Many of the studies are from highly influential journals.

A [2023 research review](#) synthesized existing research reviews examining the impacts of **increased physical activity** on depression, anxiety or other psychological distress among adults.



The review encompassed 1039 studies and more than 128,000 participants. Physical activity had medium effects on depression, anxiety and psychological distress as compared to usual care. All modes of physical activity were beneficial, including aerobic, resistance, mixed-mode exercise and yoga. The researchers call for exercise to be a mainstay approach for managing mental health difficulties, since, they argue, the study shows that physical activity is 1.5 times more effective than counselling or the leading medications.

Another research review from 2023 synthesized 21 studies involving 2441 adolescents and found that **physical activity interventions** were associated with a reduction in depressive symptoms compared with the control condition.

Physical activity interventions with promising findings among young adults included a wide variety of types of activities, for example, interventions promoting surfing, hiking and walking in the forest, dancing and yoga. There are dozens and dozens of other examples.



This 2021 systematic review synthesized studies on “behavioral activation” among young people aged 14-24. Behavioral activation is defined as **participation in pleasurable activities, including those that are personally meaningful and valued.** The review found “promising but limited evidence.” The review also included information from qualitative studies among young people with lived experience, showing that young people preferred these kinds of strategies to manage their mental health.

A 2022 study used a phone app to train young adults in **deep breathing.** After four weeks, the young people who practiced deep breathing experienced improved cognition and decreased stress as compared with young people in the control condition.

A 2023 randomized study found 5 minutes per day spent in **breathing exercises or mindful meditation** produced significant improvements in positive affect and reductions in anxiety and negative affect among participants. One particular type of breathing exercise, cyclic sighing, produced the largest impacts.





This [2021 review of systematic reviews](#) describes the evidence for positive outcomes from **meditation** interventions, including mental health outcomes specifically.

A [2019 systematic review focused on post-secondary students](#) and examined the impacts of **meditation, yoga and mindfulness** interventions on depression, anxiety and stress. The analysis found moderate effects; however, these decreased among studies that used an active control condition.

This [2021 scoping review](#) synthesized research on the effects of **engagement in the arts** on depression and anxiety among young people aged 14-24. The review found preliminary evidence on the positive impact of arts engagement on mental health.

A [systematic review and meta-analysis from 2022](#) finds evidence for “significant impacts” and clinically meaningful improvements among adults participating in a variety of **music interventions**.



An [integrative review and meta-analysis](#) concluded that **dancing interventions**—including tango, salsa, ballroom and ngoma—significantly reduced depression symptoms, stress, and anxiety among adults.

Suggested citation

Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures. (2023). *Beyond Psychotherapy and Medication: Wellness, Wellbeing and Fun Interventions Should be Part of Robust Systems of Care for Youth and Young Adults*. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.



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