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# Older people who exercise have better mental health

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# Older people who exercise have better mental health

## **Abstract**

People with higher levels of physical activity report enhanced mental health (Law et al. 2014). In contrast, low levels of exercise can in turn lead to waning of physical and mental health, along with a decreased social network, as sedentary behaviours become the norm (Valencia, Stoutenberg & Florez, 2014). This is particularly so in older people.

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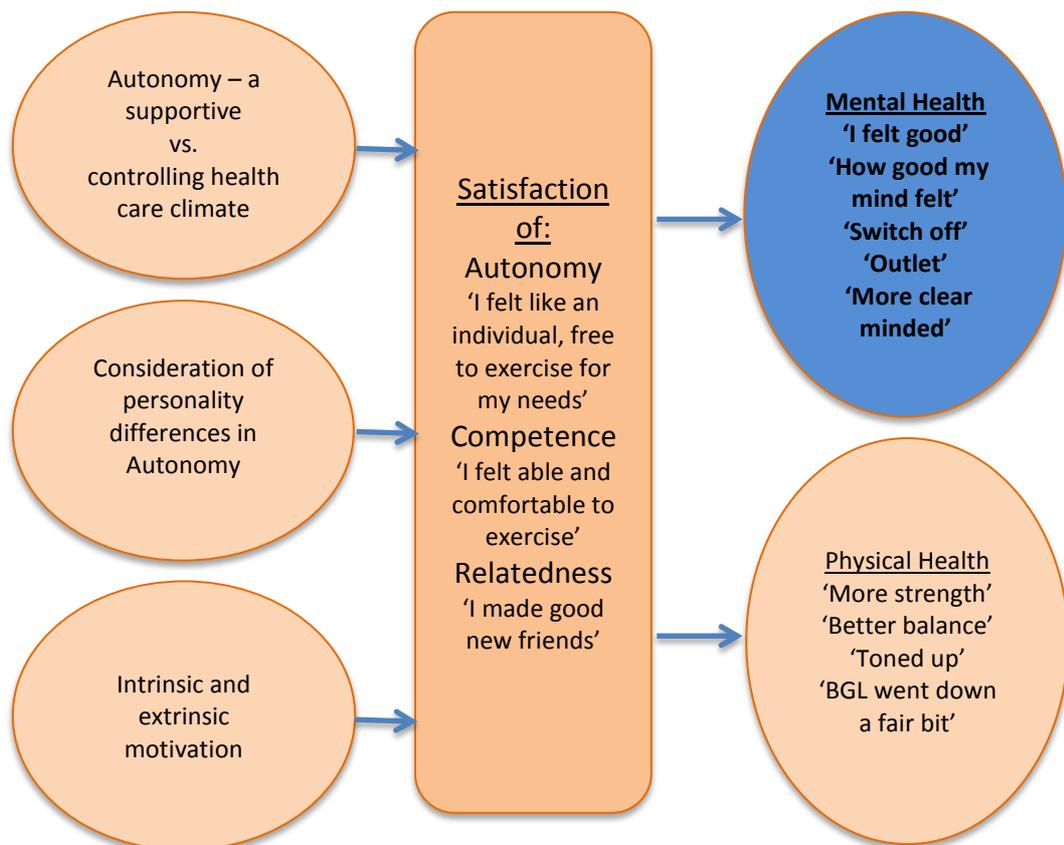
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### **Older people who exercise have better mental health**

People with higher levels of physical activity report enhanced mental health (Law et al. 2014). In contrast, low levels of exercise can in turn lead to waning of physical and mental health, along with a decreased social network, as sedentary behaviours become the norm (Valencia, Stoutenberg & Florez 2014). This is particularly so in older people. From the lead authors research, it becomes apparent that how we engage older people with diabetes into exercise programs becomes even more of a challenge. But how do we encourage this engagement in exercise as health professionals, to enhance mental health in our older population, especially those with chronic illnesses?

When the older person's autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported and promoted within an exercise program, psychological needs in people are met. Autonomy encompasses having control and choice. Competence comprises the older person feeling capable about doing something. Relatedness embodies feeling connected to and supported by others. Once met, individuals are then more motivated to initiate and maintain health behaviours. van Stralen et al. (2009) argue that realising one's potential for improved mental, and physical, outcomes enhances maintenance of exercise and commitment to a group within a program. Ryan et al. (2008) propose that when these three aspects are met, subsequent improved mental health is supported. Participants in the lead authors research supported this with comments around exercising in an exercise and health promotion program, such as, *'it got me out of the house, and that was a good thing'* and *'I felt better about myself when I was exercising'*.

How autonomy, competence and relatedness contribute to a more positive and enhanced mental health when older people are exercising is summarised in Figure 1 below. Participant quotes from the lead authors research are included.



As health professionals we have a responsibility to promote and support motivation in older people to initiate and maintain health related behaviours. This is possible by engendering a sense of autonomy, and competence so that health related behaviours and actions are internalised, prompting self-regulation and sustainability of those behaviours (Ryan et al. 2008). These, along with relatedness, are core psychological needs that must be met. When met, it is purported that commitment to exercise occurs; thereby contributing to improved mental health.

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