Aug 18th, 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM

Outdoor Physical Activity and Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

- About 25% of US adults have a mental illness. The economic demand that treatment for mental illness involves is extensive. Since mental illness often involves a myriad of potential causes and stressors, treatment is not straightforward and differs from person to person.
- There has been recent awareness and evidence is growing in the effect of exposure to an outdoor environment on mental health. Researchers suggest that there may be some additional benefits of physical activity performed outdoors that can be used as an intervention for improving mental health.
- Several narrative reviews have been published in which the benefits of exercising outside are summarized. However, the specific incorporation of this into an inpatient psychiatric setting and any additional advantages attributable to allowing these patients to spend time outdoors remain unclear.

METHODOLOGY

The design for this manuscript is an integrative literature review that is aimed to investigate and evaluate research on outdoor physical activity and mental health status. The literature review was conducted using a framework which includes four stages of review including problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, and data analysis. An extensive review of literature on the topics of outdoor physical activity and mental health was conducted in order to see if there is a relationship between the two.

- The literature search for the research topic was found using the databases of CINAHL Complete, PubMed, and ProQuest Sociology. The search terms used for research included: physical activity, mental health, indoor, and outdoor. The results were narrowed to include those written between the years 2011 and 2017. The majority of journals came from disciplines including nursing, psychology, environmental science, and public health. Significant information was found to conduct the analysis.

PURPOSE

Addressing the relationship between outdoor physical activity and mental health is imperative because the benefits of outdoor physical activity need to be explored as a possible intervention to aid in treatment of psychiatric disorders. As a non-pharmacological intervention, this is something that is incredibly relevant to nursing practice and its incorporation into a patient’s plan of care could potentially make a difference in their outcome and achievement of overall treatment goals.

DISCUSSION

- A study in Barcelona, Spain showed that neighborhood green space was associated with better mental health.
- Repeated physical activity in a natural setting as opposed to a built location seems to have added health benefits for subjective health. This connection was seen even when general activity level and unusual life events were controlled for.
- The availability of a park or playground was significantly associated with positive mental health in a study conducted on the mental well being of older adults. These settings have been linked to recovery from mental fatigue, stress reduction, and neighborhood social cohesion.
- Children who spend more time outdoors are more physically active and display greater psychosocial health.
- The very act of walking has strong support in the literature for its benefits on mental health.
- Being in a green space is associated with better general and mental health across different degrees of urbanization, socioeconomic status, and gender.

RESULTS

The results of the integrative review suggest a positive association between mental health and outdoor physical activity.