

WELL | MOVE

Get Up and Move. It May Make You Happier.

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By GRETCHEN REYNOLDS JAN. 25, 2017

When people get up and move, even a little, they tend to be happier than when they are still, according to an interesting new study that used cellphone data to track activities and moods. In general, the researchers found, people who move are more content than people who sit.

There already is considerable evidence that physical activity is linked to psychological health. Epidemiological studies have found, for example, that people who exercise or otherwise are active typically are less prone to depression and anxiety than sedentary people.

But many of these studies focused only on negative moods. They often also relied on people recalling how they had felt and how much they had moved or sat in the previous week or month, with little objective data to support these recollections.

For the new study, which was published this month in PLoS One, researchers at the University of Cambridge in England decided to try a different approach. They would look, they decided, at correlations between movement and happiness, that most positive of emotions. In addition, they would look at what people reported about their activity and compare it with objective measures of movement.

To accomplish these goals, they first developed a special app for Android phones. Available free on the Google app store and ultimately downloaded by more than 10,000 men and women, it was advertised as helping people to understand how lifestyle choices, such as physical activity, might affect people's moods. (The app, which is no longer available for download, opened with a permission form explaining to people that the data they entered would be used for academic research.)

The app randomly sent requests to people throughout the day, asking them to enter an estimation of their current mood by answering questions and also using grids in which they would place a dot showing whether they felt more stressed or relaxed, depressed or excited, and so on.

Periodically, people were also asked to assess their satisfaction with life in general.

After a few weeks, when people were comfortable with the app, they began answering additional questions about whether, in the past 15 minutes, they had been sitting, standing, walking, running, lying down or doing something else.

They also were asked about their mood at that moment.

At the same time, during the 17 months of the study, the app gathered data from the activity monitor that is built into almost every smartphone today. In essence, it checked whether someone's recall of how much he or she had been moving in the past quarter-hour tallied with the numbers from the activity monitor.

In general, the information provided by users and the data from activity monitors was almost exactly the same.

Of greater interest to the researchers, people using the app turned out to feel happier when they had been moving in the past quarter-hour than when they had been sitting or lying down, even though most of the time they were not engaged in rigorous activity.

In fact, most of the physical activity that people reported was gentle walking, with little running, cycling or other more strenuous exercise.

But the links between moving in any way and feeling happy were consistent for most people throughout the day, according to the data from their apps. It also didn't matter whether it was a workday or weekend.

The researchers also found that people who moved more frequently tended to report greater life satisfaction over all than those who reported spending most of their time in a chair.

In general, the results suggest that “people who are generally more active are generally happier and, in the moments when people are more active, they are happier,” says Gillian Sandstrom, a study co-author who was a postdoctoral researcher at Cambridge and is now a lecturer in psychology at the University of Essex.

In other words, moving and happiness were closely linked, both in the short term and longer term.

Of course, this type of study does not establish causation. It cannot tell us whether being more active actually causes us to become happier or, conversely, whether being happy causes us to move more. It only shows that more activity goes hand-in-hand with greater happiness.

The study also is limited by its reliance on cellphone data, Dr. Sandstrom says, because it may not have captured information about formal exercise. People often do not carry their phones when they run, cycle or engage in other types of vigorous activity, she and her colleagues point out in the study. So those types of workouts would not be reflected in the app or the phones' activity monitor, making it impossible to know from this data set whether formal exercise is linked to happiness, for better or worse.

Still, the size of the study group and the consistency of the findings are compelling, Dr. Sandstrom says. They do indicate that if you get up and move often, you are more likely to feel cheerful than if you do not.