

# 11th ASEAN Council of Physical Education and Sport (ACPES) International Conference 2025



Contribution ID: 119

Type: Oral

## EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Thursday, October 2, 2025 3:15 PM (15 minutes)

Physical activity has been traditionally important in treating mental health issues. This study aims to assess the impact of physical exercise engagement on students' mental health in Molave, Zamboanga del Sur during COVID-19 pandemic - a descriptive study using stratified sampling. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) were used (GAD-7). It states that most of them are females aged 17-19, ideally in Senior High School (Grades 11 and 12), single, and living on less than Php 40,000 or (Php 3,333) annually. On average, participants engage in moderate to light physical activity for 15-29 minutes each day during their P.E. sessions, and 96% do their routine outside of class. With an average score of 18, individuals are expected to be well, with minor symptoms at an average score of 7 and mild anxiety at 6. The study also found a low negative connection between physical activity, psychological distress ( $r=-0.481$ ) and a vital link ( $p=0.000$ ). Exercise has a moderate negative relationship with depression severity ( $r=-0.619$ ) and a significant negative correlation ( $p=0.000$ ). It also shows a moderate negative association between physical activity and depression severity ( $r=-0.699$ ) and a meaningful relationship ( $p=0.000$ ). It also implies that increasing physical activity reduces psychological suffering, depression severity, and anxiety. Thus, physical exercise engagement is suggested to benefit everyone's mental health.

Keywords: physical exercise, mental health, students

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**Session Classification:** Physical Activity, Health, and Well-being

**Track Classification:** Physical Activity, Health, and Well-being