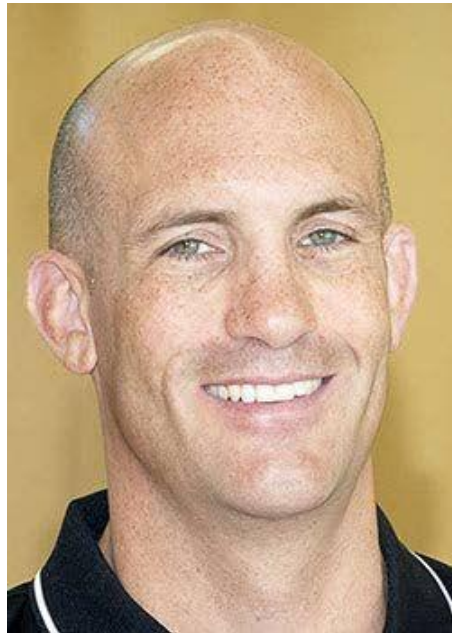


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## WSU researchers: Exercise may be less effective against virus-related stress

By Scott Jackson, Daily News staff writer  
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Duncan

Exercise is a common, healthy way to manage stress, but researchers with Washington State University have found the time-honored technique may not be as effective against anxiety related to COVID-19.

In March, WSU researchers, led by professor Glen Duncan with the school's Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine, analyzed survey responses from more than 900 pairs of twins from the Washington State Twin Registry.

While results showing those who decreased their daily physical activity experienced an increase in stress was more or less expected, Duncan said it was a bit surprising to find that those who increased their activity felt a similar rise in anxiety. He said both groups experienced more stress than those who reported no change in physical activity at all.

However, Duncan is quick to point out this is just an early snapshot of research hoping to understand behavioral coping mechanisms and their effectiveness in dealing with stress on a deeper level. He said all researchers can say with any certainty is that there is a correlation between an increase in physical activity and an increase in COVID-19 related stress but they have not established a causal relationship between the two. He warned these outcomes may very well change over time or as they gather more data.

“We don’t know if it’s cause and effect — it might be that people actually were feeling a whole lot of stress and anxiety because of COVID and to deal with it, they started exercising, not the other way around,” Duncan said. “(If) they started exercising and then they felt more stressed and anxious, that would be extremely surprising and that wouldn’t fit any kind of biological mechanism that we could think of.”

Duncan said much of the point of the research is to get a sense of what kinds of coping mechanisms people have deployed to deal with stress since shutdown orders began earlier this year. He said more detailed data, including a program where respondents log their daily physical activity, is on the way and could paint a clearer picture of the relationship between coping strategies and their effectiveness in dealing with stress.

“We’re hoping to get some richer information on this — in particular, we’re really interested in how people who do have parks and amenities nearby can actually utilize those and those can be beneficial to their mental health,” Duncan said. “Other people who don’t have access to that — that’s a big negative and that’s a big problem when you don’t have access to the infrastructure that can provide health benefits.”

Duncan said these kinds of early, correlational studies aren’t done to establish conclusive causality but to create a sort of baseline of early data. He said no one study can establish direct cause and effect but serve to support a growing case. While we are pretty sure of some things — like the relationship between cigarette smoking and lung cancer — he said this certainty is usually built through research and experimentation. He said the next step for this particular vein of research will be, in a sense, to continue growing that data.

“It’s a whole host of different kinds of studies that build from the most basic correlational kinds of studies all the way to the most rigorous experimental studies and then meta analysis of a whole accumulation of scientific evidence that builds the case for causality,” Duncan said. “Things like

association studies or correlational studies have their place, they're important steps in that process, but they're clearly not enough."

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