

Can Physical Activity Technology Promote Student Mental Wellbeing?

Introduction

Physical activity can improve mental health, yet physical activity technology is rarely designed with mental health benefits in mind.

This study explores whether personal tracking technology for physical activity could be used to promote student mental health and how this might be implemented in connection with students' own experience of mental health management.

Method

We built an app, Walking on Sunshine (WoS), to explore its feasibility and acceptability.

We recruited 21 UK university students aged between 18 and 50 (13 undergraduate, 8 postgraduate, 12 women, and 9 men). Participants used WoS app for a month, and after took part in an in-depth interview.

We collected physical activity data and interaction data from app, as well as physical activity levels, using IPAQ-SF.

Lessons learnt

When tracking physical activity for mental health, a number of considerations around the physical activity side of data need to be account for.

1. The benefits of physical activity for mental health need to be explicit.
2. How physical activity data is tracked matters.
3. Not all physical activity is equal when compared to mental health.

When designing mental wellbeing technology, the following considerations should be accounted for:

1. Mental wellbeing tracking is episodic
2. Variations in data matter more than an ultimate goal.
3. It is important to avoid negative or harmful effects

Steps Towards Mental Health

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Walking on Sunshine app

