



## Adherence to aerobic and muscle-strengthening components of the physical activity guidelines and mental health

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## Abstract

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Despite clear distinction between aerobic and muscle strengthening (MS) components in the physical activity guidelines, public health surveillance has largely focused only on aerobic components, limiting the reach of epidemiological research on the physical activity guidelines. Hence, this study investigated the association between adherence to both components (i.e., aerobic and muscle-strengthening) of the World Health Organisation's physical activity guidelines and mental health among the college student population. A cross-sectional study was conducted among a nationally representative sample of Irish college students (7,088 participants, M age: 23.17 years; 50.9% female). Participants were categorised as meeting both components of the guidelines ( $n=41\%$ ), only the aerobic component ( $n=25.3\%$ ) or the MS component ( $n=7.3\%$ ), and neither ( $n=26.4\%$ ). Group membership effects on mental health was determined through mixed univariate ANOVAs, with a Bonferroni correction for post-hoc analyses to assess multiple comparisons. Results revealed that meeting both components of the guidelines was significantly (all  $p < 0.01$ ) associated with greater self-reported happiness, body image and general health, and less mental ill-being, relative to all other respective groupings. Meeting aerobic or MS components in isolation was significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) associated with better happiness, general health and body image compared to not meeting either component. To conclude, 59% percent of the college-aged population are insufficiently active, and adherence to both guideline components is positively associated with mental health. Co-produced, evidence-based, physical activity interventions are needed in students, and could contribute to mental health promotion.

**Keywords:** resistance; exercise; mental illness; well-being; college; higher education.

## 26 **1.1 Background**

27

28 Constructed via philosophical traditions and contemporary theories (e.g., Diener & Emmons,  
29 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1989), Keyes' (2002) outlines that well-being constitutes the  
30 positive dimension of mental health, whereas depression and anxiety symptoms exist within a  
31 distinct, but correlated, ill-being dimension. Ill-being predicts increased risk of illnesses  
32 including cardiovascular and Alzheimer's diseases, type 2 diabetes, and reduced mortality  
33 (Banatvala et al., 2019). Mental well-being is associated with longevity and healthy  
34 functioning (Lawrence, Rogers & Wadsworth, 2015). One in five college (or University/  
35 Third Level) students have? experienced depression or anxiety during a 12-month period  
36 (McLafferty et al., 2017), and up to 35% reported low well-being (Shannon et al., 2019).  
37 Understanding modifiable lifestyle factors for mental health promotion is therefore important  
38 during this? key transitional life stage (Huppert, 2009). Data suggest increases in unhealthy  
39 lifestyle behaviours during college years (typically 18-24), including alcohol consumption,  
40 smoking and drug use (Nelson et al., 2009; Donohue et al., 2016). Higher rates of  
41 overweight/obesity are also evident, along with unhealthy, enduring dietary and sedentary  
42 behaviours (Fazzino, Forbush, Sullivan & Befort, 2019). Due to changing body composition  
43 during college years (Mcleod, Stokes & Phillips, 2019), body image issues, defined as how  
44 one thinks, acts, and feels towards their physical appearance (Radwan et al., 2019) can  
45 increase risk to the aforesaid unhealthy behaviours. Physical activity is a modifiable lifestyle  
46 behaviour that is comprehensively associated with mental and physical well-being (e.g.,  
47 Biddle, Gorely & Mutrie, 2014; Way, Hackett, Baker & Johnson, 2016). Indeed, the World  
48 Health Organisation (WHO; 2020 and the United Kingdom's Chief Medical's Officer (CMO,  
49 2019) guidance recommends that all adults participate in a minimum of: (i) 150  
50 minutes/week of moderate-intensity (or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity) aerobic physical  
51 activity (e.g., walking, running); and (ii) two days per-week of muscle-strengthening (MS)  
52 activities (e.g., resistance training).

53 Despite clear distinction between aerobic and MS components in the guidelines, over  
54 the past 45 years public health surveillance has focused only on moderate-to-vigorous aerobic  
55 physical activity (MVPA) (Milton et al., 2018; Strain et al., 2019; Bennie, Shakespear-Druery  
56 & De Cocker, 2020). For example, most researchers cite that ~27.5% of adults do not meet  
57 the WHO guidelines (Guthold, Stevens, Riley, & Bull, 2018). However, this statistic is  
58 largely based on the MVPA component alone (Steele et al., 2017), and researchers examining  
59 MS activities show that ~66% of adults do not meet the MS component of the guidelines

60 (Strain, Fitzsimons, Kelly & Mutrie, 2016). Emphasised in a recent review by Bennie et al.  
61 (2020), evidence indicates that when assessing MS and aerobic components collectively,  
62 between 75-80% of adults do not meet the physical activity guidelines (see, Bennie et al.,  
63 2019a; De Cocker, Teychenne, White & Bennie, 2020). Restricted to the college student  
64 population, as low as 17.3% (see Branscum & Fairchild, 2019) and as high as 40.3% met  
65 both aerobic physical activity and MS recommendations (Wilson et al., 2019). Relatively  
66 speaking, while ‘complete’ guideline adherence is higher among the college student  
67 population than the general population, the statistics remain well short of the ideals espoused  
68 in the WHO (2020) guidelines.

69         Beyond prevalence statistics, the European Psychiatric Association (Stubbs et al.,  
70 2018), concluded a lack of data and clarity on the association between mental health and MS  
71 activities. Some intervention studies ( $n = 3$ ) indicates independent, but statistically similar  
72 effects, for aerobic and MS activities in the treatment of anxiety and depression (Gordon et  
73 al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2018). Whereas, recent epidemiological studies among the general  
74 population have shown that meeting both guideline components was associated with the  
75 lowest risk for depression, anxiety and psychological distress, followed by meeting aerobic,  
76 resistance, and not meeting either guideline (Bennie et al., 2018; Oftedal et al., 2019; De  
77 Cocker, Teychenne, White & Bennie, 2020).

78         To date no epidemiological studies examining associations between complete  
79 physical activity guideline adherence and mental health have been conducted amongst  
80 college students. Furthermore, considered within Keyes’ (2002) two-continua model of  
81 mental health, existing epidemiological mental health studies among the general population is  
82 restricted to the ill-being dimension of mental health (e.g., Bennie et al., 2018; Oftedal et al.,  
83 2019), rather than mental well-being, resulting in a limited assessment of a complete mental  
84 health model. Lastly, evidence suggests that while physical activity is linked to improved  
85 body image, research has focused on aerobic or MS modalities in isolation (SantaBarbara,  
86 Whitworth, & Ciccolo, 2017).

87         As such, two key features emerge from extant literature needing addressed. First, the  
88 proportion of college students meeting both, one, or neither components of the physical  
89 activity guidelines is inconsistent, with studies often including small, selective samples, and  
90 prevalence statistics ranging widely from 17.3% (Branscum & Fairchild, 2019) to as high as  
91 40.3% (Wilson et al., 2019). Establishing prevalence statistics from a nationally

92 representative sample would provide a more accurate assessment amongst a population  
93 already identified at risk of adopting multiple unhealthy lifestyle behaviours. Second, it  
94 remains unclear whether independent or combined mental health effects are present for  
95 guideline adherence in the college student population. While it would be expected that, as  
96 with the general population, MS and aerobic guideline adherence would protect against ill-  
97 being, a more holistic model of mental health as theorised by Keyes (2002) would contribute  
98 to the current literature. In doing so, subjective elements of mental health such as body image  
99 perceptions, a sub-domain of general self-perceptions and linked to self-esteem can be  
100 significant (Biddle & Vergeer, 2020), as is subjective well-being, considered within  
101 multidimensional mental health models (Longo et al., 2020).

102 Accordingly, the Student Activity and Sport Study Ireland (SASSI) survey showed  
103 associations between adherence to the aerobic component of the physical activity guidelines  
104 and health (Murphy et al., 2018). Despite inclusion of a resistance exercise instrument in the  
105 survey, adherence to the MS component of the guidelines was not assessed, nor were  
106 different combinations of the WHO's (2020) aerobic and MS components of the guidelines<sup>1</sup>.  
107 The present study was therefore a secondary analysis of SASSI, aiming to: (i) identify the  
108 prevalence of college level students adhering to the WHO's (2020) physical activity  
109 guidelines; and (ii) determine whether adherence to different components of the guidelines  
110 were associated with fewer self-reported ill-being symptoms (i.e., depressive and anxiety  
111 symptoms), better mental well-being, body image perceptions, and self-reported general  
112 health.

## 113 **1.2 Hypotheses tested**

114 For the first study aim, while we expected a majority (>50%) of our sample would not meet  
115 both MS and aerobic components, akin to existing studies among the college population  
116 (Wilson et al., 2019), we did not formally hypothesise a specific prevalence figure as sample  
117 characteristics (e.g., size, cultural norms), likely exert a role. For the second study aim  
118 however, and based on emerging epidemiological studies (e.g., Milton et al., 2018; Bennie et  
119 al., 2018; Bennie et al., 2019; Oftedal et al., 2019): Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>) was that, the category  
120 meeting both the aerobic MVPA and MS components of the guidelines would score most

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Murphy et al.'s (2018) study was conducted across the island of Ireland, which comprises two political jurisdictions with differing guidelines, namely, Republic of Ireland and northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland's physical activity guidelines do not specify the MS component of the WHO's physical activity guidelines for adults, whilst northern Ireland's does.

121 favourably on mental health. Secondly, we hypothesised that adherence to the aerobic  
122 component alone would predict better mental health than meeting the MS component alone  
123 (H<sub>2</sub>), and not meeting either component of the guidelines (H<sub>3</sub>). Lastly, we hypothesised that  
124 adherence to the MS component (H<sub>4</sub>) would be associated with better mental health than not  
125 meeting either component of the guidelines. Additionally, we controlled for several  
126 confounding factors related to mental health including Body Mass Index (BMI), gender, age,  
127 alcohol consumption, smoking, illicit drug use and sedentary behaviour (Bauman et al., 2012;  
128 Bennie et al., 2019).

## 129 **2.0 Methods**

### 130 *2.1 Inclusion criteria, recruitment, procedure and participants*

131 This study was a secondary data analysis of phase 2 of SASSI, wherein data were publicly  
132 requested by the lead author and granted by the Irish Social Science Data Archive. SASSI  
133 was commissioned to understand sport and physical activity participation in  
134 colleges/universities across the island of Ireland. To achieve a nationally representative  
135 sample, 31 institutions distributed the survey through random sampling that included cohorts  
136 who were undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate courses within 10 diverse fields of  
137 study (e.g., humanities, social sciences, medicine). Once the sampling framework was  
138 applied, 10,606 students were approached for participation. The survey was administered  
139 through SurveyMonkey (San Mateo, CA) to entire class groups using an online random  
140 number generator that identified the appropriate year group and field of study during a  
141 timetabled hour (Murphy et al., 2018). The online survey took approximately 20 minutes to  
142 complete and was incentivized by entry into a prize draw that could be exchanged for  
143 purchases at a range of retail stores or food outlets. Ethical approval was granted by Ulster  
144 University, and endorsed by all participating institutions. Further detail on the methodology  
145 for SASSI can be found in Murphy et al. (2019), as can information pertaining to the  
146 demographics of the sample.

147 In total, 9197 survey responses were collected, but following the removal of non-  
148 responders, 8122 remained. In the study sample 50.9% were female and were aged on  
149 average at 23.17 years (SD=6.75). White European was the most reported ethnicity (91.2%),  
150 with other ethnicities including Asian (4.3%), Black (1.9%), mixed/multiple (1.6), and other  
151 (1.1%). Participants were mainly undergraduate students (92.4%) enrolled in full-time  
152 courses (94.1%), such as Science, Maths and Computing (25.7%), Social Sciences, Business

153 and Law (21.1%), Humanities and Arts (14.6%) and Health and Welfare (11.8%). Sixty  
154 percent of students lived in college accommodation or private residences, with the remaining  
155 at their family home.

## 156 *2.2 Outcome measures*

### 157 *Physical activity guideline adherence/non-adherence*

158 The International Physical Activity Questionnaire-Short Form (IPAQ-SF) (Craig et al., 2003)  
159 assessed whether participants met the MVPA component of the WHO's (2020) guidelines.

160 The validity and reliability of the IPAQ-SF (see, Lee et al., 2011) is evident in studies among  
161 the student population (Murphy et al., 2017). Using established scoring protocol (IPAQ,  
162 2005), individuals categorised as "high" active were categorised as meeting the aerobic  
163 physical activity requirements, with those in "low" or "moderate" comprised the group not  
164 adhering (Bauman et al., 2009).

165 Participation in the MS component of the guidelines was assessed using an instrument from  
166 the Sport Participation and Physical Activity Young Adult+ Study (Hardie-Murphy, 2016).

167 Adapted from the IPAQ-SF, the measure is highly similar to existing MS tools in national  
168 physical activity surveys showing sound reliability (Yore et al., 2007; Milton et al., 2018).

169 For example, through a 7-day recall period, respondents identify the number of days that  
170 were spent doing 'exercises that may strengthen your muscles, such as push-ups, sit-ups,  
171 weightlifting or heavy lifting?'. The sample was dichotomised into those meeting (i.e.,  $\geq 2$   
172 days) and not meeting ( $\leq 1$  days) the MS component of the guidelines.

### 173 *Mental well-being*

174 An item derived from the Northern Ireland Sport and Physical Activity Survey (Sport  
175 Northern Ireland, 2010) was used to assess subjective well-being (Diener, 2000). Scored so  
176 that 1 represented the lowest (i.e., 'extremely unhappy'), and 10 (i.e., extremely happy) the  
177 highest, the tool has been assessed and shown external correlations with various health  
178 behaviours (e.g., nutrition, physical activity) in epidemiological studies in Ireland (Breslin,  
179 Nevill, Donnelly & Murphy, 2013).

### 180 *Ill-being symptoms*

181 The five-item Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) derived from the 36-item medical outcomes  
182 health survey (SF-36) (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992) was used to measure ill-being symptoms.

183 Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, and inquired about depressive moods (e.g.,  
184 ‘have you felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?’) and anxiety  
185 symptoms (e.g., ‘been a very nervous person?’). Previous research has established the  
186 validity and reliability of the MHI-5 to positively screen for mood disorders (Rumpf, Meyer,  
187 Hapke & John, 2001), and has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure among Irish  
188 students (Houghton et al., 2010). Cronbach’s alpha among the present sample displayed good  
189 internal consistency statistics ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### 190 *Body image*

191 Perceptions of body image were derived through an item from Hart, Leary and Rejeski’s  
192 (1989) validated and internally reliable social physique anxiety scale. Coded through a Likert  
193 scale (i.e., 1= ‘much too thin/fat’, 2= ‘a bit too thin/fat’, and 3= ‘about the right size’), the  
194 item reflects one’s satisfaction with body image.

### 195 *General health*

196 Self-reported general health in the past 12 months was assessed using an item from the SF-36  
197 (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992). Using a 5-point Likert scale, responses were reverse coded so  
198 that higher scores equated to better general health (i.e., 5=very good; 1=very poor). The  
199 validity and reliability of the SF-36 has been shown among several populations (Laucis, Hays  
200 & Bhattacharyya, 2015) and has been used in epidemiological studies in Ireland (Breslin,  
201 Nevill, Donnelly & Murphy, 2013).

### 202 *2.3 Controlling variables*

203 Self-reported BMI ( $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}$ ) was calculated using WHO (2000) reference values, categorises  
204 included: underweight ( $<18.5$ ), normal weight ( $18.5 \leq \text{BMI} < 25$ ), overweight ( $25 \leq \text{BMI} <$   
205  $30$ ), or obese ( $\geq 30$ ). Sedentary behaviour was measured via Marshall et al.’s (2010) scale  
206 wherein subjects were dichotomised into those sedentary at  $< 420$ , or  $\geq 420$  minutes per-day  
207 (Murphy et al., 2018). Items from the Survey of Lifestyle and Attitudes to Nutrition study  
208 (Morgan et al., 2007) assessed smoking levels, recreational drug use and alcohol intake.

### 209 *2.3 Data management and analysis*

210 All outcome variables displayed acceptable skewness and kurtosis values to warrant  
211 parametric statistical analyses. The prevalence of physical activity guideline adherence were  
212 calculated among the full sample, and split by gender. To test the study hypotheses, a variable  
213 positioned each respondent into one of four possible adherence categories: (i) meeting both



214 guideline components, (ii) meeting aerobic MVPA only, (ii) meeting MS only, and; (iv) not  
215 meeting either. Adherence category was included as the independent variable; mental well-  
216 being, ill-being symptoms, general health and body image were designated as continuous  
217 dependent variables, and; gender, BMI, smoking, sedentary behaviour, drug and alcohol use  
218 were specified as fixed controlling factors in several mixed univariate ANCOVA models  
219 using SPSS (version 25). Moreover, given the participants were distributed across 31  
220 academic institutions, we included institution as a random factor. Adjusted mean scores and  
221 standard errors were reported for the full sample and adherence categories, and statistical  
222 significance was set at  $p < .05$  (Field, 2013). Third, we used a Bonferroni correction for post-  
223 hoc analyses to assess multiple comparisons between adherence categories. Two line figures  
224 were produced, in addition to a second table to outline post-hoc group comparisons through  
225 unstandardized mean differences, Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes (n.b., 0.2-0.4= small effect, 0.5-0.7=  
226 medium effect,  $\geq .8$ = large effect), and lower and upper bound confidence intervals were  
227 included.

## 228 **3.0 Results**

229

### 230 *3.1 Descriptive findings and adherence category effects on study outcomes*

231 After exclusion of 12.7% of the sample who had missing data on at least one guideline  
232 component item ( $n=1034$ ), 7088 remained, and 41% self-reported meeting both MS and  
233 aerobic components, 25.3% met the aerobic MVPA component only, 7.3% met the MS  
234 component only, and 26.4% did not meet either component of the guidelines. Therefore, 59%  
235 of the sample were deemed insufficiently active through not meeting both guideline  
236 components. Split by gender, 52% of males met both guideline components, compared to  
237 29.8% of females. Moreover, 21% of males and 29.8% females met the aerobic component  
238 alone, and 7.9% of males and 6.7% of females reported adherence to the MS component  
239 alone. Lastly, 19.1% of males and 33.8% of females did not meet either component of the  
240 guidelines.

241 After adjusting for statistical controls<sup>2</sup>, the corrected model revealed support for the  
242 study hypotheses to the extent that the category meeting both guideline components reported  
243 the highest well-being levels (see Table 1), with significant results ( $p < 0.01$ ) and small effect

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<sup>2</sup> Note that most statistical controls exerted a significant association on the study outcomes, aside from the following; sedentary behaviour on mental ill-being; gender and sedentary behaviour on body image, and; drug use and sedentary behaviour on general health. The random factor (institution) displayed a significant effect in all models. Controlling for these associations, the exposure variable (i.e., physical activity guideline adherence categories) remained significant in the model.

244 sizes ( $d=.13 - .34$ ) ( $H_1$ ). Specifically, while meeting the aerobic component alone was related  
245 to better well-being than not meeting either component ( $H_3$ ), there was no statistically  
246 significant difference between adherence to aerobic or MS components in isolation ( $H_2$ ); nor  
247 between meeting MS component alone and not meeting either component ( $H_4$ ) (see Figure 1  
248 for visual illustration).

249 *Please insert Table 1 and Figure 1*

250 Likewise, Table 2 indicated that the category meeting both guideline components  
251 were more likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) to report lower mental ill-being than the other three categories,  
252 with small effects ( $d= .20 - .31$ ; see Figure 2) ( $H_1$ ). As shown in Figure 2, the category  
253 meeting the aerobic MVPA component alone scored lower on ill-being than neither  
254 component ( $p < .05$ ) ( $H_2$ ), yet there was no statistically significant association between the  
255 latter comparisons on ill-being ( $H_3, 4$ ).

256 Meeting both MS and aerobic components was significantly associated with better  
257 body image than the respective categories ( $H_1$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $d= .30-.44$ ). Of note, meeting MS  
258 component alone showed better scores for body image than the aerobic component alone ( $p <$   
259  $0.05$ ;  $d=.15$ ) ( $H_2$ ), and not meeting either guideline component ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $d= .28$ ) ( $H_4$ ).  
260 Meeting the aerobic component alone was associated with a better body image score than not  
261 meeting either component ( $p < 0.01$ ;  $d= .14$ ) ( $H_3$ ) (see Table 2).

262 Table 2 also illustrates that meeting both aerobic and MS components was associated  
263 with better general perceived health in comparison to the respective categories, with small-to-  
264 moderate effect sizes ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $d=.38-.57$ ) ( $H_1$ ). Meeting the MS or aerobic components in  
265 isolation was also better for perceived general health than not meeting either component ( $p <$   
266  $0.05$ ,  $d=.20$  and  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d=.17$ , respectively) ( $H_3, 4$ ). There was no significant difference  
267 between adherence to MS or aerobic components for perceived general health ( $H_2$ ).

268 *Please insert Table 2 and Figure 2*

#### 269 **4. 0 Discussion**

270

271 According to our data, approximately 59% of college students are insufficiently active. The  
272 41% meeting the guidelines reported fewer ill-being symptoms, enhanced well-being, body  
273 image and general health in comparison to the three respective categories ( $H_1$ ). Additionally,  
274 the 25.3% meeting only the aerobic component of the guidelines displayed better well-being

275 and general health compared to meeting neither component of the guidelines (H<sub>2</sub>), and; the  
276 7.3% meeting the MS component alone scored better general health and body image than  
277 meeting neither component (H<sub>4</sub>). Hence, our study supports the WHO's (2020) and CMO's  
278 (2019) recommendation that, at minimum, adults adhere to both components of the physical  
279 activity guidelines for mental health promotion. Results further highlight the need for  
280 inclusion and promotion of MS activities alongside aerobic for more robust physical activity  
281 surveillance (Bennie et al., 2019a; Bennie, Shakespear-Druery & De Cocker, 2020), and how  
282 independent and combined mental health effects are likely present for physical activity  
283 modalities (Lubans et al., 2016).

284         Responding to recent calls (Bennie, Shakespear-Druery & De Cocker, 2020) to  
285 address the historical limitations of physical activity and public health epidemiology, the  
286 measurement of both guideline components was a pertinent study aim. To illustrate our own  
287 shortcomings in regard to providing balance to the guideline assessments, in the first analysis  
288 of the SASSI dataset, Murphy et al. (2018) reported that 64.3% of our sample met the  
289 physical activity guidelines. We now reveal a markedly lower figure at 41% when both  
290 components are measured. A larger sample proportion adhered to both components of the  
291 physical activity guidelines than a single in isolation (i.e., 41 compared to 32.6%), and  
292 therefore our findings contrast studies among the general population suggesting larger  
293 proportions of 'active' individuals engaging in aerobic activities alone (e.g., De Cocker et al.,  
294 2020). Further, while a larger proportion of our sample met the guidelines than the general  
295 population reported in in Harris et al. (2013) (i.e., 21%), 59% remain insufficiently active.  
296 Restricted to the few studies among the college-aged population, our findings are consistent  
297 with Wilson et al. (2019) who reported 40% adherence, but higher than Branscum and  
298 Fairchild (2019) who indicated 17%. Concerningly, fewer than three in ten of our female  
299 participants met both components of the guidelines, and meta-analyses (Corder et al., 2017)  
300 show further decreases in physical activity behaviours between the ages of 18-30, and rapid  
301 declines during mid-to-late adulthood (Gow, Pattie & Deary, 2017).

302         Encouragingly, the 41% adhering to both guideline components reported fewer ill-  
303 being symptoms, and enhanced well-being, body image and general health (H<sub>1</sub>). Moreover,  
304 meeting aerobic and MS components in isolation was more advantageous than meeting  
305 neither component for perceived general health and body image (H<sub>3,4</sub>), and for well-being via  
306 the aerobic component (H<sub>3</sub>). Such findings support the view in the United States and  
307 Australian guidelines that "doing any physical activity is (likely) better than doing none"

308 (Teychenne et al., 2020), and a recent meta-analysis (Schuch et al., 2017) showing mental  
309 health benefits from lower doses of physical activity. No significant differences existed  
310 between aerobic or MS components in isolation on ill-being and well-being, and perceived  
311 general health, supporting existing meta-analyses (Gordon et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2018).  
312 A relatively novel finding was that meeting the MS component alone was related to healthier  
313 body image than aerobic alone (Santabarbara et al., 2017). Theoretically, MS activities may  
314 produce more visible increases in muscular strength and appearance (Nielsen & Thing, 2019).  
315 However, and reiterating the need for adherence to both components, meeting both  
316 components was related to healthier body image than the respective categories.

317         Practically, our findings present a contemporary challenge for health authorities,  
318 policy makers, and college-level education bodies (Biddle, Gorely and Mutrie, 2014). In  
319 terms of our study implications, we propose that our methods offer a template for widescale  
320 physical activity surveillance efforts in the college-aged population (see Murphy et al., 2019),  
321 and illustrates the importance of inclusion of MS activities. Furthermore, the identification of  
322 (i) a majority of inactive students in our data, and (ii) potential benefits of physical activity  
323 for mental health in the sample, stresses the urgent need for physical activity interventions  
324 among the college-aged population. Recent research (deJonge et al., 2020) among college  
325 students suggests a widescale acceptability of physical activity interventions for mental  
326 health promotion. However, implementation is hindered due to resourcing, and the  
327 education/training of deliverers. For future interventions to be accessible and scalable, logic  
328 modelling of socio-ecological factors (e.g., contextual barriers/facilitators, inputs, outputs and  
329 impacts) is advised (Mills, Lawton, & Sheard, 2019). A recently developed mental health  
330 toolkit for exercise may serve as a guide (see Glowacki et al., 2019).

#### 331 ***4.1 Study limitations***

332 As our data were cross-sectional, the relationship between mental health and physical activity  
333 is, plausibly, a bi-directional one (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2020), urging caution on any  
334 conclusions drawn from the data. Further, indirect mechanisms (e.g., neurobiological,  
335 psychosocial) and effect moderators (e.g., frequency, context, intensity; White et al., 2017),  
336 likely driving the salutary association between physical activity on mental health were not  
337 tested. Future longitudinal epidemiological research should seek to identify if such factors are  
338 implicated in mental health promotion (Teychenne et al., 2020). Moreover, while internally  
339 reliable and/or structurally sound, the measures used to assess mental health may have

340 benefitted from a more comprehensive instrument tapping into multiple well-being theories,  
341 such as the mental health continuum short-form (Keyes, 2002). Furthermore, while  
342 appropriate for large-scale studies, the self-report nature of our physical activity measurement  
343 could have been supplemented with wearable devices (e.g., accelerometers). Lastly, our  
344 sample included a diverse range of college students, but was restricted to the Irish context.  
345 Further international samples comprising other college institutions would improve the  
346 generalisability of the findings.

#### 347 **4.2 Conclusion**

348 In conclusion, we extended physical activity surveillance by determining students'  
349 adherence/non-adherence to both components of the WHO's (2014) physical activity  
350 guidelines, and; whether independent and/or combined mental health effects were present  
351 (Milton et al., 2018). Overall, findings revealed that 59% are insufficiently active, and over  
352 one quarter do not meet either guideline component. Consistent with emerging research (e.g.,  
353 De Cocker et al., 2020) our findings present concern, as the category meeting neither  
354 component displayed the poorest mental health profile. However, the 41% meeting both  
355 components of the guidelines displayed the most advantageous mental health profile, and  
356 meeting one component in isolation was largely better for mental health than not meeting  
357 either. Echoing the public health message that some physical activity is likely more beneficial  
358 than none (Gordon et al., 2018), we propose the need for investment into guideline  
359 awareness, and physical activity interventions among the college-aged population  
360 (Daskalopoulou et al., 2017; Steele et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2018). Future efforts may  
361 benefit from designing and/or adapting existing evidence-based physical activity  
362 interventions using a co-production model, wherein students exert a role as key stakeholders,  
363 and socio-ecological factors are incorporated into the design, implementation and analyses  
364 (Mills, Lawton, & Sheard, 2019).

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#### 374 **Figure Captions**

375 Figure 1: Line graph demonstrating differences in mental well-being levels (Y axis) for the  
376 four respective group memberships (X axis) based on components of the guidelines  
377 adhered/not adhered to

378 Figure 2: Line graph demonstrating differences in mental ill-being (Y axis) for the four  
379 respective group memberships (X axis) based on components of the guidelines adhered/not  
380 adhered to.

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