

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fitness activities from the lens of physical education teachers: Pursuing mental health and balancing act in stressful work environment

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health among Physical Education (PE) teachers in Zamboanga, Philippines, focusing on their experiences managing stress in demanding work environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 PE teachers to explore their preferred fitness routines, the impact of exercise on their mental clarity and stress management, and the consequences of skipping workouts. The data were analyzed using a structured thematic analysis approach, drawing from established qualitative frameworks to ensure rigor and credibility. Findings showed that PE teachers prioritize quick, space-friendly exercises such as deep breathing, stretching, and light cardio for immediate stress relief, while high-energy activities like Zumba and circuit training were favored for mood elevation and social engagement. Participants consistently reported improved mental clarity, patience, and positivity after engaging in fitness activities, whereas skipping workouts resulted in heightened stress, irritability, and reduced emotional balance. Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrating fitness routines into the daily lives of PE teachers as a critical form of self-care and stress management, ultimately enhancing their mental well-being and resilience in navigating the demands of their profession.

Keywords: Physical Education teachers; fitness activities; mental health; stress management; workplace well-being

1. Introduction

The demands of modern education, coupled with the unique pressures of physical activity, create a complex and often stressful environment for Physical Education teachers ^[1]. While physical activity is widely recognized for its positive impact on physical and mental health, the specific benefits of fitness activities for managing stress and promoting well-being among Physical Education teachers remain under-explored.

Stress is an inevitable aspect of life, affecting individuals across various professions, including Physical Education teachers. It can serve as a trigger for necessary change or manifest discomfort and distress. Balboa and Glaser ^[2] assert that stress is a universal experience generated by the dynamic situations individuals encounter. In the context of Physical Education teachers, managing stress is paramount, as they face unique

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challenges that can impact their mental health and teaching efficacy. Consequently, exploring how fitness activities can serve as a mechanism for enhancing mental well-being in this demographic offers valuable insight into their professional lives.

Engaging in physical exercise has been shown to mitigate not only the risk of chronic diseases but also a variety of psychological and behavioral issues. According to Curran et al. ^[3], regular physical activity can significantly alleviate stress and mental strain, making it a vital tool for those in high-pressure occupations. For Physical Education teachers, whose roles inherently involve physical activity, understanding how these exercises contribute to mental clarity and stress management is essential. This research aims to investigate the specific fitness activities that these educators find most beneficial, particularly in stressful work environments.

The commitment to physical exercise has garnered considerable attention in recent studies, which have explored various factors influencing participation and adherence to fitness routines. Kang et al. ^[4] and Evans et al. ^[5] highlight the importance of understanding these influencing factors to improve engagement in physical interventions. Identifying the specific fitness activities that Physical Education teachers prioritize, this research not only aims to promote adherence to exercise but also to enhance mental well-being among educators facing job-related stress.

The demanding nature of teaching, coupled with the pressures of meeting deadlines and managing substantial workloads, often leads to significant stress. Alhasani et al. ^[6] note that the struggle to maintain a balance between personal and professional life can result in burnout and decreased job satisfaction, which further exacerbates mental health issues. This context emphasizes the need for effective coping mechanisms, such as fitness activities, to help these teachers navigate their challenging work environments.

Recent international research has emphasized that stress among PE teachers arises not only from the physical demands of their work but also from systemic and professional challenges. In India, Shirotriya and Quraishi ^[7] developed a comprehensive occupational stress scale for Physical Education teachers, identifying key stressors such as workload, professional misconceptions, working conditions, and lack of recognition, with strong psychometric support. Similarly, a more recent study on PE teacher marginalisation found that when teachers feel undervalued within their institutions, role stressors such as ambiguity and overload amplify negative perceptions of their professional worth ^[8]. These findings reinforce the need to examine how PE teachers cope with stress, particularly through personal strategies like fitness activities that can enhance resilience and mental health.

This study aims to examine the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health among Physical Education teachers, particularly in stressful situations. Investigating the specific fitness routines they engage in, the research will shed light on how these activities contribute to improved mental clarity and stress management. Additionally, the study will explore how skipping fitness routines may affect their ability to cope with stress, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the relationship between physical activity and mental well-being in this profession.

Throughout this manuscript, the term “fitness activities” is consistently used to describe the physical routines and exercises performed by PE teachers. The importance of these activities extends beyond physical health, serving as a foundation for PE teachers’ professional identity and personal resilience. Regular engagement in fitness activities not only enhances their ability to cope with occupational stress but also allows them to model healthy practices for students, reinforcing their role as both educators and advocates of well-being.

2. Literature

Stress management is an essential element in fostering a productive and harmonious work environment [9]. A stressful workplace can have detrimental effects, a recent international studies further emphasize the global relevance of this issue. For example, Kilag et al. [10] found that incorporating fitness-based practices in teaching contexts enhanced teachers' cognitive clarity and classroom engagement in Philippines. Similarly, Carroll et al. [11] highlighted the effectiveness of yoga and mindfulness interventions in promoting resilience among educators in Australia, additionally Ramirez [12] confirmed the dual physical and psychological benefits of aerobic fitness activities in Philippines. These comparative perspectives underscore that the challenges faced by PE teachers in the Philippines are consistent with broader international trends, strengthening the rationale for examining stress management through fitness activities.

The teaching profession is inherently demanding, and Physical Education (PE) teachers face a unique set of challenges that contribute to workplace stress [13]. In addition to general teaching duties, PE teachers often work under conditions that heighten stress levels, such as inadequate or unsafe facilities, limited access to sports equipment, and overcrowded classes that complicate supervision. This multifaceted role requires exceptional skills and dedication, often leading to increased stress levels. Furthermore, PE teachers often experience a lack of support, appreciation, adequate salaries, favorable working conditions, career development opportunities, and public respect [14-15]. This lack of recognition and support can exacerbate the stress associated with their demanding roles. PE teachers often feel undervalued and underappreciated, which can negatively impact their motivation and job satisfaction. This sense of undervaluation is partly due to the perception that physical education is less important than academic subjects such as mathematics, science, or languages [16-17]. In many schools, PE receives less curriculum time, smaller budgets, and fewer professional development opportunities. These structural inequalities, coupled with limited recognition from administrators and parents, contribute to feelings of diminished professional identity among PE teachers. As a result, their morale and long-term motivation are often affected.

Research consistently highlights the positive impact of physical exercise on mental health [18-19]. Engaging in physical activity allows individuals to gain a greater sense of control over themselves and their environment, leading to improved psychological well-being. Moreover, physical exercise provides opportunities for social interaction and support, enhancing interpersonal skills and relationships. This suggests that physical activity can be a valuable tool for managing stress and promoting mental health, particularly for professionals in high-pressure fields like education. Regular physical activity can help individuals cope with stress, improve their mood, reduce anxiety, and enhance their overall sense of well-being.

Research has revealed a strong association between PE teachers' coping mechanisms and their perceived stress levels [20]. Teachers who employ coping strategies such as confronting stressful situations, avoiding escape behaviors, and engaging in positive reappraisal tend to experience lower levels of stress. This highlights the importance of equipping PE teachers with effective coping strategies to manage the demands of their profession. However, further research is needed to explore the specific coping mechanisms that are most effective for PE teachers and how these mechanisms can be integrated into their professional development. Understanding the specific coping strategies that are most successful for PE teachers can help to develop targeted interventions and training programs to support their mental health.

To mitigate the negative effects of stress on PE teachers, it is essential to provide adequate training and intervention programs [21]. Pre-service and in-service training should focus on raising awareness of the main sources of stress in PE teaching and building up effective coping strategies. Furthermore, PE teacher

education programs should consider interventions to prevent health consequences of stress, such as voice disorders, which are common among teachers due to the demands of their profession. These interventions should include strategies for managing stress, promoting healthy lifestyles, and fostering a supportive work environment for PE teachers. By providing teachers with the tools and resources they need to manage stress, organizations can create a more supportive and positive work environment.

PE teachers should be knowledgeable about balance and training techniques and integrate them into their lessons ^[22]. These techniques can enhance coordination, balance, and stability, contributing to the overall well-being of both teachers and students. Moreover, PE teachers should be adept at managing stress and possess a repertoire of coping mechanisms, such as leisure activities and relaxation techniques, to maintain their own mental health. This suggests that PE teachers themselves can benefit from the same physical activities and stress management techniques that they promote in their students. Practicing what they preach, PE teachers can serve as role models for their students and demonstrate the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

3. Methodology

This research adopted an exploratory design, a valuable approach for gaining a deeper understanding of a complex subject, especially when investigating innovative or underexplored research concerns ^[23]. This approach allowed for flexibility and an open-ended framework, which was well-suited for exploring the relationship between fitness activities and mental health among Physical Education teachers ^[24].

3.1. Population and sampling

The study population consisted of 40 Physical Education teachers from Zamboanga, Philippines. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could offer valuable insights into the research topic ^[25]. Teachers were selected based on specific criteria, including at least two years of professional teaching experience, direct involvement in delivering physical education programs, and willingness to participate in the study. To ensure representativeness, the sample included teachers from both public and private institutions across primary and secondary levels. While interviews were conducted in neutral settings to minimize environmental influence. Since the study did not manipulate external factors, no experimental control variables were required; instead, consistency in data collection procedures served to reduce bias and enhance transparency and replicability.

3.2. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection instrument. These interviews required initial analysis of previous knowledge on the topic ^[26] and provided a structured framework while allowing for flexibility and exploration of emerging themes. The interview guide was developed directly from the research objectives and validated through expert review by three faculty specialists in physical education and qualitative research. Feedback was incorporated to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's aims. A pilot test was conducted with three PE teachers outside the main sample to assess reliability and comprehensibility, after which minor revisions were applied to refine the instrument before final data collection ^[27-28].

Table 1. Instrument of the study

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Interview Questions</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>N</i>
Examine the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health among Physical Education teachers in stressful work environments.	1. Can you describe a specific example when engaging in a fitness activity helps you manage a particularly stressful situation at work? 2. How do you feel your mental clarity or focus changes after completing your regular fitness routine, especially on demanding workdays? 3. Have you noticed any differences in how you handle stress on days when you skip your fitness activities compared to when you complete them?	Physical Education Teachers	40
Identify the specific fitness activities preferred by Physical Education teachers for managing stress and promoting mental well-being.	4. What specific type of exercise or fitness activity do you prioritize when you feel overwhelmed or stressed by your work responsibilities? 5. Why do you prefer certain fitness activities over others when it comes to managing stress from work? 6. Can you share any particular routines or exercises that you rely on to maintain your mental health during challenging times at work?		

3.3. Data gathering procedure

Data collection was conducted from October 24 to 27, 2024, through semi-structured interviews with the 40 Physical Education teachers. The sessions were scheduled at times convenient for the participants, creating an environment that encouraged open dialogue. At the beginning of each interview participants were briefed on the study's purpose, and consent was obtained to record their responses. This semi-structured approach allowed participants to discuss their experiences in depth, with the interviewer guiding the conversation while allowing flexibility for participants to share insights related to fitness activities, mental health, and stress management.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the methodological approach to interpret and make sense of the qualitative data gathered [29]. This study adopted a structured thematic analysis framework, which emphasized systematic coding, iterative theme development, and verification to ensure credibility and dependability. This approach enabled the identification of key patterns related to the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health, the specific activities preferred by PE teachers, and the strategies they employed to manage stress in their work environment.

4. Results

Objective 1. Examine the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health among Physical Education teachers in stressful work environments.

1. Can you describe a specific example when engaging in a fitness activity helps you manage a particularly stressful situation at work?

1.1 Mental Reset

Twenty-eight participants reported that engaging in fitness activities such as jogging, walking, or Zumba allowed them to mentally reset and cope with work-related stress. These short routines provided a momentary escape, enabling them to clear their minds, regain focus, and maintain a more positive outlook during demanding situations.

"Just a few minutes of movement helps me reset and gain a bit of mental clarity."

"After a Zumba class, I feel lighter, more balanced, and ready to take on whatever else the day brings."

"Just 20 minutes of focused movement helped me reset mentally and regain control of my emotions."

"Taking a few minutes to move allows me to release tension and prepare for class or tasks."

"Running allows me to clear my mind and process the day's events in a healthier way."

"It's amazing how a bit of movement can reset my mood and energy."

("That short time for myself shifted my mindset, giving me a chance to breathe and approach things with a bit more patience."

1.2 Physical Activity as a Mood Booster

Twenty (20) participants mentioned that engaging in physical activities like running, Zumba, and quick workouts significantly boosts their mood after stressful work situations. They emphasized that physical exertion not only relieves tension but also leads to a positive emotional shift. This uplifted mood enhances their interactions and helps them approach work tasks with a refreshed perspective.

"It not only helps me unwind but also boosts my mood, allowing me to return to my work feeling more grounded."

"These short bursts of exercise help me stay centered and more prepared to handle my workload."

"Dancing and guiding others through the moves doesn't feel like 'work' but more like a rewarding break."

"It's a small effort actually, but it makes a big difference in managing the pressures of my job."

"Even short workouts help me decompress and feel refreshed."

1.3 Self-Care through Fitness

Sixteen (16) participants emphasized that incorporating fitness into their routine represents an essential form of self-care. These individuals expressed that when work feels overwhelming, taking time for exercise allows them to prioritize their mental and physical well-being, even if only for a brief period. They feel that this self-care routine reaffirms the importance of looking after their health, which, in turn, helps them manage their workload more effectively. Physical activity not only relieves immediate stress but also contributes to a lasting sense of control and balance amid work pressures.

"This time to refocus through fitness makes a significant difference in managing the intense demands of my work."

"It reminded me of the importance of self-care, even when time is tight."

"I've once again realized that physical activity, like running, shifts my focus from stress to movement."

"Finding ways to decompress through exercise is essential."

2. *How do you feel your mental clarity or focus changes after completing your regular fitness routine, especially on demanding workdays?*

2.1 *Enhanced Mental Clarity and Focus*

Twenty eight (28) participants highlighted that completing their fitness routines, even for a short time, brings them heightened mental clarity and focus, which is especially helpful on demanding workdays. They shared that exercise acts like a mental “reboot,” clearing their minds and helping them approach tasks with greater concentration. This enhanced clarity not only aids in managing workload but also allows them to prioritize tasks effectively and handle responsibilities calmly. The mental refreshment gained from physical activity enables them to feel more prepared and less overwhelmed by daily challenges.

“After working out, I experience a clearer mind and increased focus.”

“Even short activity sessions help reduce the mental fog.”

“The combination of music and movement clears my mind.”

“It’s almost as if the workout acts like a mental ‘reboot,’ allowing me to stay more present and engaged.”

“After a quick workout, I find that I approach my tasks with a clearer mind.”

“Small moments of movement keep me grounded, even on hectic days.”

“After I complete my usual exercise routine, I feel my mind is sharper and more grounded.”

2.2 *Increased Patience and Positivity*

Twenty four (24) participants observed that engaging in fitness routines positively impacts their patience and mood, especially during stressful workdays. They noted that exercise helps them feel more positive and less reactive, improving their interactions with students and colleagues. This mental shift allows them to face daily challenges with a calm and collected attitude. By fostering positivity and patience, physical activity becomes a valuable tool for managing the demands of their job and maintaining a balanced mindset.

“A workout not only lifts my mood but also enhances my ability to prioritize tasks and make quicker decisions.”

“It’s a stress-reliever that recharges both my body and my mind.”

“This boost in mental sharpness helps me handle each task more calmly and efficiently.”

“Exercise allows me to recharge mentally, especially when my schedule is full of classes and student activities.”

“These short breaks keep my energy up and help me face each task with a fresh perspective.”

“After working out, I feel like I can tackle the rest of my responsibilities more calmly.”

3. *Have you noticed any differences in how you handle stress on days when you skip your fitness activities compared to when you complete them*

3.1 Heightened Stress and Irritability

Twenty four (24) participants reported that skipping their regular fitness routines results in heightened stress and increased irritability, as they feel more affected by minor stressors and daily pressures. Without exercise, they tend to react more quickly to stress, and even small challenges seem harder to manage. This buildup of stress throughout the day leaves them feeling unprepared and overwhelmed.

“On days I don’t work out, I tend to feel more irritable and sensitive to minor stressors.”

“My patience wears thin faster, and I find myself more reactive to daily stresses.”

“On days when I skip it, I feel more weighed down by the day’s pressures.”

“Without that physical outlet, I tend to carry more tension.”

“I tend to feel more tense and easily frustrated.”

“I’m more likely to feel overwhelmed by small setbacks and get frustrated more easily.”

3.2 Emotional Balance and Positivity

Twenty (20) participants described exercise as an essential buffer for maintaining emotional balance and positivity. Engaging in physical activity allows them to release built-up tension and helps them feel mentally refreshed. With exercise, they approach their tasks with a positive mindset, making them better equipped to manage daily stress. In contrast, missing workouts impacts their resilience and lowers their ability to maintain a calm attitude.

“Fitness activities seem to act as a buffer, giving me a positive outlet for stress.”

“Even a tiny amount of exercise makes a big impact on my stress levels and mood.”

“Moving to the music and teaching Zumba allows me to let go of stress.”

“Exercise acts as a release, and without it, I feel less prepared to handle the unexpected challenges.”

“Exercise acts as a buffer, so when I skip it, the weight of the day feels heavier.”

3.3 Mental Readiness and Productivity

Twenty eight (28) participants noted that completing their fitness routines enhances their mental readiness and productivity, especially on high-demand days. Exercise provides them with the mental clarity needed to handle tasks with patience and efficiency. This preparation allows them to remain more focused and steady throughout the day. When they miss their workouts, however, they feel less productive and are often weighed down by a foggy mindset.

“When I complete my workout, I find I’m more balanced and can handle stressful situations more calmly and effectively.”

“Even a few minutes of movement helps reduce this tension.”

“That time to exercise is essential in helping me keep a level head.”

“Without that physical outlet, I tend to carry more tension.”

“Even a single Zumba session makes a difference, giving me the sense of balance I need to handle a high-stress work environment.”

“I find that regular exercise is key to keeping me sharp and reducing the sense of overload.”

“I’m more likely to feel overwhelmed by small setbacks and get frustrated more easily.”

Objective 2. Identify the specific fitness activities preferred by Physical Education teachers for managing stress and promoting mental well-being.

4. What specific type of exercise or fitness activity do you prioritize when you feel overwhelmed or stressed by your work responsibilities?

4.1 Quick, Space-Friendly Exercises

Twenty four (24) participants noted the benefits of engaging in brief, space-efficient exercises to alleviate stress. These activities, such as deep breathing, stretching, or light cardio, are easily incorporated into their routines due to minimal time and space requirements, making them ideal for quick stress relief during busy schedules. Participants emphasized that these exercises provide immediate relaxation, which helps them manage work-related stress effectively without interrupting their workflow.

“I prioritize deep breathing exercises and stretching to help me manage my stress. These activities are quick, easy to do in any space, and provide immediate relaxation, which is especially helpful in the middle of a busy day.”

“I instantly do quick stretching exercises since they don’t require much time or space. I can do a few stretches right in my office or even during a break between classes.”

“I turn to activities that are quick and calming, like deep breathing exercises or light stretching. These activities help me relax and are easy to fit in during breaks, even if I don’t have time for a full workout.”

“These exercises don’t require much planning, and I can fit them in without much preparation. The rhythmic movement and fresh air help clear my mind, which does wonders for reducing stress.”

“When I feel overwhelmed by work, I choose yoga or light stretching. They’re perfect for unwinding after a long day, and they’re simple enough to do anywhere.”

“These exercises don’t require a lot of setup, so I can jump in and feel like I’ve accomplished something, even if time is limited.”

4.2 Stress Relief

Twelve (12) participants highlighted choosing physically engaging activities, like Zumba or circuit training, which not only alleviate stress but also uplift their mood and provide an energetic boost. They noted that these activities require mental focus, which helps them detach from work-related concerns. The structured movements, rhythmic beats, and overall engagement with these activities create a balanced stress-relief experience, making them feel more refreshed and prepared for the rest of the day.

“Zumba is my choice; it’s not only my passion but also an activity that immediately lifts my mood. The music and rhythm make me forget about stress, allowing me to fully immerse myself in the moment.”

“I gravitate toward activities like circuit training or short, intense cardio sessions. These exercises allow me to push myself and release energy in a structured way, which helps reduce any stress I’m carrying.”

“When the demands start piling up, I usually turn to basic strength training or even a quick HIIT session. The intensity helps me channel my stress, making me feel physically and mentally stronger.”

5. Why do you prefer certain fitness activities over others when it comes to managing stress from work?

5.1 Convenience and Quick Relief

Twenty (20) participants highlighted the importance of selecting fitness activities that can be done quickly and without extensive setup, making them ideal for their busy schedules. Activities like stretching, deep breathing, and light cardio were preferred for their flexibility and efficiency, allowing participants to manage stress in a short time without leaving their workspace. These quick, convenient exercises provide mental relief and keep participants energized for their daily tasks.

“I prefer deep breathing and stretching exercises because they’re simple yet highly effective. These exercises can be done quickly and provide mental and physical relief without requiring a gym or extensive time commitment.”

“Stretching exercises...are convenient and can be done anywhere. I may not have time for a full workout, but I can easily stretch for a few minutes without needing equipment or changing locations.”

“These activities are manageable within my tight schedule and help me relieve stress without taking much time. With limited time, I need activities that are practical and don’t require me to leave my workspace.”

“Walking and cardio give me an immediate energy boost without exhausting me. They help me clear my head while keeping my body active, which I find perfect after teaching multiple classes.”

“Yoga and stretching...are easy to fit into my schedule, even on busy days. This flexibility makes these activities ideal for managing work-related stress.”

5.2 Social and Energetic Engagement

Twelve (12) participants preferred fitness activities that combine physical exercise with social or energetic components, such as Zumba and circuit training. These activities help them relieve stress through dynamic movements and shared experiences, which not only provide an energy boost but also enhance social connections. This mix of physical and social engagement allows participants to unwind, elevate their mood, and face work challenges with renewed enthusiasm.

“I will always choose Zumba...it’s a unique mix of cardio, dance, and social engagement, which makes it the perfect fit for relieving stress. Teaching Zumba also lets me share this experience with others.”

“The variety in circuit training keeps me motivated, which is important when I’m feeling overwhelmed...Each exercise feels like a mini goal, and accomplishing each one helps build a positive mindset.”

“I gravitate towards strength-based workouts...Unlike other routines, strength training pushes me to stay present, which helps me unwind.”

6. Can you share any particular routines or exercises that you rely on to maintain your mental health during challenging times at work?

6.1 Energizing Start and Soothing End

Twenty eight (28) participants rely on routines that bookend their day, starting with energizing exercises to set a positive tone and ending with calming activities to unwind. This approach helps them establish balance and manage mental well-being amidst daily challenges.

“Starting my day with yoga helps me set a calm and focused mindset...In the evening, I repeat this routine to unwind, letting go of any residual stress from the day.”

“Starting the day with Zumba gives me a boost that lasts for hours, while an afternoon session helps me unwind and release any stress.”

“I try to start with some shoulder rolls, neck stretches, and deep breathing to feel more centered before facing a busy schedule.”

“I usually involve a mix of gentle stretches and deep breathing exercises to start or end the day.”

“My usual routine includes a short cardio session and some stretches, helping me feel refreshed and ready to focus again.”

“My typical routine involves strength exercises and stretches...Stretching after the workout feels rewarding, giving me a sense of calm.”

“This combination of jump rope, bodyweight exercises, and light stretching helps me manage stress efficiently and stay mentally prepared.”

6.2 Versatile and Accessible Exercises

Twenty eight (28) participants value routines that are simple and can be performed anywhere without specialized equipment. These versatile exercises—light stretching, bodyweight exercises, and breathing exercises—help them manage stress without disrupting their schedules.

“This combination is easy to do on campus or at home, so I can fit it in whenever I have a few minutes.”

“This routine is easy to remember and doesn’t require any equipment, so I can do it almost anywhere.”

“I try to start with some shoulder rolls, neck stretches, and deep breathing...a realistic way to manage stress within my time constraints.”

“My usual routine includes a short cardio session and some stretches, which doesn’t take too long.”

“A few minutes of breathing exercises and gentle stretching...keeps me mentally refreshed and doesn’t disrupt my day.”

“I can easily stretch for a few minutes without needing equipment or changing locations.”

“The yoga and breathing exercises I do can be done quickly, even between classes.”

5. Discussion

Objective 1. Examine the role of fitness activities in enhancing mental health among Physical Education teachers in stressful work environments.

Engaging in physical activity provides a valuable mental reset for teachers, helping them manage work-related stress. Participants in the study noted that exercise routines like jogging or Zumba offer brief moments of escape, enabling them to clear their minds and feel more balanced. Yook ^[30] supports these findings, stating that physical activity can significantly boost mental health, which aids individuals in maintaining independence and coping with daily stressors. Thus, integrating fitness into the daily routine can play a crucial role in sustaining mental resilience for educators.

Participants observed a noticeable boost in mood after engaging in physical activities such as running, Zumba, and quick workouts, particularly during stressful periods. Mahindru et al. ^[31] found similar outcomes, noting that exercise helps alleviate depressive symptoms and enhances mood for people of all ages. These results highlight that physical activities not only relieve stress but also foster a positive emotional state, reinforcing the benefits of regular exercise for maintaining a constructive outlook amidst work demands.

Incorporating fitness routines into daily life was identified as an essential form of self-care by participants, allowing them to prioritize both physical and mental well-being. According to the World Health Organization ^[32] physical activity includes various forms of bodily movement beyond exercise alone, and addressing physical inactivity requires a society-wide approach. This aligns with participants’ experiences, where prioritizing fitness contributes to a balanced lifestyle, showing that accessible self-care practices like exercise can enhance their capacity to manage stress.

Teachers reported that exercise provided them with a mental “reboot,” allowing them to regain focus and clarity. This mental refresh helped them approach tasks with improved concentration and calmly manage responsibilities. Gilmore et al. ^[33] observed similar benefits with brain-stimulating activities, such as stretches and balancing exercises, noting that these can enhance cognitive clarity. These findings underline the effectiveness of exercise in not only managing stress but also optimizing focus and productivity.

Engaging in fitness routines positively impacted on teachers’ patience and mood, especially during high-stress days. Participants noted feeling less reactive and more positive after completing their routines, a result that Suttles ^[34] supports by describing how the emotional labor required of teachers can be mitigated through self-care. The study highlights the role of physical activity as a crucial strategy for maintaining emotional resilience and effective interaction within classroom settings, helping educators navigate daily stressors with greater ease.

Teachers expressed that without exercise, they became more reactive to stress and found minor challenges increasingly difficult to handle. Janneke et al. ^[35] discovered similar results, noting that regular physical activity leads to lower job stress and greater job satisfaction. When teachers skip exercise, stress

levels tend to increase, which affects their overall resilience and patience. This connection reinforces the need for regular physical activity to help educators maintain calm under pressure.

Teachers noted that consistent exercise enabled them to maintain a positive mindset, allowing them to manage their daily stress more effectively. Ferguson ^[36] also highlights that many teachers face intense pressures, from academic responsibilities to societal expectations, making them susceptible to burnout. This study confirms that fitness routines help educators approach their tasks with optimism, which aids in managing the emotional and physical demands of their roles.

Objective 2. Identify the specific fitness activities preferred by Physical Education teachers for managing stress and promoting mental well-being.

Participants observed that fitness routines improved their mental readiness, especially on high-demand days. Exercise provided clarity, enabling them to handle tasks with patience and efficiency. This aligns with research by Cecchini et al. ^[37] and Cale et al. ^[38], who suggest that physical education can enhance motivation and decrease exam-related stress. These results suggest that physical activity enhances teachers' mental preparedness, which is essential for maintaining productivity under pressure.

Teachers valued the stress relief gained from brief exercises like deep breathing, stretching, and light cardio, which provided immediate relaxation. Norelli et al. ^[39] discusses similar benefits from relaxation techniques like box breathing, which reduce stress responses such as elevated heart rate and anxiety. Participants found that incorporating these quick activities into their routines was effective for managing stress without disrupting their work, demonstrating the accessibility and effectiveness of brief exercises.

Teachers reported that activities like Zumba or circuit training not only alleviated stress but also boosted their energy and focus. Sharma et al. ^[40] found that these high-intensity exercises elevate heart rate quickly, making them an ideal way to reduce stress while improving mood. Participants appreciated the mental focus required by these exercises, as it allowed them to temporarily detach from work concerns, underscoring the dual physical and psychological benefits of high-energy activities.

Participants expressed a preference for fitness routines that require minimal setup, as these fit better within their busy schedules. Savoini ^[41] highlights that everyone copes with stress differently, with Zumba specifically offering both physical and mental health benefits. The teachers' preference for quick exercises aligns with this perspective, emphasizing the practicality of accessible fitness routines that still provide effective stress relief.

The appeal of exercises promoting both mental relaxation and physical relief was noted, with activities like yoga and stretching helping to reduce tension without draining energy. Hagen et al. ^[42] observed similar benefits, finding that yoga not only enhances relaxation but also improves mental well-being by helping participants recognize the need to unwind. The study's findings confirm that low-impact exercises are particularly beneficial for teachers after demanding workdays.

Teachers benefited from combining social and physical elements in activities like Zumba and circuit training. Verma et al. ^[43] confirms that these aerobic exercises provide cardiovascular benefits, calorie burning, and stress reduction while fostering social connections. This finding highlights the importance of social interaction within fitness routines, which not only improves physical health but also contributes to a sense of well-being and community among educators.

Participants shared that routines bookending their day, with energizing exercises in the morning and calming ones in the evening, helped them manage stress effectively. Rowman & Littlefield ^[44] describe how mindfulness practices contribute to overall well-being, allowing individuals to balance their responsibilities

while connecting with a sense of community. This approach demonstrates the holistic benefits of fitness routines for educators, enabling them to start the day positively and unwind at the end of the day.

Teachers valued exercises that could be performed anywhere and did not require specialized equipment. Rodrigues et al. ^[45] found that using low-cost equipment for fitness routines helps individuals maintain functional fitness and improve their quality of life. This study confirms that simple exercises not only support teachers' physical health but also offer a practical way to sustain their well-being, even in resource-limited environments.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the essential role of fitness activities in supporting the mental health of Physical Education (PE) teachers, particularly as they navigate the stressors of a demanding profession. Fitness activities emerged not only as strategies for immediate stress relief but also as long-term practices that enhance clarity, patience, resilience, and optimism. Consistent participation contributed to positive coping, whereas neglecting fitness routines often resulted in irritability and diminished emotional balance. The findings underscore the need for educational institutions to integrate self-care and stress management training into teacher development programs, recognizing that teacher well-being directly influences performance and educational quality. Encouraging accessible, adaptable, and sustainable fitness practices will not only strengthen the resilience of PE teachers but also reinforce their role as models of health for their students.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The research was confined to a purposive sample of 40 PE teachers in Zamboanga, Philippines, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions or educational contexts. Self-reported experiences from interviews may also be influenced by personal interpretation and recall, which could affect the comprehensiveness of the data. Future research should expand the scope to include larger and more diverse populations across different cultural and institutional settings, adopt mixed-method approaches to triangulate findings, and explore the long-term effects of fitness activities on teacher well-being and professional performance. Such directions would strengthen the evidence base and provide broader insights into how fitness can be systematically integrated into teacher development and workplace wellness programs.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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