

Improving Physical, Social, and Mental Health Outcomes for People Living with an Intellectual Disability through Cycling

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Abstract : Improved mental and physical health, community connection, and increased life satisfaction has been strongly associated with bike riding for those with and without a disability. However, much evidence suggests that people living with a disability face increased barriers to engaging in cycling compared to members of the general population. People with an intellectual disability often live more sedentary and socially isolated lives that negatively impact their mental and physical health, as well as life satisfaction. This paper is based on preliminary findings from a three-year intervention cycling project funded by the South Australian Government. The cycling project was developed in partnership with community stakeholders that provided weekly instruction, training, and support to individuals living with intellectual disabilities to increase their capacity in cycling. This project aimed to support people living with intellectual disabilities to foster and facilitate improved physical and mental health, confidence, and independence and enhance social networking through their engagement in community cycling. The program applied principles of social role valorisation (SRV) theory as its guiding framework. Preliminary data collected is based on qualitative interviews with over 50 program participants, results from two participant wellness questionnaires, as well as a perceptually regulated exercise test administered throughout the project implementation. Preliminary findings are further supplemented with ethnographic analyses by the researchers who took a phenomenology of life experience approach. Preliminary findings of the program suggest a variety of social motivations behind participants' desire to learn cycling that acknowledges previous barriers to engagement and cycling's role to address feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Meaningful health benefits can be achieved as demonstrated by increases in predicted V02 max measures, suggesting that physical intervention can not only improve physical health outcomes but also provide a variety of other social benefits. Initial engagement in the project has demonstrated an increase in participants' sense of confidence, well-being, and physical fitness. Implementation of the project in partnership with a variety of community stakeholders has identified a number of critical factors and processes necessary for future service replication, sustainability, and success. Findings from this intervention study contribute to the development of a knowledge base on how best to support individuals living with an intellectual disability to partake in bike riding and increase positive outcomes associated with their capacity building, social interaction, increased physical activity, physical health, and mental well-being. The initial findings of this study provide critical academic insights into the social and physical benefits of cycling for people living with a disability, as well as practical advice for future human service applications.

Keywords : cycling, disability, social inclusion, capacity building

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