Sport delivers more than just benefits to our physical health

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We all know the importance of sport and physical activity to our physical health; we have had it drilled into us from a young age. Our parents, school teachers, all aspects of the media, and even our childhood sporting heroes tell us that we can stay fit and healthy by playing sport. What about other aspects of our lives that sport impacts though? We do not often hear about the benefit of sport participation on our mental and emotional well-being, or the social benefits that it provides. The support structures and social networks created through belonging to a community sport club are also positive outcomes that many of us may not consider that arise through sport participation.

There has been a substantial amount of research conducted surrounding the benefits of sport and physical activity, regardless of whether the sport activity occurs in an informal and social setting, or at elite level participation. Research conducted by The Centre of Sport and Social Impact (CSSI), at La Trobe University in Melbourne, into the well-being of individuals who are associated with a specific organisation or club, and actively participate in sport, found that belongingness to a club resulted in benefits far beyond those physical benefits expected. The research study found that the context in which the sporting activity took place, influenced the social connections developed between individuals within the club; connections that may not be readily experienced, or indeed actively sought, had these individuals not participated in the sport in the first place. Additionally, these social connections developed within the club setting, provided individuals with the opportunity to access social support, which they may not otherwise be able to access.

Delving deeper, and looking beyond the physical and social benefits brought about by belongingness to a sport club, research by the CSSI identified a number of well-being outcomes recognised by individuals, including enhanced self-esteem, in the form of improved self-concept, self-worth and self-confidence, as well as improved trust in others with whom they share social circles with. Additionally, the research found that involvement with the sport club enabled individuals to maintain structure in life, and provided their life with meaning and life purpose.

Inclusion and connectedness to support structures developed through sport are particularly beneficial for disadvantaged communities. While research has shown that disadvantaged communities are less likely to participate in sport and physical recreation than those not facing disadvantage, we know that participation in sport improves their well-being and inclusion to the community. Research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has suggested that personal networks developed through involvement with a sport club are important in supporting the integration of disadvantaged people into the wider community, thus reducing the isolation they often face. Further, disadvantaged people enjoy the same types of recreation and sporting opportunities as those without disadvantage, and seek the same challenges and enjoyment sport participation brings. It is clear that inclusion in sport, and connectedness to social support structures developed through
the sporting activity provides disadvantaged communities with many benefits; they may improve their physical health, enhance their psychological and emotional well-being and experience positive social outcomes.

The work that Reclink Australia does with disadvantaged communities is a great example of how access to, and inclusion in sport and recreational activities, can benefit not only those experiencing disadvantage, but also the wider community.

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