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Are we moving well or just moving fast:

The relationship between exercise motivation, mental health, and wellbeing

A Mind HK and lululemon Research Report

2026

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Acknowledgements

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Mind HK (Mind Mental Health Hong Kong Limited) is a registered charity under Section 88 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance (91/16471), established in 2017. Our mission is to ensure that no one faces a mental health problem alone. Through our work, we hope to improve awareness of mental health and mental health conditions, remove the associated stigma, and provide free psychological support to achieve the best mental health for all in Hong Kong. Together with the existing collaboration and research efforts, we are here to support Hong Kong in becoming a global leader and regional model for public mental health.

For more information about our work, vision, and mission, please visit our website: https://www.mind.org.hk/.

lululemon

lululemon athletica inc. is a technical athletic apparel, footwear and accessories company for yoga, running, training, and most other activities, creating transformational products and experiences that build meaningful connections, unlocking greater possibility and wellbeing for all. Setting the bar in innovation of fabrics and functional designs, lululemon works with yogis and athletes in local communities around the world for continuous research and product feedback.

Suggested Citation

Mind Mental Health Hong Kong Limited (2026). The relationship between exercise motivation, mental health, and wellbeing.

Purpose

Beyond its established role in easing depression and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2024), physical activity plays a complex role in daily mental wellbeing. To fully understand its value, we must look beyond clinical benefits and examine what motivates people to move and how that movement actually feels in practice.

A survey of 506 Hong Kong residents aged 25-64, commissioned by Mind HK in partnership with lululemon, explores exercise frequency, motivation, and lifestyle, and how they relate to mental health among Hong Kong adults. It looks at enjoyment, social connection, activity tracking and everyday pressures, alongside depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness and wellbeing.

Building on these insights, lululemon has partnered with Mind HK as its Wellbeing and Movement Partner, supported through lululemon Gives, a global initiative dedicated to advancing solutions for mental health and wellbeing through movement and mindfulness.

Together, the organisations will deliver community experiences, movement-based programming and public education initiatives throughout the year, helping to strengthen mental wellbeing and promote the positive impact of physical activity on mental health.

How to read these findings

This survey provides a snapshot of people's experiences and perspectives at a single point in time. Because it is based on self-reported responses, it can identify patterns and associations, but cannot determine cause and effect. For instance, stress may influence exercise habits, exercise experiences may affect stress levels, or other factors may shape both.

The exercise experiences and four participant profiles identified in this report were developed through exploratory analyses and should be viewed as emerging patterns rather than definitive categories. Differences in mental health outcomes between the profiles were generally modest.

Exercise is only one of many factors that contribute to wellbeing. While motivation and exercise experiences were associated with mental health outcomes, these findings do not suggest that they are more important than exercise frequency or other influences on wellbeing.

Note: All percentages shown are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Introduction

Physical activity is widely recognised as an important contributor to physical and mental wellbeing. Regular movement can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve overall wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2024). However, understanding its role in everyday life requires looking beyond how often people exercise. The reasons people move, the circumstances surrounding their activity, and how they feel afterwards are also central to understanding whether movement supports their wellbeing.

In fast-paced Hong Kong, physical activity is frequently squeezed out by daily time demands. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (2023) confirmed that lack of time remains the primary obstacle preventing adults from exercising.

As a result, the population relies predominantly on functional movement rather than recreational fitness; adults average 327 minutes of weekly transport-related activity, followed by work-related movement, leaving leisure-time physical activity in last place (Department of Health, 2025).

Whether time pressure, digital interruptions and fitness expectations shape its restorative potential in Hong Kong remains a question for this study: does movement help people recover from daily pressures, or can it become another source of pressure?

01 **To explore how often do people exercise, and what forms of movement fit into their lives**

02 **To understand how exercise motivation and everyday experiences relate to mental health and wellbeing**

03 **To identify recognisable groups of people with different exercise habits and attitudes**

Methodology & Sampling

The current study was an online survey conducted by an independent survey company between June and July 2026, using random sampling to recruit 506 Hong Kong adults aged 25–64.

Demographics

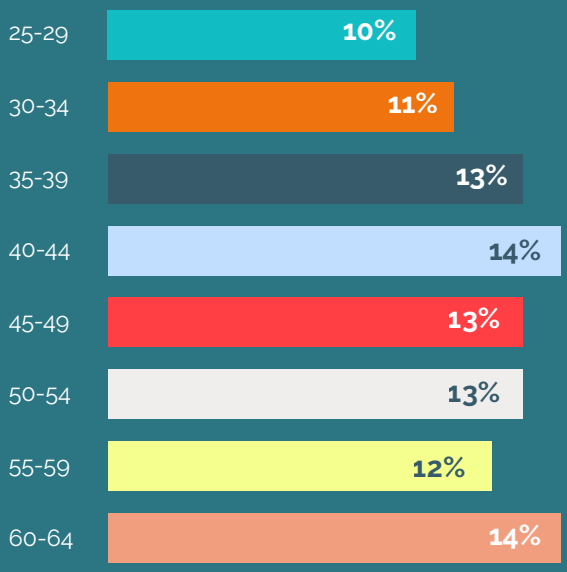
Gender

♂ Male	43%
♀ Female	57%

Ethnicity

99% Chinese

Age Distribution



Education Background



Primary - Secondary Graduate	42%
College	23%
Bachelor's Degree + Postgraduate Graduate	36%

Key Findings

1 Exercise frequency and motivation

17% reported no exercise, while **53%** exercised on one or two days a week. Almost two-thirds (**64%**) reported no more than one hour of movement a day, including walking and commuting.

Figure 1. Exercise frequency among participants (weekly)
from the survey question: "On average, how often do you engage in exercise each week?"

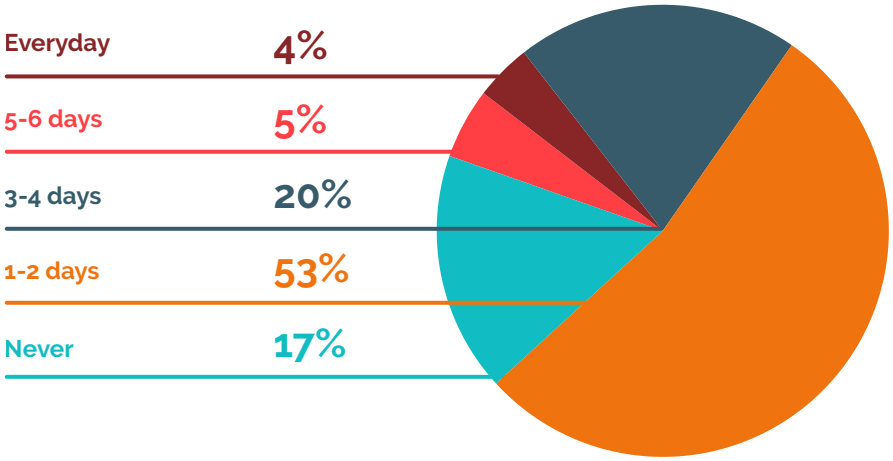
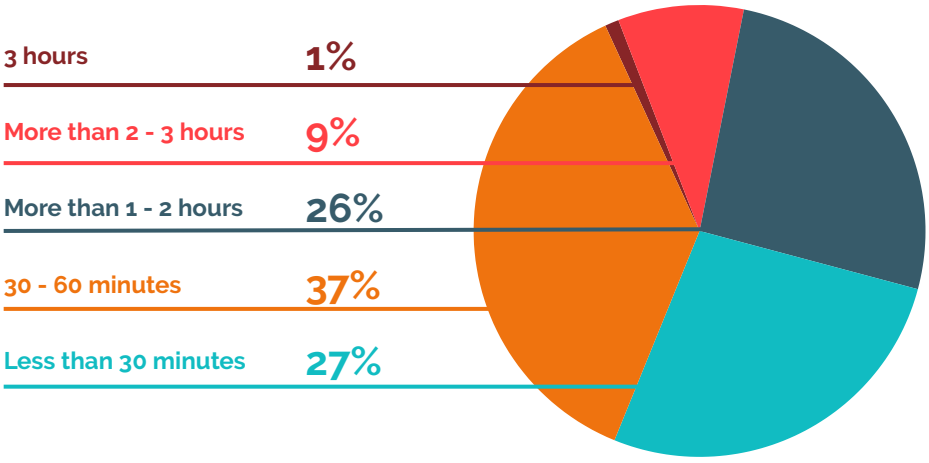
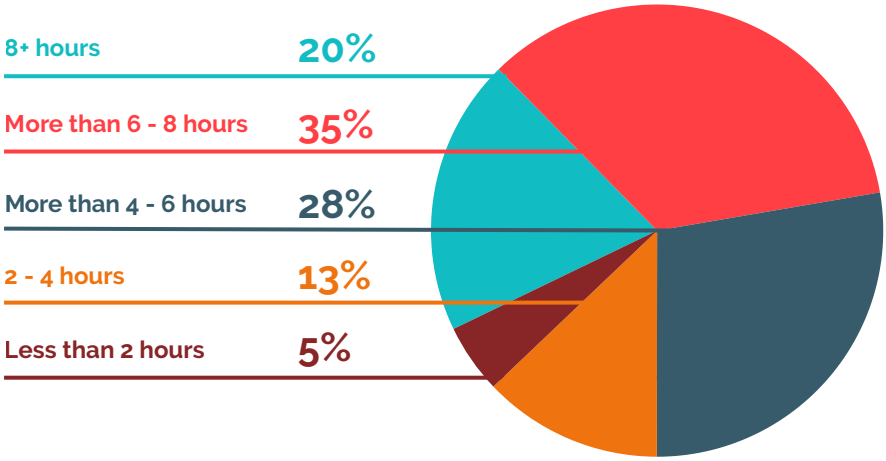


Figure 2. Average daily movement & commuting breakdown
from the survey question: "On a typical day, how much time do you spend moving (including walking and commuting)?"



Key Findings

Figure 3. Average daily movement & commuting breakdown
from the survey question: "On a typical day, how much time do you spend sitting?"



1.1. Top 3 exercises participated among respondents

Figure 4. Top 3 most exercises participanted among respondants
from the survey question:"Which of the following activities have you participated in the past 12 months"



Key Findings

1.2. Wellbeing gains beyond frequency

Respondents who exercised every day reported the highest levels of wellbeing, with an average WHO-5 score of 17.36 out of 25. Their wellbeing scores were significantly higher than those of respondents who exercised less often or not at all.

However, **higher exercise frequency was not consistently linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress or loneliness**. This suggests that while being active is associated with better wellbeing, how people experience exercise may be just as important as how often they do it.

Figure 5. Raw scores of mental health outcomes across different levels of exercise frequencies

Exercise frequency	Depression	Anxiety	Stress	Loneliness	Wellbeing
No exercise	3.06	2.76	7.45	2.41	13.72
1–2 days per week	4.41	3.93	10.35	3.23	14.16
3–4 days per week	5.47	4.89	10.97	3.58	14.00
5–6 days per week	3.59	3.67	9.85	3.07	14.44
Every day	4.09	2.50	6.46	2.27	17.36

Figures are mean scores. Higher wellbeing scores are favourable; higher depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness scores indicate greater difficulties. The measures use different scoring ranges.

Key Findings

1.3 Better outcomes begin with enjoyment and meaning

63% of respondents valued the benefits of exercise, but only 48% enjoyed their sessions: a gap of 15 percentage points. Recognising the benefits of exercise did not always translate into enjoying it.

Respondents who exercised because they enjoyed it reported higher wellbeing and lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress. People who valued exercise or saw it as an important part of who they are also tended to report better wellbeing. In contrast, those who struggled with motivation were more likely to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.

Overall, people with stronger self-driven motivation to exercise tended to have better mental health outcomes, although this was not linked to lower loneliness. Motivation driven by guilt or external pressure showed mixed results, with guilt-based motivation associated with higher stress.

2 Exercise lifestyle

2.1. Move together, stronger together

People wanted more opportunities to move together, yet 48% usually exercised alone. Among this group, approximately **58% said movement helped them connect with others, 49% enjoyed exercising with others more and 52% wanted more opportunities for group activities**.

People who usually exercised alone also reported higher loneliness scores. This association does not mean exercising alone causes loneliness, but the findings point to interest in more social opportunities.

Figure 6. Participant Attitudes Toward Exercising with Others



Key Findings

2.2. The double-edged sword: Exercise tracking

53% tracked their physical activity. Across respondents, 51% said tracking motivated them, while 25% said it made them feel pressured.

Among those who tracked their activity:



34%
felt exercise was another task to complete



28%
felt guilty when they were not exercising

2.3. Physically active, mentally drained

Busy and fast-paced lifestyles were common among respondents. **Half (50%) said daily life often felt rushed, 46% felt constantly "on the go", and 40% found it difficult to slow down. While around one in three (34%) rarely felt fully relaxed.**

These pressures often extended into exercise. While being active, 45% checked messages, 30% remained preoccupied with other thoughts, and 25% found it difficult to disconnect from their phones.

As a result, being physically active did not always mean feeling mentally refreshed. **Three in ten respondents (30%) described themselves as physically active but mentally tired.** Further analysis found that feeling rushed and struggling to switch off were associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

2.4. The weight of social expectations

Seeing others exercise on social media made 30% feel they should do the same.
For 29%, exercise felt like another task, while 28% were motivated by how others might view their appearance.

24% felt like a failure after not exercising for a while, and 23% felt guilty when they did not exercise. Direct pressure from friends or family was less common, at 13%.

Key Findings

3 Four exercise profiles

People's reasons for exercising and their everyday experiences often overlap. To explore these patterns, the study grouped 481 respondents with similar motivations and attitudes into four profiles.

These profiles help illustrate different ways people relate to exercise and physical activity. They are not diagnoses or fixed personality types, but exploratory groups identified within this survey. Further research is needed to understand whether these patterns are seen in other populations.



Relaxed Movers - "I move when I want to move"

27% | 129 respondents

Mental health: Lowest levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms and stress
Motivation: Average level of autonomous motivation, relatively low in controlled motivations
Habits: Not the most frequent exercisers



Autonomous and Active Exercisers - "I move because I like to move"

25% | 121 respondents

Mental Health: Highest WHO-5 wellbeing scores, relatively favourable
Motivation: High intrinsic drive (enjoyment, values & identity) but also highest in introjected (guilt based) motivation
Habits: Frequent exercisers; experience occasional pressure/guilt



Disengaged Movers - "I am not motivated to move"

15% | 72 respondents

Mental Health: Least favourable overall mental health pattern
Motivation: Low motivation across most dimensions
Habits: Lowest exercise frequency



Conflicted Movers - "I feel pressured to move"

33% | 159 respondents

Mental Health: 2nd-highest in PHQ-9 scores
Motivation: Low intrinsic drive paired with high external pressure and expectations
Habits: Movement is heavily dictated by obligation rather than enjoyment; greatest difficulty in disconnecting while exercising

Recommendations

The findings support a broader conversation about exercise: regular participation, enjoyment, social connection and the pressures people experience all deserve attention. They suggest the following practical directions for organisations supporting healthy exercising.

01

Make enjoyment part of the invitation

Many respondents already recognised the benefits of exercise, but fewer enjoyed it. Offer choices that help people find activities they like and find personally meaningful. Communications should give as much attention on enjoyment and personal reasons for moving as on participation targets.

02

Create accessible opportunities for connection

There was interest in moving with others, including among people who usually exercised alone. Welcoming group activities and opportunities to bring a friend could respond to this interest. The aim is to offer choice and connection, without making group exercise another expectation and create pressure.

03

Keep goals and tracking flexible

Tracking motivated many respondents, but pressure and guilt were also present. Encourage people to use goals and tracking in ways that suit them, with room for rest and routine changes. Avoid presenting a missed target as failure.

04

Make room to pause

Busy routines and digital interruptions were common. Activities could offer opportunities to put the phone aside and focus on the experience. Present this as an option to explore, rather than a proven way to improve mental health.

05

Recognise different starting points

The four profiles suggest that people may need different invitations to movement. Someone who already enjoys exercise may respond differently from someone who feels disconnected from it or under pressure. Small, manageable opportunities and meaningful choice can make communications more relevant.

Conclusion



These findings suggest that there may be no single “ideal” type of exerciser.

Encouraging people simply to move more may overlook important differences in why and how they move. Supporting self driven motivation through meaningful choice, joyful movement, confidence, and positive social connection may be more impactful, while tracking and performance goals should remain flexible rather than becoming additional sources of pressure.

Rest and opportunities to disconnect can also be viewed as an important part of a healthy, sustainable relationship with movement rather than a sign of falling short.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between movement and mental wellbeing is not one size fits all. While how much people move matters, so do their motivations, the pressures they experience, and whether movement helps them connect, find enjoyment, and create space to recharge from the demands of everyday life.

About the Research

What the survey measured

- Exercise behaviour: weekly frequency, daily movement and sitting time, and activities and organised events joined in the previous 12 months.
- Exercise motivation: the 24-item Behavioural Regulation in Exercise Questionnaire-3 (BREQ-3), covering lack of motivation, external expectations, guilt, personal value, identity and enjoyment.
- Exercise attitudes and lifestyle: 25 study-specific questions covering pressure, social experiences, technology use and the pace of daily life.
- Mental health: depressive symptoms (PHQ-9), anxiety symptoms (GAD-7), stress (DASS-21 Stress subscale) and loneliness (an adapted Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Scale).
- Wellbeing: the WHO-5 Well-Being Index, scored from 0 to 25, with higher scores indicating better wellbeing. Three separate questions also asked about physical, mental and social wellbeing.

The symptom questionnaires describe experiences and are not clinical diagnoses. The different measures have different scoring ranges, so their raw scores should not be compared directly.

How the results were analysed

The analysis summarised responses and examined relationships with mental health. Related attitude and lifestyle questions were grouped into five areas using exploratory factor analysis: exercise pressure, rush culture, moving with others, difficulty disconnecting and tracking orientation.

The six motivation scores and five exercise-experience areas were then used to identify the four profiles using latent profile analysis. Profile comparisons of mental health allowed for age and gender. The full survey included 506 respondents; the profile analysis included 481.

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Appendix

1. Full Demographics Table

Age Group	
Mean (SD)	45 (11)
25 - 29	49 (9.7%)
30 - 34	58 (11%)
35 - 39	67 (13%)
40 - 44	72 (14%)
45 - 49	66 (13%)
50 - 54	65 (13%)
55 - 59	59 (12%)
60 - 64	70 (14%)
Gender	
Female	287 (57%)
Male	219 (43%)
Marital Status	
Never married	152 (30%)
Cohabit	28 (5.5%)
Married	296 (58%)
Widowed	2 (0.4%)
Divorced/ separated	28 (5.5%)

Parenthood	
Yes	261 (52%)
No	245 (48%)
Number of Children	
1	144 (28%)
2	97 (19%)
3	18 (3.6%)
4	2 (0.4%)
N/A	245 (48%)
Ethnicity	
Chinese	500 (99%)
Indonesian	2 (0.4%)
Thai	2 (0.4%)
Other Asian	2 (0.4%)
Education Level	
Primary	9 (1.8%)
Lower secondary (form 1 to 3)	35 (6.9%)
Upper secondary (form 4 to 7/ including Yi Jin Diploma Programme)	166 (33%)
College: Diploma/ Certificate/ Associate Degree	114 (23%)
Bachelor's Degree	148 (29%)
Postgraduate: Master/ Phd	34 (6.7%)

Appendix

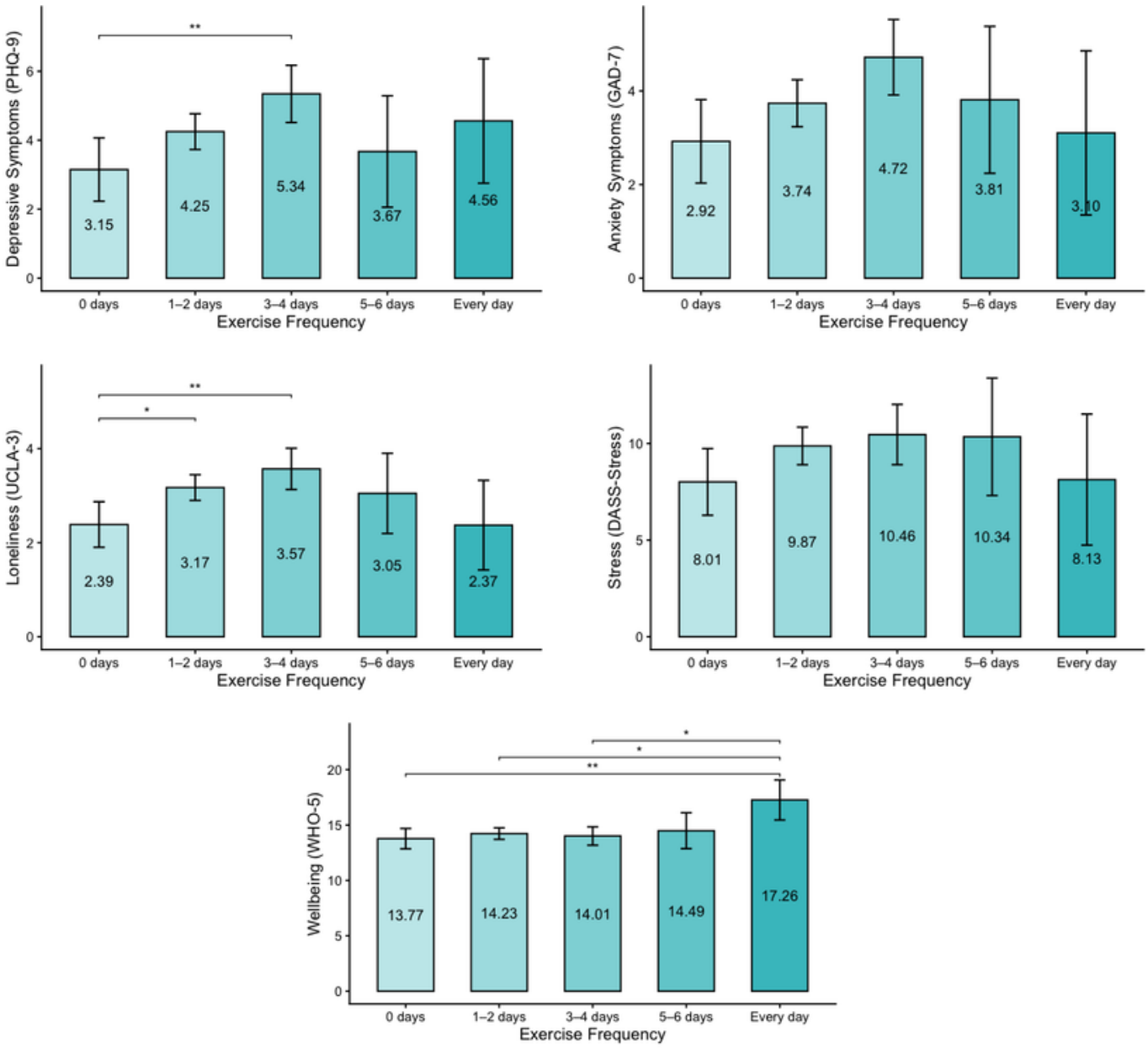
1. Full Demographics Table (Con't)

Employment Status	
Working people	400 (79%)
Student	2 (0.4%)
Home-Maker	53 (10%)
Retired	24 (4.7%)
Unemployed	27 (5.3%)
Personal Income (HK$)	
Less than $10,000	52 (10%)
$10,000 – $19,999	68 (13%)
$20,000 – $29,999	117 (23%)
$30,000 – $39,999	90 (18%)
$40,000 – $49,999	50 (9.9%)
$50,000 – $74,999	35 (6.9%)
$75,000 – $99,999	7 (1.4%)
$100,000 or more	2 (0.4%)
I prefer not to say	55 (11%)
No income	30 (5.9%)

Household Income (HK$)	
Less than $10,000	12 (2.4%)
$10,000 – $19,999	23 (4.5%)
$20,000 – $29,999	48 (9.5%)
$30,000 – $39,999	62 (12%)
$40,000 – $49,999	78 (15%)
$50,000 – $74,999	136 (27%)
$75,000 – $99,999	55 (11%)
$100,000 or more	29 (5.7%)
I prefer not to say	63 (12%)

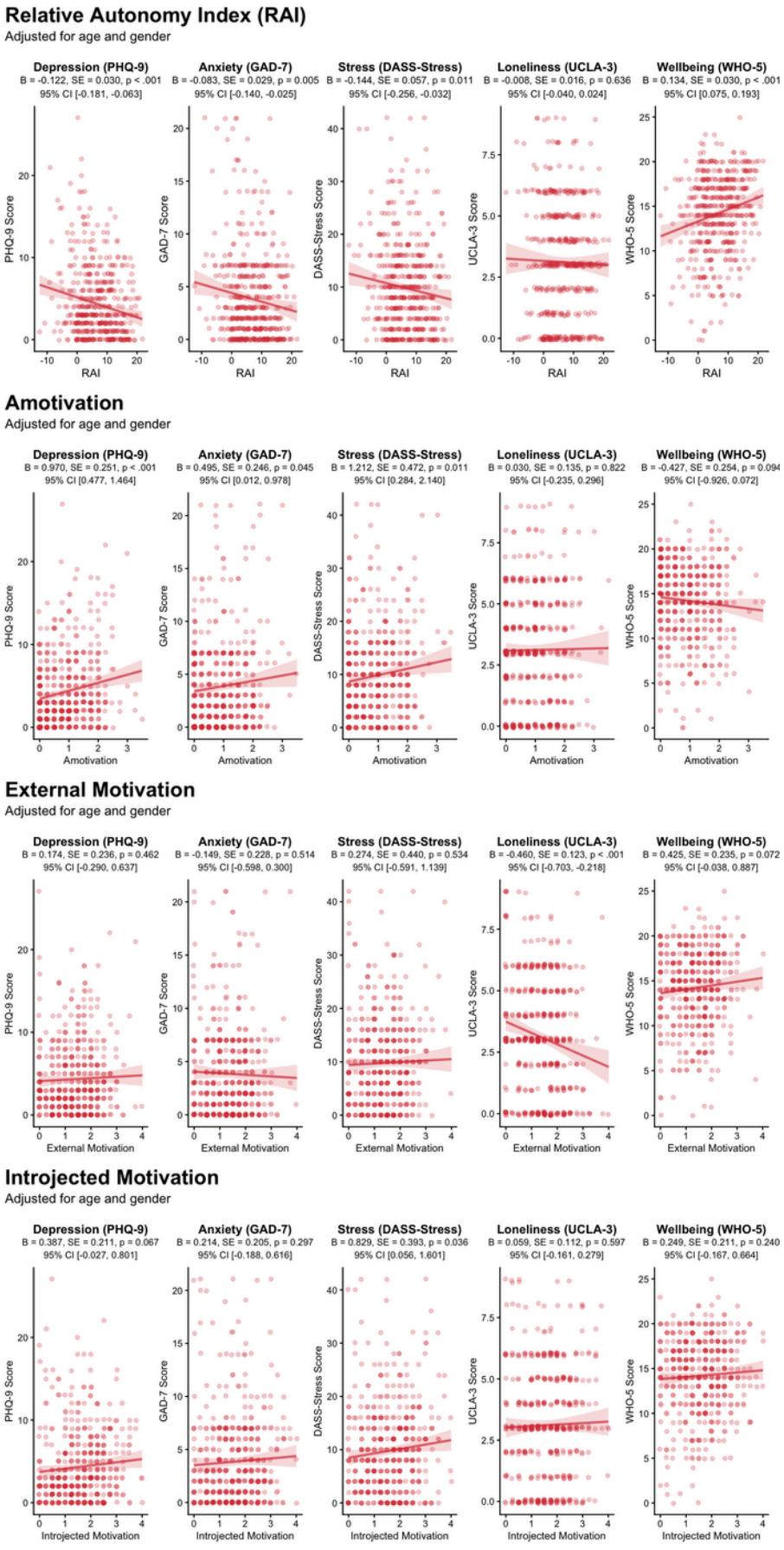
Appendix

2. Exercise Frequency and Mental Health Outcomes (Controlled for Age and Gender)



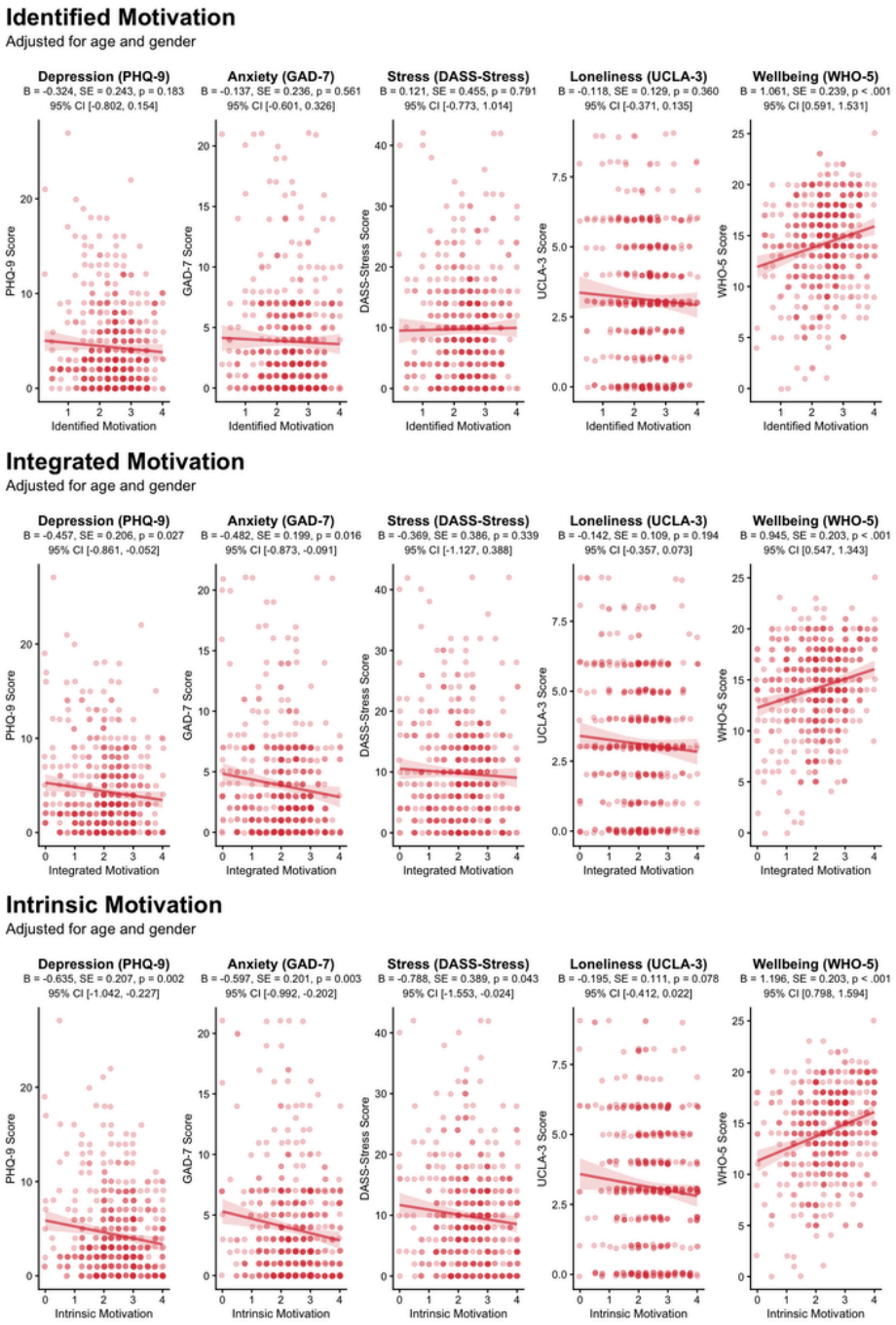
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3. Exercise Motivation (BREQ-3) and Mental Health Outcomes (Controlled for Age and Gender)



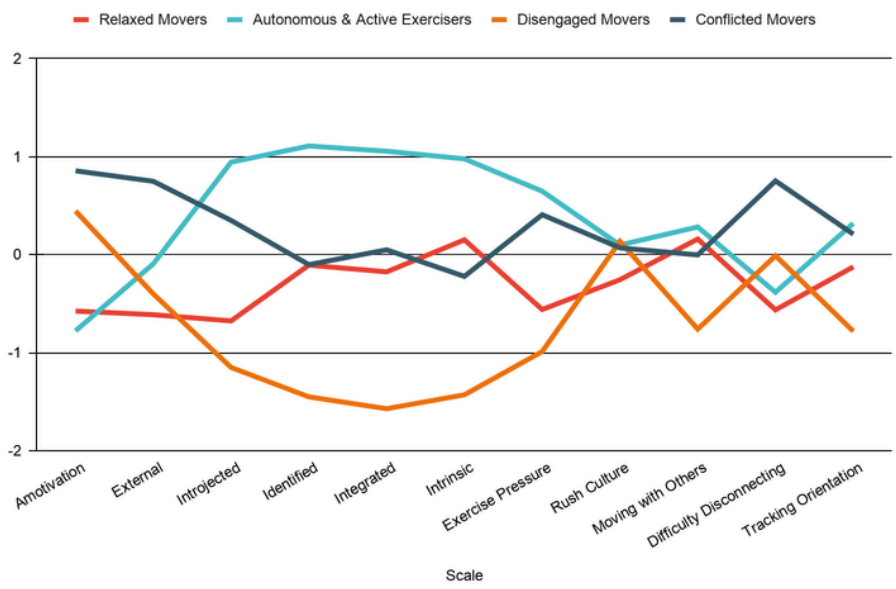
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3. Exercise Motivation (BREQ-3) and Mental Health Outcomes (Controlled for Age and Gender)

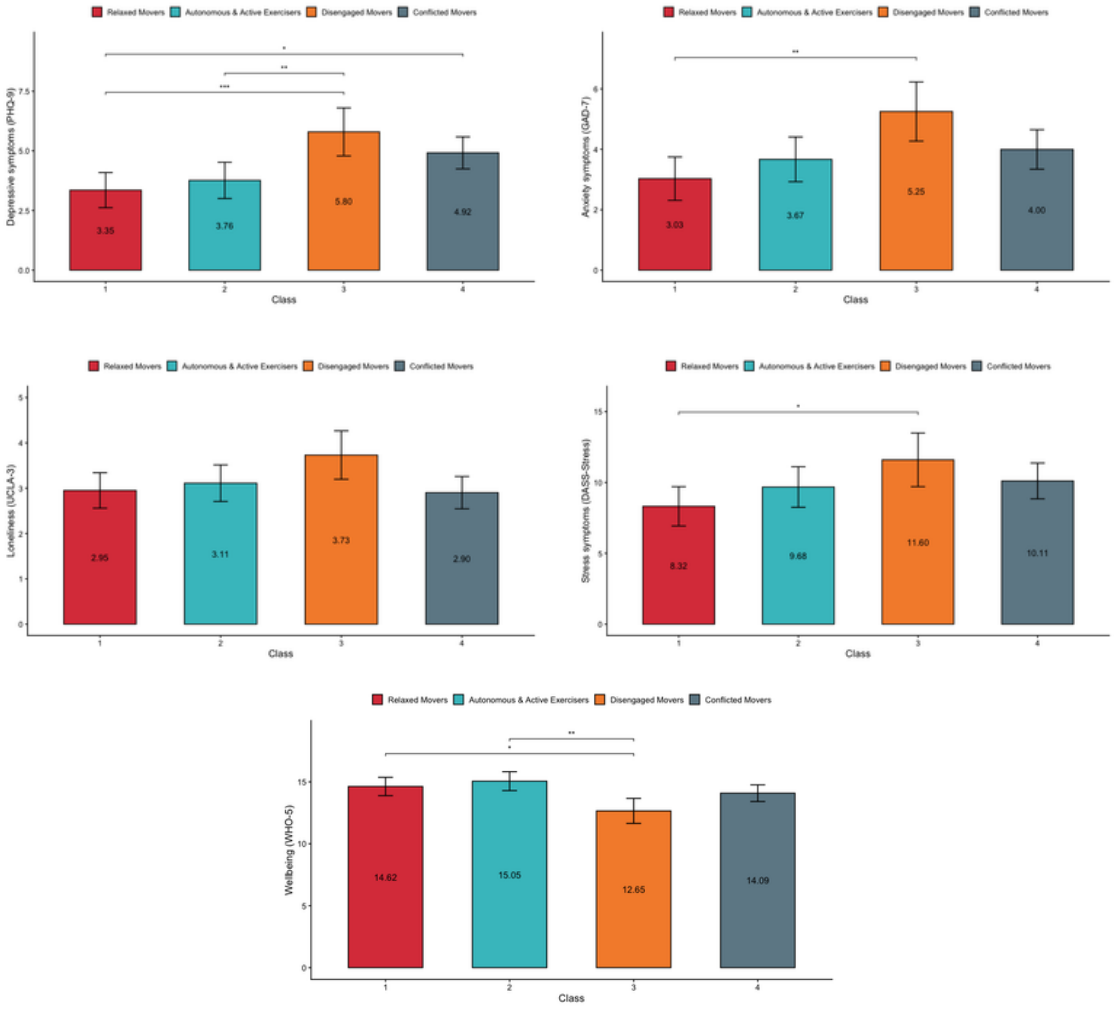


Appendix

4. Class Profile from Latent Profile Analysis



5. Exercise Profile and Mental Health Outcomes (controlled by age and gender), with Bonferroni-pairwise comparisons. * p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001



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