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Exercise Avoidance and Stress: The Mediating Role of Fear of Failure

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between exercise avoidance and perceived stress, and to examine whether fear of failure mediates this relationship among adults in India. A descriptive correlational research design was employed with a sample of 419 adult participants, selected using Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table. Participants completed three standardized self-report measures: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), the Exercise Avoidance Scale (EAS), and the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess bivariate relationships among variables using SPSS-27. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS-21 to test the mediating effect of fear of failure on the association between exercise avoidance and stress. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices including χ^2/df, RMSEA, GFI, CFI, and TLI. Results indicated significant positive correlations between exercise avoidance and perceived stress ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), exercise avoidance and fear of failure ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), and fear of failure and perceived stress ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). The SEM analysis revealed that fear of failure partially mediated the relationship between exercise avoidance and perceived stress. The model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.20$, RMSEA = 0.053, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95). Direct effects were significant for all paths: exercise avoidance → fear of failure ($\beta = 0.45$), fear of failure → stress ($\beta = 0.42$), and exercise avoidance → stress ($\beta = 0.29$), with a total effect of $\beta = 0.49$. Fear of failure significantly mediates the relationship between exercise avoidance and stress, indicating that cognitive-emotional factors play a critical role in shaping behavioral responses to stress. Interventions that address fear of failure may help reduce psychological distress and promote engagement in health-enhancing behaviors.

Keywords: Exercise Avoidance, Perceived Stress, Fear of Failure.

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Introduction

Psychological stress is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon, particularly among young adults and student populations, as they navigate a complex intersection of academic expectations, performance pressures, and evolving self-identities. Defined broadly as a psychological and physiological response to perceived threats or demands exceeding an individual's coping resources, stress is closely linked to various behavioral and emotional outcomes, including avoidance behaviors and mental health disorders (1). One

such behavioral consequence of stress, often underexplored in empirical literature, is exercise avoidance—a pattern of consistently evading physical activity despite known benefits. Although physical exercise is widely acknowledged for its protective effects against mental distress, individuals under significant psychological strain may paradoxically withdraw from exercise due to underlying cognitive-affective processes such as fear of failure (2, 3).

In this context, the current study aims to examine the association between exercise avoidance and stress while investigating the mediating role of fear of failure. Fear of failure, or atychiphobia, is defined as the persistent and irrational apprehension of failing in evaluative situations, often accompanied by negative self-appraisals and avoidance tendencies (4, 5). The role of fear of failure in maladaptive stress responses has gained attention in recent years, with findings indicating that individuals who exhibit high fear of failure are more likely to internalize stress, withdraw from challenges, and display procrastinatory or avoidant behaviors (6, 7). Given this triadic interaction, the present study situates fear of failure as a psychological bridge connecting stress and physical inactivity, positing that individuals experiencing higher levels of stress may avoid exercise due to heightened fear of performance inadequacy.

Research on stress in educational and performance contexts has provided a robust foundation for understanding its multidimensional impact. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated perceived stress levels among university students, influenced by factors such as uncertainty, disrupted routines, and altered academic expectations (8). A similar rise in perceived stress has been documented among students during high-stakes transitions and performance evaluations (9, 10). Stress is not merely a byproduct of external conditions; it interacts dynamically with internal dispositions like low self-efficacy and fear-based cognitive schemas. Recent neuropsychological findings have also linked chronic stress to disrupted fear memory and altered prefrontal cortex function, further validating the emotional-cognitive basis of stress responses (11).

Fear of failure, in particular, has emerged as a critical cognitive variable mediating stress outcomes. Individuals prone to atychiphobia often interpret performance situations as threats rather than challenges, leading to heightened physiological arousal and maladaptive coping strategies such as withdrawal or denial (4, 5). In academic contexts, fear of failure has been shown to predict decisional procrastination, low academic confidence, and disengagement from evaluative activities (2, 3). These findings are corroborated by neurobiological studies suggesting that fear responses activate avoidance circuits that reduce willingness to engage in potentially rewarding but evaluative tasks like exercise or public performance (12). Furthermore, cultural studies indicate that in collectivist societies, where familial and societal expectations are deeply embedded, fear of letting others down intensifies the stress-failure link (13, 14).

Avoidance behaviors, including those related to physical activity, are often motivated by an individual's attempt to mitigate negative emotional states or perceived social scrutiny. From a behavioral standpoint, exercise avoidance can be understood as a form of negative reinforcement, wherein avoidance of discomfort or embarrassment outweighs the anticipated health benefits of physical activity (15). This is particularly true among individuals who internalize failure as a personal flaw rather than a situational outcome. Empirical studies have established a link between psychological avoidance and low physical activity engagement, especially in individuals with high performance-related anxiety (6, 7).

Emerging literature has also begun to explore how fear of failure operates as a mediator in various stress-related outcomes. Cashman et al. (2023) demonstrated that fear of failure significantly mediated the relationship between educational expectations and stress-related complaints among adolescents, suggesting a key cognitive pathway linking external pressures to internal stress responses (7). Similarly, Obenza et al. (2024) found that academic stress mediated the relationship between fear of failure and academic procrastination, further supporting the mediating potential of this variable in behavioral outcomes (3). These findings lend credence to the notion that fear of failure is not merely a co-occurring trait with stress but a dynamic mechanism that channels its behavioral consequences.

In the Indian context, where academic and career-related performance pressures are culturally salient, the psychological interplay between stress, fear of failure, and avoidance behaviors warrants deeper investigation. Research has shown that Indian students and young adults report high levels of perceived stress stemming from familial expectations, competitive educational systems, and future uncertainty (16, 17). Studies have also noted elevated rates of procrastination, academic burnout, and disengagement in Indian student populations, many of which are strongly correlated with fear-based cognition (2, 10). Such evidence underscores the urgency of understanding how fear of failure may mediate maladaptive responses to stress, such as avoidance of health-promoting behaviors like exercise.

Although stress has been independently linked to reduced physical activity levels (18), and fear of failure has been associated with both stress and behavioral withdrawal (5, 6), few studies have formally examined the mediating role of fear of failure in the specific relationship between exercise avoidance and stress. Most studies have focused on academic outcomes or performance-related anxiety without extending the analysis to health behaviors. Additionally, the use of robust statistical techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test these mediation pathways remains limited in the current literature (3, 7).

The current study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between exercise avoidance and perceived stress and investigating whether fear of failure serves as a mediating variable.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This research employed a descriptive correlational design to investigate the relationship between exercise avoidance, fear of failure, and stress among adults. The study sample consisted of 419 participants, selected based on the sample size recommendation from the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) table for a population of over 1,000 individuals. Participants were recruited from various urban areas across India through online survey distribution channels. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and able to understand English. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection.

Data Collection

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein in 1983, is a widely used psychological instrument for assessing the perception of stress. This 10-item scale measures the degree to which individuals appraise situations in their lives as stressful, particularly focusing on how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. Items are rated on a 5-point

Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), with total scores ranging from 0 to 40. Higher scores indicate greater perceived stress. The PSS-10 includes both positively and negatively worded items to control for response bias. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically > .80) and good construct and criterion-related validity in a variety of populations and contexts, as confirmed in numerous empirical studies.

The Exercise Avoidance Scale (EAS), developed by Rodgers and Gauvin in 1998, is designed to assess individuals' tendencies to avoid engaging in physical activity due to psychological or motivational barriers. The scale consists of 10 items and includes subdimensions such as emotional discomfort, lack of motivation, and avoidance due to self-consciousness. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater avoidance of exercise. The EAS has been validated in various populations and has shown good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values generally above .80. Its validity has been supported through associations with related constructs such as body dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and sedentary behavior.

The Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI), created by Conroy, Willow, and Metzler in 2002, is a standardized measure designed to assess the fear of failure as a multidimensional construct. The inventory consists of 25 items across five subscales: fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, fear of devaluing one's self-estimate, fear of having an uncertain future, fear of important others losing interest, and fear of upsetting important others. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale from -2 (do not believe at all) to +2 (believe very strongly). The overall score and subscale scores can be computed, with higher scores indicating a greater fear of failure. The PFAI has shown strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficients > .85 for most subscales) and demonstrated validity through correlations with anxiety, motivation, and achievement-related behaviors.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to assess the strength and direction of associations between the dependent variable (stress) and the independent variables (exercise avoidance and fear of failure). To evaluate the mediating role of fear of failure in the relationship between exercise avoidance and stress, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. Model fit was assessed using multiple indices, including the Chi-square statistic, RMSEA, CFI, and TLI.

Findings and Results

Of the 419 participants included in the final analysis, 231 (55.13%) identified as female and 188 (44.87%) as male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 48 years (M = 27.36, SD = 6.84). Regarding education level, 178 participants (42.48%) held a bachelor's degree, 153 (36.51%) had a master's degree, 53 (12.65%) completed high school or equivalent, and 35 (8.36%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of employment status, 207 (49.40%) were employed full-time, 96 (22.91%) were students, 64 (15.27%) were self-employed, and 52 (12.41%) were unemployed or not currently working.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were evaluated. Skewness and kurtosis values for all key variables were within acceptable ranges (skewness: -0.84

to 0.67; kurtosis: -0.91 to 0.78), indicating approximate normal distribution. Scatterplots and partial regression plots confirmed linear relationships among variables. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed acceptable tolerance values (0.71 to 0.88) and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below the critical value of 10 (range: 1.13 to 1.41), indicating no issues of multicollinearity. Homoscedasticity was also verified through visual inspection of residual plots.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 419)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perceived Stress	23.47	5.83
Exercise Avoidance	32.61	6.12
Fear of Failure	41.38	8.05

The mean perceived stress score among participants was 23.47 (SD = 5.83), indicating moderate levels of stress. The mean score for exercise avoidance was 32.61 (SD = 6.12), suggesting moderate avoidance tendencies. Fear of failure had the highest mean score at 41.38 (SD = 8.05), reflecting a relatively elevated level of performance-related anxiety among participants. These descriptive results highlight the presence of considerable psychological burden and avoidance behavior in the sample.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Perceived Stress	—		
2. Exercise Avoidance	.42** ($p < .001$)	—	
3. Fear of Failure	.48** ($p < .001$)	.45** ($p < .001$)	—

Significant positive correlations were found between all variables. Perceived stress was positively correlated with exercise avoidance ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and fear of failure ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). Exercise avoidance also showed a strong positive correlation with fear of failure ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that greater avoidance of exercise is associated with higher levels of stress and fear of failure, and vice versa.

Table 3. Fit Indices for Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
Chi-Square (χ^2)	127.86	—
Degrees of Freedom (df)	58	—
χ^2/df	2.20	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.053	≤ 0.06
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95

The SEM model demonstrated a good fit to the data. The chi-square value was 127.86 with 58 degrees of freedom, resulting in a χ^2/df ratio of 2.20, which is below the recommended threshold of 3. Goodness-of-fit indicators such as GFI (0.94), AGFI (0.91), CFI (0.96), and TLI (0.95) all exceeded acceptable criteria. The RMSEA was 0.053, which also falls within the desirable range. Collectively, these values indicate that the proposed mediation model fits the observed data well.

Table 4. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects Between Variables in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	Beta	p
Exercise Avoidance → Fear of Failure	0.62	0.07	0.45	< .001
Fear of Failure → Perceived Stress	0.51	0.06	0.42	< .001

Exercise Avoidance → Perceived Stress (Direct)	0.38	0.08	0.29	< .001
Exercise Avoidance → Perceived Stress (Indirect via Fear of Failure)	0.32	0.05	—	< .001
Exercise Avoidance → Perceived Stress (Total Effect)	0.70	0.09	0.49	< .001

The direct path from exercise avoidance to fear of failure was significant (b = 0.62, β = 0.45, p < .001), indicating that those who avoided exercise also reported higher fear of failure. Fear of failure, in turn, significantly predicted perceived stress (b = 0.51, β = 0.42, p < .001). The direct effect of exercise avoidance on perceived stress was also significant (b = 0.38, β = 0.29, p < .001), but a substantial indirect effect through fear of failure was observed (b = 0.32, p < .001), confirming partial mediation. The total effect of exercise avoidance on perceived stress (b = 0.70, β = 0.49, p < .001) was stronger than either the direct or indirect effect alone, highlighting the significant role of both direct behavioral pathways and fear-based cognition.

Figure 1. Structural Model Showing Direct Standardized Path Coefficients

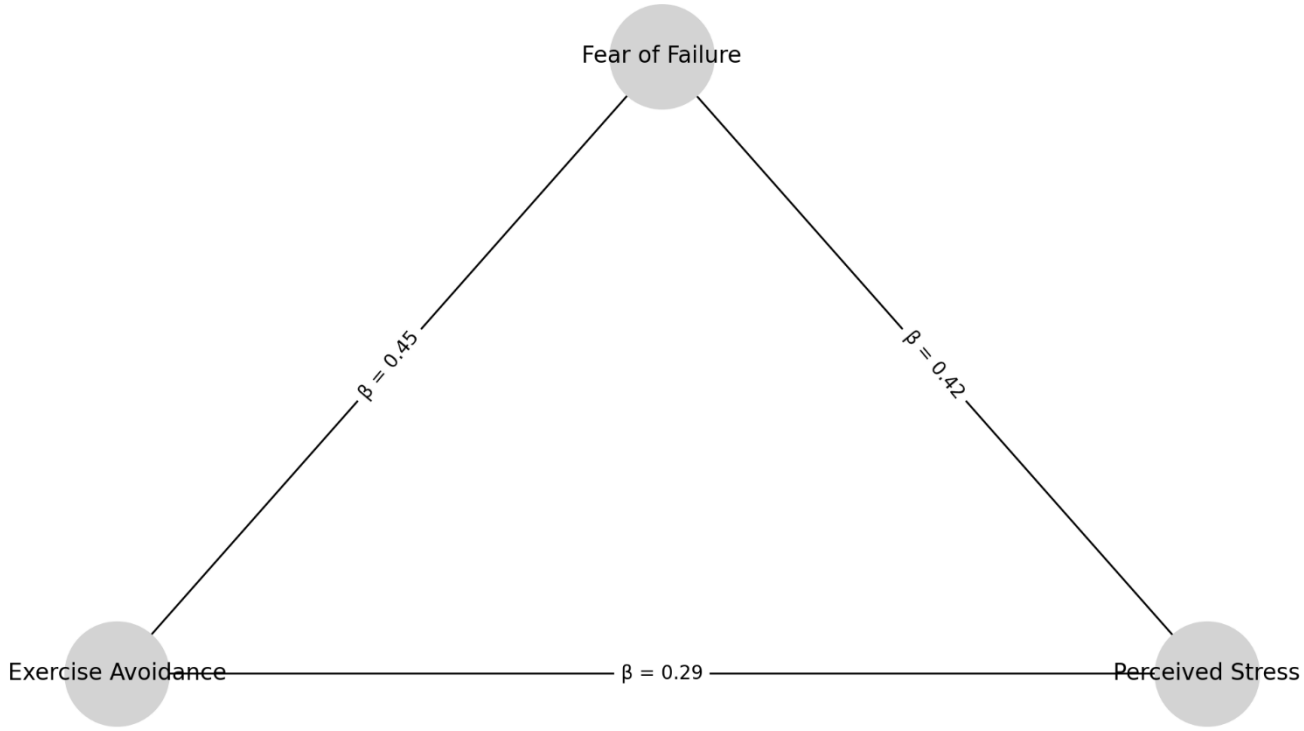

Figure 1. Model with Beta Values

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationship between exercise avoidance and stress, with a specific focus on the mediating role of fear of failure. Using a descriptive correlational design and a sample of 419 participants from India, both Pearson correlation and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The findings revealed three major results: (1) a significant positive correlation between exercise avoidance and perceived stress, (2) a significant positive correlation between fear of failure and both exercise avoidance and perceived stress, and (3) fear of failure significantly mediated the relationship between exercise avoidance and perceived stress. These findings contribute to a more

nuanced understanding of how cognitive-emotional factors like fear of failure may help explain why individuals experiencing stress tend to avoid health-promoting behaviors such as physical activity.

The significant correlation between exercise avoidance and perceived stress supports existing literature suggesting that individuals under psychological strain are less likely to engage in physical activity, despite its known stress-buffering effects. This aligns with studies showing that high levels of perceived stress often translate into behavioral withdrawal and avoidance tendencies (1, 16). Prior research has also documented that stressed individuals are more susceptible to procrastination and avoidant coping mechanisms, which may manifest as a reduction in exercise engagement (17). Notably, Paparao and Devi (2021) found a similar trend among intermediate students, where academic stress was associated with low participation in physical activities, reinforcing the idea that stress interferes with motivation and action toward well-being behaviors (10).

Furthermore, the study found a robust association between fear of failure and both exercise avoidance and stress, supporting the central premise that atychiphobia functions as a psychological barrier in performance and self-care behaviors. Individuals who fear failure tend to view exercise not as a health practice, but as a performance domain where perceived inadequacy or external judgment could lead to embarrassment or emotional discomfort (4, 15). This cognitive framing causes them to avoid such activities entirely, especially when already under psychological strain. Consistent with this, Mansouri et al. (2021) reported that fear of failure was predictive of decisional procrastination, indicating that avoidance extends beyond academics to broader behavioral contexts (5).

The mediating role of fear of failure in the relationship between exercise avoidance and stress represents a central contribution of this study. The SEM analysis confirmed that individuals who avoid exercise often do so due to underlying fear of failure, which in turn contributes to elevated levels of stress. This mediation model is supported by previous findings that conceptualize fear of failure as a core cognitive construct driving avoidance and psychological distress (3, 6). In their study, Obenza et al. (2024) found that academic stress mediated the link between fear of failure and academic procrastination, a finding that parallels the current study's proposition but within the behavioral domain of exercise. Similarly, Cashman et al. (2023) demonstrated that fear of failure mediated the relationship between educational expectations and stress-related complaints, thereby reinforcing the mediating potential of atychiphobia in various domains (7).

Additionally, the findings are consistent with neuropsychological literature that highlights the role of the prefrontal cortex in modulating fear responses. Judd et al. (2025) observed that inhibition of prefrontal glutamatergic neurons impaired fear memory recovery and stress regulation, which may help explain the heightened avoidance behaviors in individuals with poor emotional regulation under stress (11). This biological insight supports the psychological observation that stress and fear of failure co-occur and interact to suppress health-promoting behaviors such as exercise.

Interestingly, this study also aligns with research that explores fear of failure in entrepreneurial and occupational contexts. For instance, Al-Alawi et al. (2023) examined how fear of performance failure affected decision-making and stress levels in entrepreneurs, emphasizing that fear of social disapproval and future uncertainty are central to how individuals respond to pressure and risk (14). Similarly, Srinivasan et al. (2023) found that low self-confidence and fear of failure significantly undermined entrepreneurial intent and performance, a pattern that echoes the present findings within a health behavior framework (13).

Other contextual studies further support these findings. For example, Warren-James et al. (2021) observed that first-year paramedic students reported high stress levels during initial field placements due to fears of performance failure and peer evaluation (9). The resulting stress was not merely a reaction to workload but a deeper psychological response tied to self-perception and anticipated judgment. Likewise, Çiçek and Lanbaran (2023) found that organizational stress was significantly affected by FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) and other fear-based constructs, suggesting that such cognitive-emotional factors permeate across personal and professional contexts (19).

The role of social context also deserves emphasis. In collectivist cultures like India, the fear of disappointing others and falling short of expectations is a strong determinant of stress responses (3, 14). This may intensify the tendency to avoid behaviors perceived as risky or potentially humiliating, such as public or group-based exercise. These culturally embedded fears can exacerbate the link between stress and avoidance, as individuals may prioritize face-saving strategies over mental or physical well-being.

Additionally, recent studies have begun to explore demographic differences in fear of failure and stress perception. For instance, Hameed et al. (2025) found that fear of failure was significantly higher among undergraduate medical students, particularly females, and correlated positively with stress and other psychosomatic symptoms (20). These gender-based variations suggest that interventions should be sensitive to demographic factors when addressing fear and avoidance patterns.

The contribution of this study also resonates with literature examining fear of failure in adolescence. Junuthula (2022) emphasized that fear of failure heavily influences decision-making during adolescence, a life stage marked by identity formation and high external expectations (6). Fear of negative evaluation, in turn, fuels stress and retreat from self-enhancing behaviors, a pattern mirrored in this study's findings.

Finally, the broader implications of this study affirm that fear-based cognition, especially in performance-related scenarios, must be accounted for when designing interventions targeting stress reduction and health promotion. As shown in research by Huang et al. (2025), attribution retraining in athletes can mitigate choking under pressure, implying that cognitive restructuring of failure narratives can reduce stress and promote engagement in challenging activities (21). This aligns with the current findings, suggesting that reducing fear of failure may improve physical activity adherence and lower perceived stress.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality among the examined variables. While the mediating role of fear of failure was statistically supported, the temporal direction of these relationships cannot be confirmed without longitudinal data. Second, the study relied solely on self-report measures, which are susceptible to response bias and social desirability effects. Participants may have underreported their levels of stress or avoidance due to stigma or misunderstanding of item content. Third, the sample consisted of individuals residing in India, limiting the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. Cultural norms and societal expectations may differently influence fear of failure and stress perception across populations.

Future research should consider employing longitudinal designs to examine how the relationship between fear of failure, exercise avoidance, and stress evolves over time. Such studies could provide stronger evidence for causality and identify critical periods where intervention may be most effective. Additionally, future work should include qualitative components to explore the nuanced personal experiences behind fear-based

avoidance of physical activity. Interview-based or mixed-methods approaches may uncover underlying motivations and cultural values that quantitative tools cannot fully capture. Furthermore, comparative cross-cultural studies could offer valuable insights into how sociocultural contexts moderate the dynamics between stress, fear of failure, and avoidance.

Practitioners aiming to promote physical activity in stressed populations should consider incorporating cognitive-behavioral techniques that directly address fear of failure. Helping individuals reframe failure as a learning opportunity rather than a threat may reduce avoidance tendencies. Schools, universities, and workplace wellness programs can incorporate workshops on emotional resilience and self-compassion to mitigate fear-based responses. Additionally, exercise interventions should be designed with psychological safety in mind—providing low-pressure, nonjudgmental environments that reduce the perception of evaluation and social comparison. Tailoring strategies to individual needs and ensuring access to social support can further enhance adherence and psychological well-being.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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