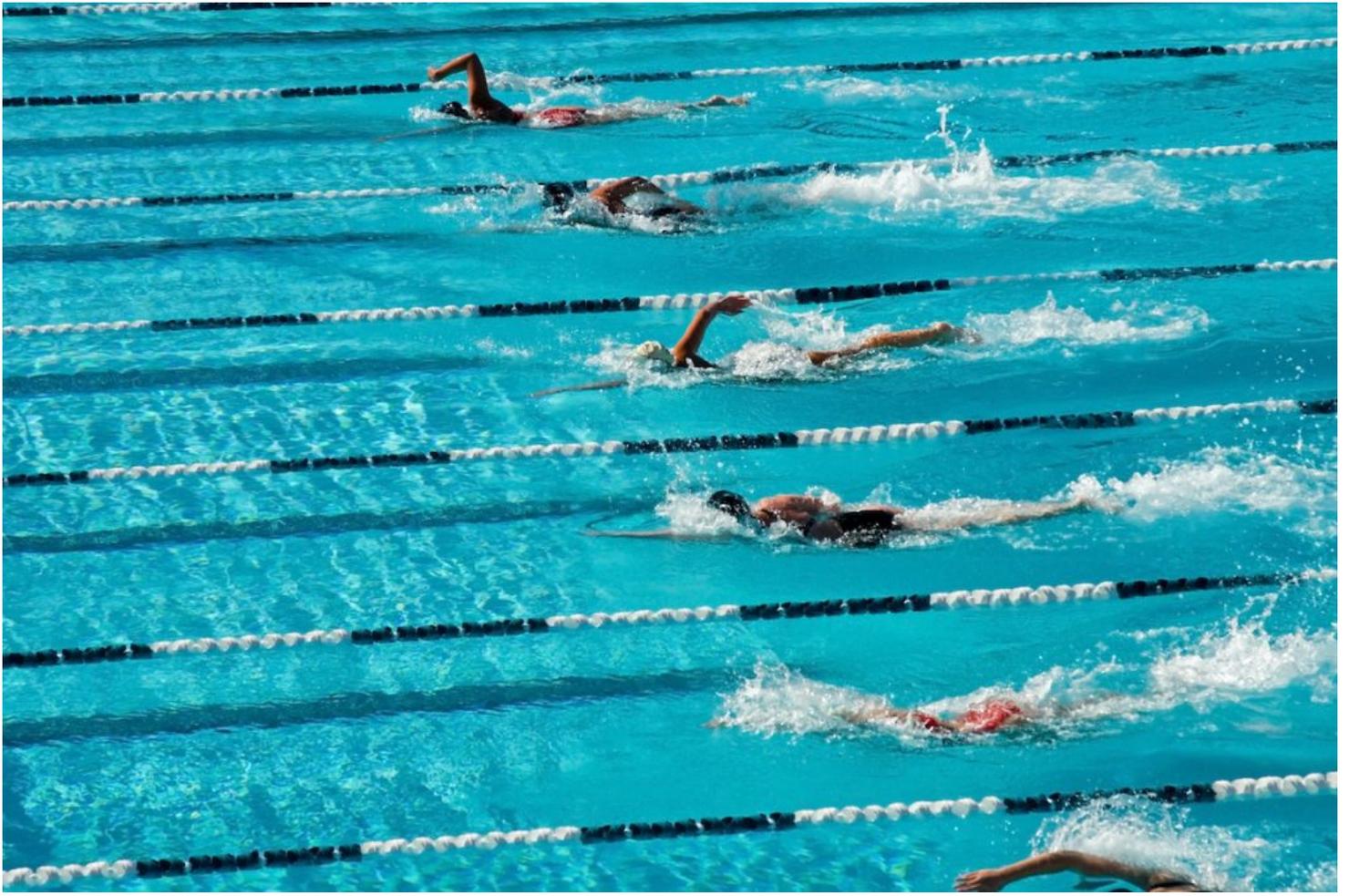


Going for the Gold

By Kathleen M. Pike, PhD

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Arriving in Rio for the 2016 Olympics is a dream come true for thousands of athletes from around the world. We can see in their smiles and tears the culmination of years of intense dedication and are awed by their athleticism. Their stories also have something to say about the intimate link between physical and mental health. Even those of us who are not Olympians know that regular exercise is good for our health — from avoiding weight gain to preventing heart disease and diabetes to improving our mood, sleep and sex lives.



[Photo Credit](#)

So why is it that getting moving is so difficult for most of us, and what are some mental health benefits of exercise that we can glean from superstars like Michael Phelps?

1. Believe it or not, time is on our side. Though commonly cited as a prime culprit, lack of time is not really a good excuse for not exercising. The average American watches four hours of TV per day, and all the exercise gurus tell us we only need 20-30 minutes of exercise 3-4 times per week to see health benefits. [The science is very clear: even a little physical activity can make a profound difference to improving our brain health.](#)

2. We are evolutionarily designed to conserve calories. Conserving calories was a good thing when we had to hunt and gather our food; when we had to walk to school and work (uphill in both directions); when we had to climb four flights of stairs to visit a friend. Bummer is that in today's world of supermarkets, automobiles, and elevators we conserve so much energy all day long that most of us have trouble burning enough calories to keep up with our overly abundant food supply. Even though most people describe feeling like they are watching what they eat, two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese. We really do need to keep moving.

3. Physical Exercise Directly Benefits our Brain Health. Neurotransmitters, endorphins, and endocannabinoids are natural feel-good brain chemicals that are released when we are active. The benefits are well documented: healthier heart, reduced anxiety and depression, better sleep and sex, to name just a few. And the good news is that even more important than vigorous exercise is avoiding being a couch potato. According to researchers at the Beckman Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, [simply being more active all day long – avoiding a sedentary lifestyle – can have dramatic effects on your brain health](#) by maintaining the integrity of the white matter in your brain, which is key to neural conduction between brain regions and associated with superior cognitive functioning.

4. Even with exercise, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. It's pretty awesome that when Michael Phelps earned his 22nd gold medal, he beat a 2,168-year-old Olympic record held by Leonidas of Rhodes. Such extraordinary achievement deserves the many headlines and sighs of awe that have filled the airways this week. However, we should keep in mind that [excessive exercise and extreme competition can actually be associated with poorer mental health](#), including increased symptoms of [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [eating disorders](#). The key here is finding your sweet spot – not too much, not too little – sort of like Goldilocks' search for what is “just right.”

5. Olympians weigh in on Mental Health. As they compete for the gold, Olympic competitors are also sharing their life experiences of mental illness. Just this week, Kookaburras midfielder [Simon Orchard spoke about debilitating anxiety issues that took him out of play for two months](#). He is competing in Rio because he got the treatment he needed. [Having stared down the dark hole of depression, 2012 Olympic gold medal champion, Allison Schmitt spoke about the need for each of us to know, ‘It’s OK not to feel OK’](#) because with the right care we can feel better. [And Emily Cook, three-time Olympic aerial skier, has become an advocate for suicide prevention](#) following the loss of her teammate, Jeret “Speedy” Peterson who died by suicide less than 18 months after winning the 2010 Silver Medal.

Let's face it, most of us will have to live vicariously when it comes to Olympic medals, but the health benefits of being physically active are accessible to all of us. It's hard to get moving, and the challenge is to find that sweet spot that confers a myriad of health benefits for mind and body across our lifetimes. And let's keep in mind, that even for those who are truly the best in class – in this case the best athletes from around the world – mental health challenges are real. When faced and treated, in the same way that other

injuries call for attention, these athletes can go on to excel, and for many, the victory of earning an Olympic medal is about a lot more than a bodacious dismount or shaving a few seconds from their 400 meter run.