



Quick Bites

Transportation for Mental Health and Happiness

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Mental Health

Transportation planning decisions can affect people's lives in many ways, including mental health and happiness (also called "subjective wellbeing" or "life satisfaction"). Following are various ways that certain transportation planning decisions can support mental health and happiness goals.

Physical Activity

Experts recommend that people engage in at least 22 minutes of moderate physical activity daily for mental as well as physical health. Although there are many possible ways to be active, many—such as organized sports and gym exercise—require special expense and time commitments. For many people—particularly those who are currently inactive—walking and bicycling are the most practical ways to introduce moderate exercise for lifelong fitness and health benefits. People who live in walkable and bikeable communities tend to be healthier, and commuters who walk and bike to work tend to be happier than those who use public transit or drive to work. Daily walking and bicycling have been shown to improve mood, reduce depression, and reduce dementia. Transportation planning can help ensure that the opportunity for convenient and safe active travel are available to all.

Comfortable and Safe Travel Conditions

On average, people spend 60 to 80 minutes per day in out-of-home travel. The comfort and safety of that travel—or lack thereof—can significantly affect an individual's mental health and sense of well-being. Motorists can enhance their comfort and safety by purchasing a vehicle with these attributes, but pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit travelers depend on the quality of facilities and services provided in their communities. Many studies indicate that long-duration and unpleasant automobile and transit commutes are particularly stressful. Transportation planning can ensure that the travel experience is comfortable by improving active and public transport travel conditions with features such as wider sidewalks and better crosswalks, protected bikeways, less crowded and more comfortable transit stations and vehicles, and streetscaping. Reducing the need for longer distance commutes can also reduce mental stress and unhappiness.

Excessive noise can cause discomfort and stress to travelers and nearby residents, so traffic noise reduction and protection is important. Since diesel buses and trucks are particularly noisy, reducing their noise emissions can improve comfort and reduce stress for passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and residents.

Independent Mobility for All Users

Many people are limited in their ability to travel independently due to physical disabilities or other impairments, or because they are a non-driver located in an automobile-dependent community. These constraints can impose mental stress, isolation, and unhappiness. Transportation planning can reduce these problems by applying universal design (transportation facilities and services that accommodate diverse users, including people with disabilities and other special needs), and

by creating multimodal transportation systems that provide high quality mobility and accessibility options for non-drivers.

Economic Stress – Affordability

Excessive transportation costs—including large unexpected financial burdens due to vehicle mechanical failures and crashes—impose mental stress, so improving affordable mobility and accessibility options can increase mental health and happiness. Planning can help achieve this by favoring affordable modes such as walking, bicycling, and public transit, and ensuring that every household, including those with lower incomes, can find affordable housing in accessible, multimodal neighborhoods where it is easy to get around without driving.

Community Cohesion and Friendliness

Community cohesion refers to the quality of interactions among people in a community, and the ease of building positive relationships. Social isolation and loneliness contribute to mental illness and unhappiness. Community cohesion tends to increase in communities that have attractive public realms, that is, public spaces where neighbors naturally interact, such as sidewalks, paths, local shops, parks, and schools. Planning can support this by through pedestrian improvement and streetscaping that creates attractive sidewalks and paths, and by planning complete, mixed neighborhoods where residents rely on local services.

Access to Greenspace and Public Art

Exposure to greenspace, such as local parks and roadside landscaping, can enhance mental health and happiness. Public art may also enhance happiness and help create a sense of community which further encourages community cohesion. Transportation planning can support this by minimizing the amount of urban land that must be paved for roads and parking facilities, through streetscaping and landscaping that increase the quantity and quality of greenspace along sidewalks, paths, and roadways, and by incorporating appropriate public art, particularly if it helps build local community. In hot climates, trees can also provide shade.

For More Information

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