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The Complex Bidirectional Relationship Between Depression and Cardiovascular Disease

Jakub Robak, Stanisław Telega, Paweł Bollin, Monika Barbara Solarz, Wojciech Wiesław Lachór, Justyna Maria Solarz, Jakub Tomasz Wawrzyńców, Urszula Szymczak, Julia Piekarska, Weronika Cyrkler

Jakub Robak
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8830-5717
jakub.robak1@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Stanisław Telega
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2355-5876
stanislaw.telega@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Paweł Bollin
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7687-4674
pawel.bollin@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Urszula Szymczak
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6560-6539
urszula.szymczak@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Wojciech Wiesław Lachór
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2017-4788
wojciech.lachor@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Monika Barbara Solarz
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4476-8755
monika.solarz@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Julia Piekarska
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7164-2833
julia.piekarska@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Justyna Maria Solarz
Medical University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8686-0142
s86199@365.sum.edu.pl

Jakub Tomasz Wawrzyńców
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3716-4784
jakub.wawrzyncow@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Weronika Cyrkler
Medical University of Lodz, Poland
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1214-0249
weronika.cyrkler@stud.umed.lodz.pl

Abstract
This systematic review establishes a robust bidirectional relationship between depression and cardiovascular disease (CVD) mediated by interconnected biological pathways including autonomic dysfunction, chronic inflammation, and endothelial impairment. Depression significantly increases CVD risk while CVD elevates depression susceptibility, creating a self-perpetuating cycle with worse clinical outcomes. Women with CVD demonstrate particular vulnerability to depression, necessitating gender-sensitive approaches.
Current evidence supports integrated management strategies incorporating routine depression screening, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like sertraline, and cognitive-behavioral therapy within cardiac care. However, optimal treatment requires addressing both conditions simultaneously through collaborative care models.

Future research priorities include elucidating causal mechanisms, developing biomarkers for risk stratification, and testing interventions targeting shared pathways. These findings underscore the urgent need for healthcare systems to implement holistic approaches that bridge mental and cardiovascular health, ultimately improving outcomes for this high-risk population.

Keywords:
depression, cardiovascular disease, epidemiology, pathophysiology, autonomic dysfunction, inflammation, endothelial dysfunction, platelet activation, neuroendocrine dysregulation, gender differences, treatment strategies, integrated care

Introduction

Depression and cardiovascular disease (CVD) represent two of the most pressing global health challenges, with growing evidence revealing a complex, bidirectional relationship between these conditions. Epidemiological studies consistently demonstrate that depression affects 20-30% of patients with CVD (Zhang et al., 2018), while also serving as an independent risk factor for developing cardiovascular events (Krittanawong et al., 2023). This reciprocal association contributes to worse clinical outcomes, including increased morbidity, mortality, and reduced quality of life. Despite significant advances in understanding this connection, the underlying mechanisms remain incompletely characterized, and clinical management often fails to address both conditions simultaneously.

The pathophysiological links between depression and CVD involve multiple interconnected biological systems. These include autonomic nervous system dysregulation, chronic inflammation, endothelial dysfunction, platelet hyperactivity, and neuroendocrine disturbances (Penninx, 2017; Halaris, 2017). These shared pathways create a vicious cycle where each condition exacerbates the other, complicating treatment and worsening prognosis. Additionally, psychosocial factors such as chronic stress and social isolation further compound this relationship, particularly among vulnerable populations like elderly patients and women (Möller-Leimkühler, 2010; Allabadi et al., 2019).

Current clinical approaches often focus on treating either depression or CVD in isolation, neglecting their synergistic effects. While selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and psychotherapy show promise (Mavrides & Nemeroff, 2013), integrated care models that address both conditions holistically are needed to improve outcomes. This review synthesizes evidence from 20 key studies to elucidate the epidemiological patterns, biological mechanisms, and clinical implications of the depression-CVD relationship. By highlighting critical knowledge gaps and emerging treatment strategies, we aim to inform more effective, patient-centered approaches to managing this complex comorbidity.

Methods

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 20 key studies examining the bidirectional relationship between depression and cardiovascular disease (CVD). A comprehensive literature search was conducted in PubMed using MeSH terms and keywords, including *"depression," "major depressive disorder," "cardiovascular disease," "coronary artery disease," "myocardial infarction," "heart failure," "stroke," "bidirectional," "comorbidity," "inflammation," "autonomic dysfunction,"* and *"endothelial dysfunction."*

The search was limited to English-language studies published between 2003 and 2023 to ensure relevance to current clinical understanding. Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria: (1) large-scale epidemiological studies, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials (RCTs), or longitudinal cohort designs; (2) adult populations (≥18 years) with diagnosed depression, CVD, or both; (3) examination of depression as a risk factor for CVD (or vice versa) and/or biological mediators linking the two conditions; and (4) reporting of effect sizes (e.g., hazard ratios, odds ratios). Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts for eligibility, followed by full-text assessment for methodological quality. Data on study design, population characteristics, key findings, and effect estimates were extracted and synthesized into thematic categories: epidemiological patterns, pathophysiological mechanisms, and clinical implications.

Several limitations should be noted. First, publication bias may have led to an overrepresentation of positive findings. Second, heterogeneity in depression assessment tools (e.g., DSM criteria vs. self-report scales) and CVD definitions across studies complicates direct comparisons. Third, residual confounding (e.g., smoking, physical inactivity) may influence observed associations. Fourth, observational designs preclude definitive causal inferences. Finally, most studies were conducted in Western populations, limiting generalizability to diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups. These gaps highlight the need for future research with standardized methodologies, longitudinal designs, and broader demographic representation to clarify mechanistic pathways and optimize clinical interventions.

Results

A systematic review of 20 studies establishes depression as both a significant risk factor for and consequence of cardiovascular disease (CVD), creating a complex bidirectional relationship with profound clinical implications (Zhang et al., 2018; Krittanawong et al., 2023). This analysis reveals multiple interconnected pathways through which these conditions influence each other, including biological, behavioral, and psychosocial mechanisms that collectively contribute to worse health outcomes (Penninx, 2017; Hare et al., 2014). The evidence demonstrates that the depression-CVD relationship is not merely correlational but represents a pathophysiological continuum with substantial public health implications.

1. Epidemiological Evidence: Prevalence and Clinical Impact

The co-occurrence of depression and CVD represents a major public health challenge of increasing global significance. Zhang et al. (2018) emphasize that geriatric depression constitutes a particularly serious concern when comorbid with chronic medical conditions, noting that clinically relevant depression affects 20–30% of patients with hypertension, 18–30% of those with coronary artery disease, and 25–30% of individuals with diabetes. Their systematic review highlights how depression significantly impacts multiple aspects of disease management, including reduced medication adherence (by 30–50% in some studies), blunted treatment response, and worse long-term prognosis across various cardiovascular conditions (Zhang et al., 2018). These effects are particularly pronounced in elderly populations where depression may interact with age-related physiological changes to create a perfect storm of cardiovascular risk.

Large-scale meta-analyses provide compelling evidence for depression as an independent cardiovascular risk factor. Krittanawong et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive analysis of data from 1,957,621 participants across 26 high-quality studies, establishing robust associations between depression and a 13% increased stroke risk (HR = 1.13, 95% CI [1.08, 1.18]), 28% increased myocardial infarction risk (HR = 1.28, 95% CI [1.21, 1.35]), 4% increased heart failure risk (HR = 1.04, 95% CI [1.01, 1.07]), and 16% increased risk of composite CVD outcomes (HR = 1.16, 95% CI [1.12, 1.20]). Most strikingly, their analysis revealed depression was associated with a 43% increased all-cause mortality (HR = 1.43), 44% increased CVD mortality (HR = 1.44), and a remarkable 220% increased heart failure mortality (HR = 3.20). These associations remained statistically significant even after rigorous adjustment for traditional cardiovascular risk factors including age, sex, smoking status, body mass index, physical activity levels, and socioeconomic status (Krittanawong et al., 2023).

Population-specific studies provide important insights into these relationships across different ethnic and cultural contexts. Meng et al. (2020) examined two large Chinese cohorts—the China Kadoorie Biobank with 512,712 participants and the Dongfeng-Tongji cohort with 26,298 participants—using culturally validated assessment tools. They found depression prevalence of 0.64% for major depressive episodes and 17.96% for clinically significant depressive symptoms (Meng et al., 2020). Their results confirmed similar mortality patterns in Asian populations as seen in Western studies, with depression associated with 32% increased all-cause mortality (HR = 1.32) and 22% increased CVD mortality (HR = 1.22). Notably, gender differences emerged consistently across studies, with men showing higher mortality risks than women, potentially reflecting differences in help-seeking behaviors, social support systems, or biological vulnerability factors that warrant further investigation (Meng et al., 2020).

Clinical populations with established CVD demonstrate even stronger and more concerning associations. Williams et al. (2019) reported striking differences in depression prevalence between patient groups, with 62.6% of acute coronary syndrome patients meeting criteria for depression compared to only 37.4% of those with stable coronary artery disease. During 12-month follow-up, depressed patients experienced triple the rate of major cardiac events (18% vs. 6%) and nearly double the rate of minor cardiac events (44% vs. 25%), even after controlling for disease severity, treatment factors, and traditional risk factors (Williams et al., 2019). These findings suggest that acute cardiac events may trigger or unmask depressive

symptoms in vulnerable individuals while also highlighting depression's powerful role in predicting adverse outcomes through both behavioral and biological pathways.

The study by Dhingra et al. (2023) added another layer to our understanding by examining how cumulative cardiovascular risk factors are associated with depression severity in the general U.S. population. Their analysis of NHANES data (N = 18,175) found a clear dose-response relationship, with individuals having 1, 2, 3, or 4 CVD risk factors showing 1.28-, 2.18-, 2.53-, and 2.97-fold higher odds of moderate-to-severe depression, respectively (Dhingra et al., 2023). This suggests that the relationship between depression and CVD may be bidirectional and self-reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle that accelerates disease progression in both domains.

2. Pathophysiological Mechanisms: Biological Pathways Linking Mood and Cardiovascular Health

2.1. Autonomic Nervous System Dysregulation

Multiple studies elucidate how depression leads to autonomic imbalance with significant cardiovascular consequences. Joynt et al. (2003) and Paz-Filho et al. (2010) demonstrate through both clinical and experimental research that depression is characterized by distinct patterns of autonomic dysfunction including chronic sympathetic nervous system overactivity as evidenced by elevated plasma and urinary norepinephrine levels, reduced parasympathetic tone measured through heart rate variability analysis and vagal tone assessment, decreased heart rate variability (HRV), and abnormal baroreflex sensitivity contributing to blood pressure instability and reduced cardiovascular adaptability. These autonomic changes create a pro-arrhythmic state and accelerate atherosclerosis through several well-documented mechanisms: increased myocardial oxygen demand during both rest and daily activities, enhanced platelet activation and aggregation responsiveness, promotion of ventricular arrhythmias through electrical remodeling of cardiac tissue, and endothelial dysfunction via chronic catecholamine exposure and oxidative stress (Joynt et al., 2003; Paz-Filho et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2019; Bouzinova et al., 2015).

Bouzinova et al. (2015) expanded our understanding by identifying increased systemic vascular resistance in depression using sophisticated hemodynamic measurements, suggesting microcirculatory involvement that may contribute to target organ damage independent of blood pressure changes. Their innovative work using validated animal models of chronic stress demonstrates structural remodeling of cardiac sympathetic innervation and altered β-adrenergic receptor density, providing plausible biological substrates for the observed clinical associations between depression and adverse cardiovascular outcomes (Bouzinova et al., 2015).

2.2. Inflammatory Pathways and Immune Activation

The inflammatory hypothesis provides one of the most compelling and well-supported explanations for the depression-CVD link. Penninx (2017) and Halaris (2017) document through extensive clinical research that both conditions are characterized by elevated levels of pro-inflammatory markers including C-reactive protein (CRP) with levels often in the high-risk range (>3 mg/L), interleukin-6 (IL-6), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and fibrinogen. Chronic low-grade inflammation promotes atherosclerosis through multiple interrelated pathways: increased expression of vascular adhesion molecules (VCAM-1, ICAM-1) promoting leukocyte recruitment, activation of matrix metalloproteinases that weaken plaque stability and promote rupture, promotion of a pro-thrombotic state through tissue factor expression and platelet activation, and impairment of endothelial progenitor cell function and vascular repair capacity (Penninx, 2017; Halaris, 2017; Williams et al., 2019; Chávez-Castillo et al., 2020).

The Netherlands Study of Depression and Anxiety (N = 2981) provided important insights by showing that depressed patients have significantly worse lifestyle factors and more physiological disturbances than healthy controls, with some differences being specific to depression subtypes or treatment status (Penninx, 2017). For example, patients with atypical

depression (characterized by increased appetite and weight gain) showed particularly pronounced metabolic abnormalities, while melancholic depression was more strongly associated with HPA axis dysregulation (Penninx, 2017).

Emerging research highlights novel inflammatory biomarkers such as neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin (NGAL) as particularly promising markers linking depression and CVD, with serum levels correlating strongly with both depressive symptom severity and cardiovascular risk profiles (Gouweleeuw et al., 2015). NGAL appears to reflect shared pathways involving oxidative stress and vascular inflammation, though its precise role in the pathophysiology of these conditions requires further mechanistic investigation (Gouweleeuw et al., 2015).

2.3. Endothelial Dysfunction and Vascular Changes

Growing evidence from multiple research groups indicates that depression is associated with measurable impairments in endothelial function that precede clinical atherosclerosis. Chávez-Castillo et al. (2020) and Bouzinova et al. (2015) document several vascular abnormalities in depressed individuals, including reduced nitric oxide bioavailability due to increased oxidative stress and scavenging, increased production of potent vasoconstrictors like endothelin-1, abnormal vascular smooth muscle function and calcium handling, and impaired angiogenesis and collateral vessel formation capacity. These molecular and cellular changes manifest clinically as reduced flow-mediated dilation (FMD) in brachial artery testing, increased arterial stiffness measured by pulse wave velocity, microvascular dysfunction evident in retinal or coronary circulation assessments, and elevated systemic vascular resistance despite normal blood pressure readings (Chávez-Castillo et al., 2020; Bouzinova et al., 2015). Notably, these vascular alterations often precede clinical atherosclerosis by years or even decades, potentially explaining the increased cardiovascular risk observed in depressed individuals long before traditional risk factors become apparent (Chávez-Castillo et al., 2020; Bouzinova et al., 2015).

2.4. Hemostatic Changes and Platelet Activation

Depression creates a well-documented pro-thrombotic state through multiple interrelated pathways as demonstrated by Williams et al. (2019), including increased platelet activation and aggregation in response to various physiological agonists, elevated fibrinogen and von Willebrand factor levels promoting enhanced clot formation, impaired fibrinolysis due to increased PAI-1 activity and reduced tPA function, and altered serotonin signaling pathways affecting platelet reactivity and vascular tone. Their comprehensive study provided novel insights into platelet serotonin receptor (5-HT2A) upregulation in depressed patients with acute coronary syndrome, suggesting a plausible mechanism for increased thrombotic risk in this vulnerable population (Williams et al., 2019). Using sophisticated flow cytometry and aggregometry techniques, they found that patients with depression showed enhanced platelet reactivity to serotonin, particularly those who experienced subsequent cardiac events during follow-up (Williams et al., 2019).

2.5. Neuroendocrine and Metabolic Dysregulation

Chronic activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis in depression leads to several metabolic consequences that promote CVD development and progression, including hypercortisolemia with loss of normal diurnal rhythm, insulin resistance and impaired glucose tolerance, visceral fat accumulation and altered adipokine secretion patterns, and dyslipidemia characterized by high triglycerides and low HDL cholesterol (Paz-Filho et al., 2010). These changes create a vicious cycle that exacerbates both depression severity and cardiovascular risk over time (Paz-Filho et al., 2010). Additionally, depression is associated with altered melatonin secretion patterns (Chávez-Castillo et al., 2020), which may contribute to circadian rhythm disturbances and their well-documented cardiovascular consequences.

3. Gender Differences and Psychosocial Determinants

Research consistently highlights important gender disparities in the depression-CVD relationship that warrant clinical attention. Möller-Leimkühler (2010) and Allabadi et al. (2019) reveal through multiple study designs that women with CVD have significantly higher depression prevalence (61.4%) than their male counterparts (50.7%), with several key mediating factors: greater exposure to chronic stressors including caregiving responsibilities, lower psychological resilience and coping resources, higher rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms following cardiac events, socioeconomic disadvantages including lower education and income levels, and greater somatic symptom reporting and help-seeking behavior patterns (Möller-Leimkühler, 2010; Allabadi et al., 2019).

Allabadi et al. (2019) conducted particularly insightful work in Palestinian CVD patients, finding that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) strongly mediated the gender-depression relationship, with women showing higher PTSD levels that accounted for their increased depression risk. Their sophisticated structural equation modeling analysis suggested that gender differences in depression prevalence were largely explained by psychosocial factors rather than biological differences alone (Allabadi et al., 2019). The study revealed that women with CVD were more likely to be unemployed, less educated, and physically inactive—all factors independently contributing to their increased depression risk (Allabadi et al., 2019).

Psychosocial factors like social isolation and loneliness also show important gender-specific effects in the depression-CVD relationship. Hegeman et al. (2018) demonstrated through careful longitudinal analysis that loneliness significantly impacts cardiovascular risk in women specifically through depression pathways, with lonely women having 13% increased CVD risk (OR = 1.13) that became non-significant after adjusting for depressive symptoms (Hegeman et al., 2018). The mechanisms may involve both behavioral pathways (reduced self-care, poor adherence) and biological pathways (increased inflammation, autonomic dysfunction).

4. Clinical Implications and Treatment Approaches

Current evidence from multiple high-quality studies supports several evidence-based intervention strategies for comorbid depression and CVD:

4.1. Pharmacotherapy

The comprehensive review by Mavrides and Nemeroff (2013) of 61 studies provides clear guidance: SSRIs (particularly sertraline) demonstrate safety and efficacy in cardiac populations, tricyclic antidepressants should generally be avoided due to cardiovascular risks including arrhythmias, treatment reliably improves quality of life but cardiovascular outcome benefits remain uncertain, and careful dose titration and monitoring are recommended in patients with severe CVD (Mavrides & Nemeroff, 2013).

4.2. Psychotherapy

Elderon and Whooley (2013) highlight through their systematic analysis that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) improves both mood and cardiac outcomes, interpersonal therapy shows mixed results in cardiac populations, problem-solving therapy may be particularly effective for older adults with multiple comorbidities, and mindfulness-based approaches show promise but require further rigorous study (Elderon & Whooley, 2013).

4.3. Comprehensive Care Models

Several studies emphasize the clinical value of cardiac rehabilitation programs incorporating psychological support, collaborative care models integrating mental health specialists into cardiac care teams, integrated behavioral health approaches addressing both conditions simultaneously, and technology-assisted interventions (mobile apps, telehealth) to improve adherence and monitoring (Hare et al., 2014; Elderon & Whooley, 2013).

Case et al. (2018) provided important insights by identifying atypical depression and "double depression" (major depression plus dysthymia) as particularly high-risk subgroups that may require more intensive cardiovascular prevention efforts. Their analysis suggests these depression subtypes may be driving the overall depression-CVD relationship observed in population studies (Case et al., 2018).

5. Future Research Directions

Key unanswered questions and research needs identified across the 20 studies include better understanding of atypical depression subtypes and their specific cardiovascular risks (Case et al., 2018), development of targeted anti-inflammatory therapies for comorbid depression-CVD, personalized treatment approaches based on biomarker profiles and genetic risk factors, improved integration of mental and cardiac care systems in real-world clinical settings, investigation of novel biomarkers like NGAL for risk stratification (Gouweleeuw et al., 2015), long-term studies of depression treatment effects on hard cardiovascular outcomes, examination of sex-specific treatment responses and outcomes, development of interventions targeting shared mechanisms (e.g., autonomic training), and cost-effectiveness analyses of integrated care models in diverse healthcare systems. The study by Baune et al. (2012) provides a particularly useful framework for future research by systematically reviewing biological models that may explain how specific depression subtypes relate to CVD through distinct pathways including immune dysfunction, HPA axis abnormalities, and endothelial impairment (Baune et al., 2012).

Discussion

This systematic review synthesizes compelling evidence for the bidirectional relationship between depression and cardiovascular disease (CVD), supported by converging epidemiological and pathophysiological data. The consistent findings across 20 studies demonstrate that depression affects 20-30% of CVD patients while increasing cardiovascular risk by 13-44%, even after adjusting for traditional risk factors. These robust associations highlight depression as both a consequence and independent risk factor for CVD.

The review's major strength lies in its integration of diverse study designs, from large epidemiological cohorts to mechanistic investigations. This multidimensional approach reveals shared biological pathways including autonomic dysfunction (reduced heart rate variability), chronic inflammation (elevated CRP, IL-6), and endothelial impairment. However, limitations include heterogeneity in depression assessment methods and predominance of Western population studies, potentially limiting generalizability.

Key clinical implications emerge from our analysis:

- Depression screening should be routine in CVD management
- Integrated care models combining cardiology and mental health services are needed
- SSRIs (particularly sertraline) represent a safe pharmacological option
- Gender-specific approaches are warranted given women's higher vulnerability (61.4% vs 50.7% prevalence)

The findings challenge traditional unidirectional models of comorbidity, instead supporting a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. This has important theoretical implications, suggesting future frameworks must account for:

- Shared biological mechanisms (inflammation, HPA axis dysfunction)
- Psychosocial mediators (stress, social isolation)
- Behavioral factors (treatment adherence, lifestyle)

Future research priorities should address:

- Longitudinal studies with repeated biomarker measurements
- Clinical trials of interventions targeting shared pathways
- Investigation of depression subtype-specific cardiovascular risks
- Studies in underrepresented populations

The review underscores the need to move beyond disciplinary silos in both research and clinical practice. By recognizing depression and CVD as fundamentally interconnected

conditions, we can develop more effective, holistic approaches to patient care that address both physical and mental health simultaneously. This paradigm shift promises to improve outcomes for millions affected by this debilitating comorbidity.

Conclusions
The relationship between depression and cardiovascular disease is complex and bidirectional, with each condition influencing the development and progression of the other. This systematic review highlights how depression serves as both a significant risk factor for cardiovascular problems and a common consequence of living with heart disease. The biological connections between these conditions involve multiple bodily systems, including nervous system imbalances, inflammatory responses, blood vessel dysfunction, and hormonal disturbances. These shared mechanisms create a dangerous cycle where depression can worsen heart health, while cardiovascular disease can deepen depressive symptoms.

Women appear particularly vulnerable to developing depression alongside heart conditions, likely due to a combination of biological differences and social factors. This gender disparity underscores the need for tailored approaches in both prevention and treatment. The strong interconnection between mental and cardiovascular health calls for healthcare systems to move beyond treating these conditions separately. Instead, integrated care models that address both aspects simultaneously could significantly improve patient outcomes.

Key recommendations include implementing routine mental health screening for cardiac patients, developing collaborative treatment programs between cardiologists and mental health professionals, and carefully considering antidepressant options that are safe for heart patients. Future research should focus on better understanding the underlying biological links, testing comprehensive treatment approaches, and developing personalized care strategies. Recognizing the profound connection between emotional and physical health represents an important shift in how we approach these conditions, offering hope for more effective treatments that improve both mental wellbeing and cardiovascular outcomes.

Disclosure

Author's Contribution

Conceptualization: Jakub Robak, Julia Piekarska, Jakub Wawrzyńców

Formal analysis:Jakub Robak, Stanisław Telega, Justyna Solarz, Weronika Cyrkler

Investigation: Wojciech Lachór, Stanisław Telega, Monika Solarz, Urszula Szymczak, Julia Piekarska

Writing rough preparation: Weronika Cyrkler, Paweł Bollin, Jakub Robak, Stanisław Telega, Urszula Szymczak

Writing review and editing: Wojciech Lachór, Monika Solarz, Jakub Wawrzyńców, Justyna Solarz

Supervision: Jakub Robak, Paweł Bollin

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