

# Watching sports can be good for you—thanks to its social bonding effects

July 15 2024, by Rachel K Ownsworth, Annelie Harvey and Helen Keyes

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Being a sports fan, whether you're watching top flight football, the Olympic games or your favorite local team, can be a rollercoaster ride. Incredible highs if you win, depressing lows if you don't, and lots of stressful feelings in between.

Thankfully, the overall impact should be a positive one because [research has shown](#) that people who watch sports experience greater well-being than those who don't—and that this is probably linked to the social aspects of watching sport.

By [well-being](#) we mean a person's psychological state—how well someone feels. People with higher well-being tend to have [better physical health](#) and [live longer](#) than people with lower well-being.

[Research](#) carried out by our group at Anglia Ruskin University—led by Helen—used data from 7,209 adults, aged 16–85, living in England who participated in the Taking Part Survey commissioned by the UK government.

We found that people in the UK who attended a live sporting event in the last year are more satisfied with their lives, feel their lives are more worthwhile, and are less lonely than people who have not. These findings chime with [other studies](#), which found that people who watch sports in person at least once a year have fewer depressive symptoms than those who do not.

Can't get to live events? Watching sports on TV and online can also be good for your well-being. [Research](#) has shown that people who watch sports on TV or on the internet were also less depressed than those who did not, and depressive symptoms were even less likely for those who watched sports with increasing frequency.

Those who watch sports are more likely to [report higher feelings](#) of life

fulfillment than people who don't, regardless of whether they watch sports in-person, on TV, or online.

All these findings are correlational, which means we can't be certain which factor influences the other or whether they might both be influenced by another factor altogether (like wealth, or number of friends). However, [social identity](#) theory and brain imaging research tells us that watching sports could provide the primary well-being boost rather than other factors.

The positive effect of watching sports is likely about [social identity](#). We seek connection through the formulation of in-groups: communities of people with whom we share something in common. These communities form [part of our identities](#), and through them we find social and [emotional support](#).

An example of in-group formation is the [community we share](#) with people who support the same [sports teams](#) as us. [Research](#) has shown that people who identified strongly with a sports team were more likely to feel emotionally supported by fellow fans, which increased life satisfaction.

Through our shared social identity, we also share the social and emotional benefits of successes among our group. Researchers at KU Leuven in Belgium have dubbed this "[basking in reflected glory](#)."

However, when our team loses, we are more likely to distance ourselves from our team to protect ourselves from negative social and psychological consequences: "cutting off reflected failure."

The role of social processes linking sports spectatorship and well-being is demonstrated by a [Japanese study](#) that used brain imaging. They found that areas of the brain associated with psychological rewards (feeling

good) were more active when participants watched a popular spectator sport, like baseball, than a less popular spectator sport, such as golf.

So, the [social benefits](#) of watching sports aren't necessarily confined to going to live events with friends and family. We can enjoy the sense of community provided by our favorite athletes whether we watch sports in-person or from the comfort of our own homes, and by extension, we can also enjoy the psychological benefits.

Whether you support your team from home or at the game, you can enjoy the highs and lows of being a sports fan in the knowledge that it's good for you—as long as you're sharing that experience with others.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Watching sports can be good for you—thanks to its social bonding effects (2024, July 15) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-sports-good-social-bonding-effects.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.