

Benjamin Jones

11/14/2025

Pressure, Projects, and PRs: How UofM Students Use the Rec Center to Survive the Stress of Midterms and Finals

The clank of barbells, the thud of basketballs, and the echo of an upbeat playlist remixes filled with the University of Memphis on a Wednesday evening, not the typical peak gym hours, but midterms week had seriously changed everything. Students filed through the doors wearing AirPods, backpacks, and many tired expressions. For junior marketing major Pierce Johnson, this wasn't just a workout. It was a sense of survival.

"I had 3 exams and a lab this week," Johnson said, wiping sweat off his face between sets. "Coming here is practically the only thing keeping me from losing my mind. An hour gym session resets everything."

Johnson is not alone. As midterms and finals approach every semester, the Rec Center turns from the casual workout spot into one of the busiest stress relievers on campus. Students who normally sprinkle a few workouts suddenly begin to show up daily. Group fitness class hit the capacity very quickly. Intramural teams often rush for last second subs. Even the track crowd upstairs was packed.

This semester is no different. According to participation data from the University of Memphis Campus Recreation [Intramurals Schedule - Campus Recreation - The University of Memphis](#), student involvement in fitness programs are constantly rising during the October and April testing windows. Rec staff say they see the same pattern every year, when academic pressure rises, gym activity spikes.

"It always finds a way to pick up," said Sarah Rose, a Rec Center fitness instructor who teaches group classes/lessons. "Right before midterms and finals, we see a lot of new faces. Some students truly tell me they don't even care what class is available, they just need an hour away from studying."

Rose said students are treating fitness classes as structured mental breaks, especially high energy such as HIIT, cycling, and bootcamp. "People show up straight from the library with a Red Bull," she said. "They walk out smiling, you can tell they dropped stress levels."

The connection between mental health and exercise isn't a coincidence. The American Psychological Association [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) notes that physical activity can significantly reduce stress levels, improve overall mood, and strengthen cognitive performance. College students who are taking full course loads of work and part time jobs, may be turning to exercise out of necessity.

Junior nursing major Maya Cox said she never worked out consistently until her sophomore year, now she can't imagine exam season without it. "The Rec is my escape," Cox said. "Studying can get overwhelming, and sometimes I just need soe space where I'm not staring at Quizlet or Canvas."

She prefers the intramurals side, playing volleyball and pickleball with a group of friends she met during her first semester. "It's the one time during finals where I am actually having a smile on my face," she said. "I honestly don't even think about school for those hours."

The sense of community is a part that separates the Rec from exercising at home alone. Rose said students take in from just being around other students who are on the same page. "There's something that's motivating about being in a shared space," she said. Campus Recreation staff have leaned into the trend my promoting mental health messages during stressful academic periods. Flyers in the Rec Center encourage breaks, some fitness classes are even themed around stress release; intramurals offer short and low commitment leagues into a busy schedule. But even with benefits, some students often worry about balancing gym time with studying. Johnson said he used to get nervous and would feel guilty leaving the books behind. Now its different for him. "Honestly, I study better after I lift," he said. "It clears my head. I feel like I can truly focus."

Rose agrees." A lot of students tend to think they're losing time by working out," she said. "But most of them end up gaining it back because they're more focused and engaged and less anxious afterwards."

As the semester pushes towards the end and to finals, Rec Center staff expects the crowds to keep growing. The weight racks will always stay in rotation. Basketball courts will stay consistently full. Fitness classes will stay loud, and through it all students won't show up just to train their body but also their mind.

INTERVIEW AUDIO PIECE

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/lscy52wstbfso6n98ao5x/6766-Wildberry-Ln-13.m4a?rlkey=zi23118hqrxcmhj8fmrs847rx&st=1r99ejg3&dl=0>



6766 Wildberry Ln
13.m4a

SOURCES

- Pierce Johnson: UofM student
- Maya Cox: UofM nursing student
- Sarah: Rec Center fitness instructor/Staff member/UofM student
- EXPERT SOURCE: APA, American Psychological Association on exercise and stress