

How to Look after your mental health using exercise



**mental
health
foundation**

Physical activity
and wellbeing

**Exercise and physical
activity play a crucial
role in how you feel
about yourself and life.**

This booklet is for anyone who wants to find out how exercise and physical activity can keep them mentally well.

‘We all have bad moments. You’re not the only one. Look for help, and you’ll find support.’

What do we mean by mentally well?

Our mental health is about how we think and feel, our outlook on life and how we are able to cope with life’s challenges. It’s an essential part of our health and wellbeing.

Mental health problems

About one in four of us will have a mental health problem at some point in our life. And most of us go through times when we feel down. Lots of life’s events can trigger anxiety or depression – the death of a loved one, starting retirement, having a baby or being physically unwell are just a few examples.

Active solutions

There are many things we can do to cope with these feelings and keep ourselves in good spirits. Exercise is one of them.

Research shows that exercise and physical activity can be as effective as anti-depressant medication in treating mild to moderate depression. However, starting any type of exercise can be tough, especially when you’re feeling a bit low or lacking motivation.

Your active lifestyle

On the pages that follow there are practical suggestions about how you can make exercise or physical activity part of your everyday life.

Why physical activity is important

There are many reasons why physical activity is good for your body – having a healthy heart and supple joints are just two. But what about your mental wellbeing? Yes, it helps that as well!

Experts believe that exercise releases chemicals in your brain that make you feel good. Regular exercise can also boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, look and feel better.

Being active doesn't have to mean going to the gym, taking up jogging or wearing lycra. There are lots of ways to be active – and they don't need to cost much money.

‘When I left the gym that morning I felt as if someone had given me a million pounds – it was the sense of achievement.’

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Real benefits

As well as releasing natural chemicals that improve your mood and make you feel happier, having an active lifestyle can do more to help your mental health.

Taking part in physical activities offers many opportunities. It's a great way to meet people. And it can be a chance to give yourself a well-deserved break from the hustle and bustle of daily life – to find some quiet time.

Leading an active life can help raise your self-worth and improve your confidence. It can help you feel valued – and value yourself.

Exercise and physical activity can provide something worthwhile in your life. Something that you really enjoy, that gives you a goal to aim for and a sense of purpose.

Feel the results

We all experience different positive results from physical activity. Here are a few of the benefits:

- less tension, stress and mental fatigue
- a natural energy boost
- improved sleep
- a sense of achievement
- focus in life and motivation
- less anger or frustration
- a healthy appetite
- better social life
- fun!

Give yourself that space. Realise that being active is important – make it a priority.

‘A brisk walk to the shops can do the trick. I can’t find much time and don’t want to get sweaty on the way to work, so I walk part of the way home.’

You should aim to do
30 minutes of moderate
exercise five times a week.

30
minutes

How active do I need to be?

You should aim to do 30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week. It may sound like a lot, but it isn't as daunting as it first appears.

Moderate exercise means being energetic enough so you:

- breathe a little heavier than normal, but aren't out of breath
- feel warmer, but don't end up hot and sweaty

You don't have to leap in at the full amount. Build up slowly at a pace that suits you. And you don't have to do a solid half hour either. Find three ten-minute slots each day if that suits you – or two quarter hours.

Visit www.nhs.uk/livewell for more information.

Taking the first step

Once you have decided that you want to be more physically active, there are a few points worth thinking about.

Apart from improving your physical and mental wellbeing, what else do you want to get out of being active? Do you want to:

- Make your daily life more energetic?
- Be indoors or out?
- Meet people?
- Do a group or individual activity?
- Try a new sport?

An active lifestyle doesn't necessarily mean doing a sporty exercise, or limiting yourself to just one activity. A walk, doing housework and gardening are all physical activities. Of course, you must be sensible about your health so look at page 15 for medical advice.

Making time

What time do you have available for exercise? You may need to re-jig commitments to make room for extra activities. Alternatively, choose something that fits into your busy schedule.

Be practical

Consider any issues that could affect you. For instance, will you need support from friends and family? Will your active lifestyle have an impact on others in your life? Find out how much it will cost and, if necessary, what you can do to make it affordable.

Right for you

What kind of activity would suit you best? Is there a specific part of your body you want to exercise? Do you need to be more physically active at home? Do you want a change of scene? Do you like a structured activity that someone else has organised?

Making it a part of daily life

Adopting a more active lifestyle can be as simple as doing daily tasks more energetically or making small changes to your routine.

Here are a few suggestions:

At home

- Walk the children or grandchildren to school, then jog home
- Push the mower with extra vigour
- Get an exercise DVD – and use it!
- Speed up the housework, vac harder and faster till you're warm
- Put on some music for a ten minute dance
- Apply some real elbow grease when cleaning the car
- When you do get a break, go for a swim

At work

- Time your daily walks to and from the train station. Can you go faster?
- Ditch the lift for journeys less than four floors
- Don't pick up the phone, walk to see a colleague
- Use your lunch hour – take a brisk walk, do an exercise class or go for a swim
- Walk or cycle a slightly longer route home – the change of scenery will do you good too
- Stop at the gym on your way home

Out and about

- Leave the car at home for short journeys
- Get off the bus a stop earlier, or get on a stop later
- Park at the far end of the supermarket car park, or walk to the shops
- Looking after the grandchildren? Join in with their games – be part of the football team
- Jog and walk the dog – jog ten paces, then walk ten
- Join an exercise class at your community centre – and meet your neighbours

Stuck for ideas?

The list of activities is endless, from archery to yoga with gardening, karate and trampolining in between.

Only you know what you will get enjoyment from. Reflect on the activities you have done before and what you liked or disliked about them. It can still be tough finding something you feel is worthwhile.

‘The fact is I’ve done some work, and have somewhere to go every Monday and Wednesday with good support and a nice environment.’

Many people like taking part in organised activities that have a purpose beyond just exercise. The BTCV Green Gyms are designed to improve both your health and the environment at the same time. Experienced leaders help you tackle practical conservation tasks while improving your strength and stamina.

Website: www2.btcv.org.uk/display/greengym

Medically Wise

If exercise or physical activity hasn’t been part of your lifestyle for a while, talk to your GP.

Seek advice from a qualified expert, for example the instructor at the class you want to join. If you’re returning to physical activity, or a sport you’ve done before, your body’s experience of exercise means you may see the benefits sooner than someone who’s never been active.

Remember

- You’re probably not as fit as you were so gradually build up to a level that suits you now – not what you did 10 years ago!
- Take expert advice from your GP and instructors

Food

For an active life you need to make sure your body has the fuel it needs.

It's a case of balancing your 'energy in' (the food and drink you consume) with your 'energy out'. An active life can also mean that you need to eat the right foods at the right time so you have energy when you need it.

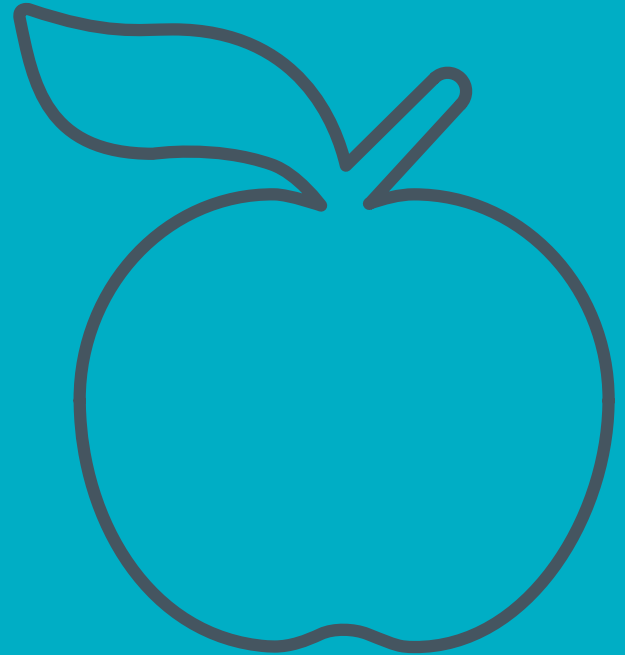
You're bound to struggle if you exercise on an empty stomach – or a very full one. Coordinating your exercise and food intake can make a real difference.

Drink

Drinking plenty of water is important to keep hydrated. Avoid sugary drinks and too much alcohol.

Visit www.drinkaware.co.uk for more information.

For an active life you need to make sure your body has the fuel it needs.



Overcoming barriers

It can be a bit scary making changes to your life. Most people get anxious about trying something new. Practical and emotional support from friends, family and experts really does help.

Fear of failure

Start with a beginners' class then move on to the advanced group. Set realistic targets – start your new running schedule with a 1km walk or jog, then increase gradually.

Responsibilities

Having children or being a carer can make time scarce. Who can help give you a break? What services can you use, like a community crèche?

Money

Is cost a worry? Many councils offer discounted rates at gyms and leisure centres. Alternatively, choose an activity that is cheaper.

Social Anxiety

Joining a new group can be daunting, so ask a friend to go along with you. If you are uncomfortable using communal changing rooms, or with the clothing you need to wear, leisure centre staff may have a solution. Otherwise try a single-sex gym or exercise class.

Feeling Lost

If you can't find your way round the leisure centre, ask the experts. Staff are there to help.

Transport

People at your activity class may share lifts, or try walking or cycling. If you are eligible, use your council dial-and-ride service. However you travel, always think how you will stay safe.

Overwhelmed

If life is getting on top of you, talk with your GP about how you feel before you get active. GPs can prescribe an exercise scheme where you are given free or discounted access to a range of leisure facilities for a period of time. It could be anything from the gym to belly dancing, depending what is available and suitable for you. A referral officer provides you with support, motivation and advice and there are interviews at key points to monitor how you are getting on.

‘The fact that the doctor had prescribed exercise made it easier. It is a treatment to make me feel better. Taking time away from work to do it was ok.’

Staying on track

After the initial motivation, maintaining an active lifestyle can have its challenges – but there are plenty of rewards!

Challenges

Sometimes staying active is hard, both physically and mentally.

Stress

This is a normal part of life. Keeping active can help you deal with it. Remember, the natural chemicals that exercise produces can help put a smile on your face.

Feeling low

When you feel down it can be hard to motivate yourself. Ask your friends for some support. Or try a different activity if that helps.

Seasons

When the clocks change for winter that evening cycle might not be so appealing – or safe. Create a winter exercise plan. Try an indoor activity where it's warm and dry.

Energy

Not all of us leap out of bed full of beans and ready for exercise. Work with your energy highs and lows. Accept that some days it's best to take a break.

Injury or Illness

Always ease back into your exercise routine – take advice from your GP if you need to. If an injury is going to be an ongoing problem switch to a more suitable activity.

Rewards

There are many positive spins offs from being active. Enjoy the ups – give yourself a quiet pat on the back or celebrate with others.

Loving Life

Nothing can beat that natural high. Take a moment to recognise how you feel more positive about yourself and life.

Sharing

Taking part in an activity with others is a chance to share what you are thinking and feeling. Achieving a result together can bring a real feeling of satisfaction.

Time Out

Maybe a half hour brisk walk gives you space to think about things. Clear your head as well as build your fitness!

Healthy Life

Being active can make you start thinking about your general health. For help with diet, smoking and alcohol consumption visit www.nhs.uk/livewell

‘Exercise? There was nothing I felt like less. I just wanted to curl up on the sofa and eat junk food. But I was wrong!’

Setting goals to measure progress might motivate you.



In the long run

Long term, staying active needs sustained motivation. You'll find your own way of doing this with time and experience. Don't see small setbacks as failures, just something to learn from.

Record

Keeping an exercise record can be helpful. As well as noting what you do, record how you feel. It can be a good way to remember the ups. Work out how you'll avoid repeating the downs.

Goals

Setting goals to measure progress might motivate you. You could:

- use a cycle computer – look to improve your average speed
- push in an extra stomach crunch at circuit training
- use a pedometer to measure how far you walk each day
- swim an extra length

How do you feel when you reach your goal? And what will your new goal be? If you didn't reach your goal, work out why. Was it unrealistic? Were there influences outside your control, like bad weather? Or do you need to try just a little bit harder? Remember, you won't see improvement every day. Making the regular commitment to doing physical activity is an achievement in itself.

New motivation

If your original motivation was to complete a challenge, like a fun run or a sponsored mountain climb, set your sights on a new event. Do you need to look for new people to be active with, like joining a running club or rambling group? Or is there a cause you'd like to fundraise for? There's always a challenge out there if you're willing to accept it!

Why not do a Challenge Event for the Mental Health Foundation?

Visit www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/
or call 020 7803 1123



Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

Our website offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

BBC

The BBC website offers help and advice on a range of wellbeing issues.

website: www.bbc.co.uk/health/emotional_health

Confidential help and support

The Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

Website: www.samaritans.org
Email: jo@samaritans.org
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Counselling

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

Website: www.bacp.co.uk
Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk
Telephone: 01455 883300

UK Council for Psychotherapy

Website: www.psychotherapy.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7014 9955

Support and information

General health information

NHS Direct provides information
24 hours a day.

Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
Telephone: 0845 4647

Leisure centres

Your local leisure centre should be able to provide you with details of all the classes it runs, along with the facilities on offer, like swimming pool, sauna and gym, along with prices and discounted rates. It is often a good place to find out about local sports and activity clubs.

We hope you found this booklet useful and informative.

The Mental Health Foundation is an independent charity. We rely on the support of people like you to fund our pioneering research and information provision.

To find out how you can donate or become involved with the work of the Foundation contact us.

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/

Telephone: 020 7803 1121

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