



# Supporting Mental Health with Physical Activity

There is a huge amount of information out there about how physical activity can positively impact both your physical and mental health.

Physical activity is simply moving our bodies more. One of the great things about physical activity is that there are endless possibilities and activities to suit everyone – regardless of motivation levels, age, fitness levels, affordability and accessibility to gyms etc.

If you have a mental health condition, it can be extremely difficult to remain consistent with physical activity, or it can become more of an obsession which can be detrimental and have long term, negative effects to your mental health.

## Building in Fitness to Support Your Mental Health and Well-Being

For some people, physical activity is about running marathons or training every day at the gym but there are many different physical things you can do to be a bit more active...it really doesn't need to be that intense! It is so much easier to be physically active if you choose something you enjoy doing and that fits in with your lifestyle. It is also motivating if you have someone doing it with you.

Getting started can be daunting, especially if you haven't been too active in the past or are going through a period of unwellness. The best approach is to start slowly with what you are comfortable with. Start with something that is manageable and build up as your confidence and ability grows. Pace yourself and try to move a little bit more every day. Doing too much at first will make you feel tired and may put you off, stopping that all important consistency.

Be realistic:

- Understand your minimum – work out what would be the least amount of physical activity that you would be comfortable with doing. For example, going for a 20-minute walk once a week.
- Understand your maximum – what would be your ideal, perhaps something you are working towards? For example, two 20-minute walks per week and two 30-minute visits to the gym.

Having a minimum and maximum will support you in knowing your limits, what is achievable and having goals to work toward. Be gentle with yourself, sometimes you can't be as active as you would like, and your energy levels will vary on different days. It's fine to slow down or take a break. At the same time, take your maximum seriously, fitness and exercise can begin to become an obsession, especially if your personality tends to lean that way. Stick to your maximums and monitor your minimums.



## Tips for Physical Activity at Home

For some, leaving the house is difficult or don't like to exercise in front of other people, so it's about finding ways to be active at home:

### Activities for your home -

- Household chores, like vacuuming, tidying up or DIY
- The NHS website has lots of different exercises or stretches you could try at home. If you have mobility issues, a physical condition, or find it difficult spending time out of a chair, the NHS website has chair-based exercises and routines you can try while sitting down. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/gym-free-workouts/>
- Move more – try and move about a bit every hour and sit less. Add more activity into your daily routine like running up the stairs instead of walking. Even put some alarms on your phone to remind you to get up and move!
- Dance – put on your favourite music, maybe while you are hoovering, cleaning or cooking. It keeps you distracted, lifts your mood making you feel positive
- There is a great deal available online like free exercise programmes designed for you to try at home, including everything from chair-based exercises to yoga and cardio workouts

### Activities outside the home -

- There is a wealth of information about different sports and activities and how to get involved. These range from joining a gym, leisure centre, joining a local team, exercise classes or running group
- There are also volunteering activities like joining The Community Volunteers (<https://www.tcv.org.uk/>) and The Wildlife Trusts who run outdoor volunteering projects around the UK
- Local leisure centres offer a range of facilities like badminton and squash courts, and run exercise classes and groups, such as Zumba or aerobics. They often feel more inclusive than private gyms, and many have discount schemes and childcare facilities
- Check out local walking and clubs like Walking for Health, Ramblers and Run Together all organised free, inclusive local groups with trained volunteers
- Over the years cycling has become popular with many people cycling to work, to the shops and going on long bike rides. Milton Keynes have several cycle paths that connect different parts of the city – go and explore. <https://www.getsmartertravelmk.org/cycling/where-to-ride>
- The NHS website has information on mindful activities like yoga and tai chi
- Gardening or seated gardening gets you out into the fresh air and there are a variety of gardening websites with information about gardening for emotional wellbeing and with disabilities
- Apps and programmes, such as the NHS's Strength and Flex and Couch to 5K, give you step-by-step programmes to follow, including information about how to exercise safely and help keep you motivated
- Exercising with others can be fun and keep you motivated too. Some people find that joining a group or getting active with someone they know - like a friend, family member, colleague or support worker - can be motivating and make a new activity more enjoyable and long term!



### Where can Therapeutic Support Physical Exercise?

- To provide opportunities to talk about your worries or anxiety provoking situations and develop coping strategies that are tailored to your needs
- Help and support you to implement/practicing coping strategies and social skills training like how to ask for help, problem solving
- Support you to overcome barriers like issues with body image by working with you to increase self-confidence and self-esteem
- Some services, like The Arthur Ellis Mentors, can come with you for a walk, accompany you to the gym, help and support you in physical activities
- Help and support interactions with healthcare professionals and staff by preparation appointments/assessments – for example making a list of questions they may wish to ask about your physical and/or mental health
- Help you research various exercise options like leisure centres, gyms, clubs etc.
- Work with your employers to make reasonable adjustments that may include incorporating physical exercise as part of your recovery plan

Arthur Ellis: Mental Health Support operate a 1:1 Mentoring Service to provide support to children (from 8 years old), young people and adults. We work with individuals to help them develop strategies for their exact needs to help you recover and move forward from any mental health related issues.

To find out more, visit

<https://www.arthurellismhs.com/mentoring/>





## What the Experts Say

### **Physical activity and mental health: current concepts.**

By Paluska SA1, Schwenk TL. Sports Med. 2000 Mar; 29(3): 167-80.

Abstract:

Physical activity may play an important role in the management of mild-to-moderate mental health diseases, especially depression and anxiety. Although people with depression tend to be less physically active than non-depressed individuals, increased aerobic exercise or strength training has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms significantly. However, habitual physical activity has not been shown to prevent the onset of depression. Anxiety symptoms and panic disorder also improve with regular exercise, and beneficial effects appear to equal meditation or relaxation.

In general, acute anxiety responds better to exercise than chronic anxiety. Studies of older adults and adolescents with depression or anxiety have been limited, but physical activity appears beneficial to these populations as well.

Excessive physical activity may lead to overtraining and generate psychological symptoms that mimic depression. Several differing psychological and physiological mechanisms have been proposed to explain the effect of physical activity on mental health disorders.

Well controlled studies are needed to clarify the mental health benefits of exercise among various populations and to address directly processes underlying the benefits of exercise on mental health.

### **Effects of Physical Exercise on Cognitive Functioning and Wellbeing: Biological and Psychological Benefits.**

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- Physical exercise induces structural and functional changes in the brain that affect brain plasticity (the brain's ability to change at any age) influencing cognition and wellbeing
- Effects on cognitive functioning have been shown across the lifespan from children to old age



## Physical Exercise as an Epigenetic Modulator of Brain Plasticity and Cognition

Jansen Fernandes et al

- In school children who engaged in greater amounts of aerobic exercise leads to better verbal, perceptual and mathematical performance (Sibley and Etnier, 2003)
- Recently, a meta-analysis study reported that a single bout of moderate aerobic exercise improves inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and working memory in preadolescent children and older adults (Ludyga et al., 2016)
- Exercise is also perceived as one of the most effective therapies to reduce depression (Rethorst and Trivedi, 2013, Kvam et al., 2016) and to improve several aspects of other brain-related diseases such as Parkinson and Alzheimer's, Epilepsy, anxiety and traumatic brain injury (Grealy et al., 1999, Chin et al., 2015, Intlekofer and Cotman, 2013, Matura et al., 2016, de Almeida et al., 2017, Peixinho-Pena et al., 2012, Shu et al., 2014, Reynolds et al., 2016, Jayakody et al., 2014)
- Aerobic exercise lowered depressive scores and relapse rate at 6 months (Blumenthal et al., 1999)

## Weinberg and Gould 2015: Foundation of Sport and Exercise Psychology

- Exercising over consistently over longer periods of time has more benefits on wellbeing in comparison to short bursts of activity
- Aerobic exercise has an impact on reducing anxiety and depression and anaerobic (weightlifting) has mood enhancing benefits
- Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, reduces muscle tension, and increases neurotransmitters like serotonin and beta-endorphins
- Physical exercise decreases hostility, tension and headaches; increases assertiveness, confidence, emotional stability, cognitive functioning, internal locus of control (being able to take responsibility), positive body image and self-control