

# How to...

## Look after your mental health using exercise



Mental Health  
Foundation

**There are many reasons why physical activity is good for your body – having a healthy heart and improving your joints and bones are just two, but did you know that physical activity is also beneficial for your mental health and wellbeing?**

We need to change the way we view physical activity in the UK in order not to see it as something we 'have to do', 'should do' or 'ought to do' for our health, but as something that we do because we personally value its positive benefits to our wellbeing.

As part of our work to promote better mental health, we have produced this pocket guide to show the positive impact that physical activity can have on your own mental wellbeing, including some tips and suggestions to help you get started.

Being active doesn't have to mean doing sport or going to the gym. There are lots of ways to be active; find the one that works for you and let's all get physical!

**'It is exercise alone that supports the spirits, and keeps the mind in vigour'**  
**Marcus Tullius Cicero**

## What is physical activity?

At a very basic level, physical activity means any movement of your body that uses your muscles and expends energy. One of the great things about physical activity is that there are endless possibilities and there will be an activity to suit almost everyone!

It is recommended that the average adult should do between 75 and 150 minutes of exercise a week. This can be either moderate intensity exercise, such as walking, hiking or riding a bike, or it can be more vigorous activities, such as running, swimming fast, aerobics or skipping with a rope. Any activity that raises your heart rate, makes you breathe faster, and makes you feel warmer counts towards your exercise!

An easy way to look at types of physical activity is to put them into four separate categories.

### 1. Daily physical activity

For adults, physical activity can include recreational or leisure-time physical activity, transportation (e.g. walking or cycling), occupational activity (i.e. work), household chores, play, games, sports, or planned exercise in the context of daily, family, and community activities.

Everyday things such as walking to the bus stop, carrying bags or climbing stairs all count, and can add up to the 150 minutes of exercise a week recommended for the average adult.

## **2. Exercise**

Purposeful activity carried out to improve health or fitness, such as jogging or cycling, or lifting weights to increase strength.

## **3. Play**

Unstructured activity that is done for fun or enjoyment.

## **4. Sport**

Structured and competitive activities that include anything from football or squash to cricket. We can play these as part of a team or even on our own. This can be a fun and interactive way of getting exercise that doesn't have to feel like exercising.

These activities can vary in intensity and can include high-intensity activities, such as tennis, athletics, swimming, and keep-fit classes, or they can be lower-intensity activities and sports, such as snooker or darts. Making exercise fun rather than something you have to do can be a motivator to keep it up.

## What is wellbeing?

The government defines wellbeing as 'a positive physical, social and mental state'. For our purposes, we are focusing on mental wellbeing.

- Mental wellbeing does not have a single universal definition, but it does encompass factors such as:
- The sense of feeling good about ourselves and being able to function well individually or in relationships
- The ability to deal with the ups and downs of life, such as coping with challenges and making the most of opportunities
- The feeling of connection to our community and surroundings
- Having control and freedom over our lives
- Having a sense of purpose and feeling valued

Of course, mental wellbeing does not mean being happy all the time, and it does not mean that you won't experience negative or painful emotions, such as grief, loss, or failure, which are a part of normal life. However, whatever your age, being physically active can help you to lead a mentally healthier life and can improve your wellbeing.

## What impact does physical activity have on wellbeing?

Physical activity has a huge potential to enhance our wellbeing. Even a short burst of 10 minutes' brisk walking increases our mental alertness, energy and positive mood.

Participation in regular physical activity can increase our self-esteem and can reduce stress and anxiety. It also plays a role in preventing the development of mental health problems and in improving the quality of life of people experiencing mental health problems.

### Impact on our mood

Physical activity has been shown to have a positive impact on our mood. A study asked people to rate their mood immediately after periods of physical activity (e.g. going for a walk or doing housework), and periods of inactivity (e.g. reading a book or watching television). Researchers found that the participants felt more content, more awake and calmer after being physically active compared to after periods of inactivity. They also found that the effect of physical activity on mood was greatest when mood was initially low.

There are many studies looking at physical activity at different levels of intensity and its impact on people's mood. Overall, research has found

that low-intensity aerobic exercise – for 30–35 minutes, 3–5 days a week, for 10–12 weeks – was best at increasing positive moods (e.g. enthusiasm, alertness).

### **Impact on our stress**

When events occur that make us feel threatened or that upset our balance in some way, our body's defences cut in and create a stress response, which may make us feel a variety of uncomfortable physical symptoms and make us behave differently, and we may also experience emotions more intensely.

The most common physical signs of stress include sleeping problems, sweating, and loss of appetite. Symptoms like these are triggered by a rush of stress hormones in our body – otherwise known as the 'fight or flight' response. It is these hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which raise our blood pressure, increase our heart rate and increase the rate at which we perspire, preparing our body for an emergency response. They can also reduce blood flow to our skin and can reduce our stomach activity, while cortisol, another stress hormone, releases fat and sugar into the system to boost our energy.

Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress. Research on employed adults has found that highly active individuals tend to have lower stress rates compared to individuals who are less active.



## **Impact on our self-esteem**

Exercise not only has a positive impact on our physical health, but it can also increase our self-esteem. Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves and how we perceive our self-worth. It is a key indicator of our mental wellbeing and our ability to cope with life stressors.

Physical activity has been shown to have a positive influence on our self-esteem and self-worth. This relationship has been found in children, adolescents, young adults, adults and older people, and across both males and females.

## **Dementia and cognitive decline in older people**

Improvements in healthcare have led to an increasing life expectancy and a growing population of people over 65 years. Alongside this increase in life expectancy, there has been an increase in the number of people living with dementia and in people with cognitive decline. The main symptom of dementia is memory loss; it is a progressive disease that results in people becoming more impaired over time. Decline in cognitive functions, such as attention and concentration, also occurs in older people, including those who do not develop dementia. Physical activity has been identified as a protective factor in studies that examined risk factors for dementia. For people who have already developed the disease, physical activity can help to delay further decline in functioning. Studies show that

there is approximately a 20% to 30% lower risk of depression and dementia for adults participating in daily physical activity. Physical activity also seems to reduce the likelihood of experiencing cognitive decline in people who do not have dementia.

### **Impact on depression and anxiety**

Physical activity can be an alternative treatment for depression. It can be used as a standalone treatment or in combination with medication and/or psychological therapy. It has few side effects and does not have the stigma that some people perceive to be attached to taking antidepressants or attending psychotherapy and counselling. Physical activity can reduce levels of anxiety in people with mild symptoms and may also be helpful for treating clinical anxiety. Physical activity is available to all, has few costs attached, and is an empowering approach that can support self-management.

For more details about how physical activity can help increase wellbeing and prevent or manage mental health problems, read our full report, or get more information about how exercise can improve your mental health on our website: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk).

## How much physical activity should I be doing?

We know all too well that that many people in the UK do not meet the current physical activity guidelines.

With an average of only 65.5% of men and 54% of women meeting the recommended physical activity levels in 2015, it is important that more people are given the knowledge and support they need to make physical activity a healthy yet enjoyable part of life.

The Department of Health recommends that adults should aim to be active daily and complete 2.5 hours of moderate intensity activity over a week – the equivalent of 30 minutes five times a week. It may sound like a lot, but it isn't as daunting as it first appears, and we have lots of suggestions to help you get started.

## **Where do I start?**

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?

Ask yourself whether you'd prefer being indoors or out, doing a group or individual activity, or trying a new sport. If you're put off by sporty exercises, or feel uninspired at the thought of limiting yourself to just one activity, think outside the box and remember that going on a walk, doing housework, and gardening are all physical activities. Also, would you rather go it alone or do an activity with a friend? Social support is a great motivator, and sharing your experiences, goals and achievements will help you to keep focus and enthusiasm.

## **Overcoming barriers**

It can be a bit scary making changes to your life, and most people get anxious about trying something new. Some common barriers, such as cost, injury or illness, lack of energy, fear of failure, or even the weather can hinder people from getting started; however, practical and emotional support from friends, family and experts really does help.

Body image can act as a barrier to participating in physical activity. People who are anxious about how their body will look to others while they are exercising may avoid exercise as a result. For women, attending a female-only exercise class

or a ladies-only swimming session may help to overcome anxiety as a barrier to initially starting to exercise.

Exercising with a companion can also help to reduce anxiety about how your body looks to others, and may be particularly helpful during the first few exercise sessions. The environment can also influence how you feel; gyms with mirrored walls tend to heighten anxiety, as does exercising near a window or other space where you might feel 'on show'.

### **Make time**

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

### **Be practical**

Will you need support from friends and family to complete your chosen activities, or is there a chance your active lifestyle will 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? Think about what parts of your body you want to exercise and whether you'd prefer to be active at home or whether you fancy a change of scenery and would prefer to exercise in a different environment, indoors or outdoors.

## **Making it 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, such as walking up a flight of stairs.

## **Start slowly**

If physical activity is new to you, it's best to build up your ability gradually. Focus on task goals, such as improving sport skills or stamina, rather than competition, and keep a record of your activity and review it to provide feedback on your progress. There are many apps and social networks accessible for free to help.

## **Goals**

It's really important to set goals to measure progress, which might motivate you. Try using a pedometer or an app on your smartphone to measure your speed and distance travelled, or add on an extra stomach crunch or swim an extra length at the end of your session.

Remember, you won't see improvement from physical conditioning every day. Making the regular commitment to doing physical activity is an achievement in itself, and every activity session can improve your mood.

## **At home**

There are lots of activities you can do without leaving your front door and that involve minimal cost. It can be as simple as pushing the mower with extra vigour, speeding up the housework, or doing an exercise DVD in the living room.

## **At work**

Whether you're on your feet, sat at a desk or sat behind the wheel during your working hours, there are many ways you can get more active. Try using the stairs for journeys fewer than four floors, walking or cycling a slightly longer route home, or using your lunch hour to take a brisk walk, do an exercise class or go for a swim. The change of scenery will do you good, too.

## **Out and about**

Being out of doors is a prime time for boosting your activity levels, and research suggests that doing physical activity in an outdoor, 'green' environment has greater positive effects on wellbeing compared to physical activity indoors.

Making small changes, from leaving the car at home for short journeys or getting off the bus a stop earlier, to higher-intensity activities like joining in with your children's football game or jogging with the dog, can help to boost your mood.

## Further ideas for starting or keeping up with physical activity

### **NHS**

The NHS Choices website has a number of tools to help people get started with physical activity, including exercises for older people, strength and flexibility videos, advice on taking up new sports, and advice on getting started with walking. The tools are available here: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk).

### **The Great Outdoor Gym Company**

Outdoor gyms are gyms where some gym equipment is provided in outside spaces for people to use for free; for example, The Great Outdoor Gym Company [www.tgogc.com](http://www.tgogc.com).

### **The British Heart Foundation**

The British Heart Foundation's 'Health at Work' website provides further suggestions and some resources to get started with promoting physical activity at work: [www.bhf.org.uk/healthatwork](http://www.bhf.org.uk/healthatwork).





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# The Mental Health Foundation

*Good mental health for all*

Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.



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