



I was running away from my problems

Blog

Content warning – the following resource covers elements of when physical activity can become unhealthy. We will be touching on topics including eating problems and over-exercise/exercise addiction. If you find any of the content triggering, we encourage you to reach out to Mind’s Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or Samaritans on 116 123 for immediate support if you need it or see [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk) for further information.

What happens when physical activity prevents people asking for support?

Physical activity can be an amazing way to support mental health. But it can lead to problems for some people. For Thomas, exercise and mental health have always been a complicated relationship.

At 15, Thomas was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) three years after his father's death. He struggled to cope with school or work and developed problems with substance abuse. "My dad was a keen marathon runner and I started getting back into exercise at 19 by taking up running".

"My life improved and I began to have periods where I felt more able to cope. I'd run to control my emotions – but at the same time I wasn't really dealing with the problems behind them. I used running as a way to cope with substance abuse without acknowledging what I was doing."

"Exercise allowed me to portray an image of myself that I wanted the people around me to see, and escape talking about my feelings and emotions. I would regularly run at especially difficult times in my life, around birthdays and anniversaries, to avoid what I was feeling."

“At the age of 19 I started running”

Hitting rock bottom

In time, Thomas went to college on his journey to preparing for university. While studying he developed irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and a skin condition called urticaria. This meant he couldn't run or do any kind of cardio activity.

“When exercise was taken away, I very quickly became unable to cope,” he says. “In essence, I had been running away from my problems.”

“All the symptoms of my PTSD came rushing back to the surface whilst at university and I quickly found it difficult to cope. I tried desperately to replace the exercise I did before with less intensive things like weightlifting – but it didn't have the same effect.”

Looking back, Thomas says that he needed to hit 'rock bottom' to rebuild his life. He says this came after a psychotic episode led to him being admitted to hospital. The fall-out left him homeless and he dropped out of education. “I was signed off work for nearly a year and I was lucky to have a support system in place. Although my physical health problems continued, I was able to manage my mental health better” he says.

“I began to explore ways to manage my mental health better. I was still unable to run. This proved to be a good thing as I had to find alternative ways to cope.”

“When exercise was taken away, I very quickly became unable to cope”

Building a healthier relationship

“It took a while, but I noticed an improvement in my physical health as I began to come to terms with my mental health.”

Today, Thomas has taken steps to develop a healthier relationship with exercise. “It’s a work in progress – but I know have the knowledge of how to avoid an unhealthy relationship,” he says.

“I limit the time I spend exercising and keep a record, which I can review to help me understand when I use exercise as an unhealthy coping mechanism. I also have a step counting watch that prevents me from overdoing things. I make a concerted effort to stick to the routine I have now.”

“There are undoubtedly many benefits I get from running, including for mental health. But it’s important I combine it with other activities and support to manage my PTSD.”

**“I limit the time I spend exercising
and keep a record”**

