

Guide 1: How can physical activity support mental health?

Delivering a sport and physical activity service
A toolkit for mental health providers



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This guide covers

- Defining physical activity.
- The impact being active has on your physical and mental health.
- Mind's Get Set to Go programme.

What does being physically active mean?

- **Physical activity.** This can describe anything that involves moving the body.
- **Exercise.** Activities people do deliberately for fitness or training, rather than something that's part of a daily routine.
- **Sport.** Sport usually refers to physical activities people do on their own or in a team for competition or fun. People working in the sport and leisure industries use the word in its broadest sense, including activities such as tennis, athletics, swimming, keep-fit or Zumba classes. Sports like snooker or darts are more about skill than any physical exertion (Sport England, the national body responsible for increasing access to sport, has an extensive list of sports on its website).

Why is it so important for people with mental health problems to do sport and physical activity?

Having a mental health problem can put people at a higher risk of developing a serious physical health problem.

People with mental health problems are:

- Twice as likely to die from heart disease.¹
- Four times as likely to die from respiratory disease.²
- On average, likely to die between 10 and 17 years earlier than the general population, if they have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (this may be due to a number of factors including poor diet, exercise and social conditions. People may also be slower to seek help, and doctors can sometimes fail to spot physical health problems in people with severe mental health problems).³

1 Harris E and Barraclough B (1998) *Excess mortality of mental disorder*, British Journal of Psychiatry

2 Phelan M and others (2001) *Physical health of people with severe mental illness*, British Medical

3 Mind. *Physical Activity, Sport and Mental Health*. Available at: <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/physical-activity-sport-and-exercise/#.WHeRDnapQ01>

- If someone has a long-term physical health condition it can also put them at risk of developing a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression.⁴ For some people, the impact on their mental health could become more of a problem than the physical condition itself. Exercise programmes and treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness have been shown to improve anxiety and depression, and quality of life for people with chronic illnesses.⁵

What are the physical health benefits of being active?⁶

Physical activity has a wide range of health benefits – for mind, body, and for social and emotional wellbeing. As well as improving overall physical fitness, being more active can have the following physical benefits:

- **Reduced risk of some diseases.** For example, health experts suggest that being more active can reduce your risk of having a stroke or developing heart disease by 10%, and type 2 diabetes by 30–40%.
- **Reduced risk of physical health problems as bodies adapt to stress.** As people become fitter, their bodies can better regulate cortisol ('stress hormone') levels.
- **Healthier organs.** For instance, a stronger heart will help people lower their cholesterol and blood pressure.
- **Healthier bones.** Weight-bearing exercises strengthen bones and help build muscle, which can reduce chances of developing osteoporosis. Healthier weight. If people are overweight, becoming more active can help them reduce body fat.
- **More energy.** As people adapt to increased activity levels they get a natural energy boost, which can make them feel less tired. Researchers say that even low intensity levels of activity can be beneficial if someone usually feels very fatigued.
- **Improved sleep.** Many people find they are able to sleep better at night after having been more active during the day.

4 Naylor C, Parsonage M, McDaid D, Knapp M, Fossy M, Galea A. (2012). *Long term conditions and mental health – the cost of co-morbidities*. London: The King's Fund and Centre for Mental Health

5 Mind. *Physical Activity, Sport and Mental Health*. Available at: <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/physical-activity-sport-and-exercise/#.WHeRDnapQ01> (Accessed January 2017)

6 Mind, *Physical Activity, Sport and Mental Health*. Available at: http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/physical-activity-sport-and-exercise/health-benefits/#.WHeT_3apQ00

What are the benefits to mental health?⁷

- **Reduced anxiety and happier moods.** When someone exercises, their brain chemistry changes through the release of endorphins (sometimes called 'feel good' hormones), which can reduce anxiety and lift mood.
- **Reduced feelings of stress.** Exercise can reduce feelings of stress and tension as the body becomes better able to control cortisol levels.
- **Clearer thinking.** Some people find that exercise helps to break up racing thoughts – as the body tires so does the mind.
- **Increased self-esteem.** The sense of achievement a person gets from increasing their fitness or learning a new skill can help people feel better about themselves and lift their mood. Improved self-esteem also has a protective effect that increases life satisfaction and can make people more resilient and less stressed.
- **Reduced risk of depression.** Increasing activity levels from doing nothing to exercising at least three times a week can reduce a person's risk of depression by up to 30%.

What is Mind's Get Set to Go programme?

Mind's Get Set to Go programme works to improve people's mental health through sport and physical activity. With support from Sport England and the National Lottery, local Minds provide tailored sports and physical activity programmes, designed to overcome common barriers faced by people with mental health problems.

Local Minds recruit and train volunteers to provide one to one support for participants taking part in the sessions. They also encourage people with mental health problems to take part in activities in their local communities.

Alongside this, Mind has delivered national campaigns to encourage people with mental health problems to get involved in sports and physical activity.

In the first two years of the programme:

- Over **2,400** people engaged in physical activity and information sessions.
- **142** local community organisations received tailored mental health awareness for sport and physical activity training.
- **4,399** people joined the Elefriends online peer support community, where users share the impact sport and activity has had on their mental health and provide encouragement to one another.
- **78,534** people learnt more about the impact getting active can have on their mental health through engaging with our online content.

⁷ Mind, *Physical Activity, Sport and Mental Health*. Available at: http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/physical-activity-sport-and-exercise/health-benefits/#.WHeT_3apQ00