

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.



Maintaining a healthy relationship with physical activity

A resource to support the sport and physical activity sector when physical activity can become unhealthy.

We know physical activity can be an amazing way to support mental health. However, it isn't helpful for everyone all the time. It's important to recognise that some of us can develop an unhealthy relationship with exercise.

While exercise can be a positive coping strategy, it may also become a way to avoid difficult emotions. This can make it harder for us to recognise when support is needed with how we're feeling.

What is over-exercising?

Over-exercising can mean exercising for too long or too intensely without enough rest for your personal limits.

What is exercise addiction?

Some of us may feel unable to stop, or not in control of how much we exercise. This is sometimes called exercise addiction.



10 signs a relationship with physical activity is becoming unhealthy*

1

Changes in personality, appearance or how often people exercise

6

Appearing constantly tired and exhausted

2

Feeling guilty or anxious when they aren't doing enough exercise

7

Exercising even when unwell or injured

3

Exercising in secret

8

Exercising instead of connecting with others

4

Regular injuries (which can be a sign of over-exercising)

9

Feeling physical activity is the most important thing in their life

5

Making excuses to be active

10

Exercising even when they want to stop

*Physical activity is personal, so experiences of an unhealthy relationship may differ. As a result, people may showcase different signs to the ones listed here.

5 ways you can help

1

Start the conversation

It may feel difficult, but asking if someone feels OK can be an important first step. Remember that it's not your responsibility to fix the problem. Listening to what they say and letting them know you hear/understand them can be really helpful.

2

Think beyond personal bests

Focusing solely on performance or body shape may lead to unhelpful comparisons which can affect people's self-esteem and worsen mental health symptoms. Try to encourage healthy and sustainable routines rather than body shape goals and personal bests. Remember to focus on how physical activity makes people feel and the enjoyment it can create.

3

Promote rest*

Introduce the benefits of rest. Talk about how it can help physical and mental health. Show how alternative activities like meditation and massage can become a healthy part of their routine.

*Rest is personal, some of us may find it difficult to start with. You may encourage active rest to start with (light or easy activity where you're still moving - but not at a high intensity).

4

Signpost to support

Suggest a helpline:

Call Samaritans on **116 123**

Call Mind's Infoline on **0300 123 3393**

Text Shout to **85258**

5

Resources to support

[Information on the relationship between physical activity and mental health.](#)

This includes guidance on developing a healthy relationship with physical activity, signs, symptoms and signposting to support.

Mind's information on [seeking help for a mental health problem.](#)

Mind's information on [physical activity and mental health.](#)