

Tips to support people when physical activity has become a problem

Coaches and instructors have a duty of care to ensure people take part in physical activity safely. They're not expected to provide professional mental health guidance, but to signpost to further support.

If you think someone might need medical help, always seek advice from NHS 111 or 999 in an emergency.

The following tips highlight how to support a person when physical activity has become a problem.

Check in and listen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow a person-centred approach (see Guide 4: Making physical activities inclusive for people experiencing mental health problems). Check in with the person around day-to-day life if they feel comfortable to do so. Listening, and sharing your concerns, can be one of the most powerful tools. ● You may be the only person who has noticed that someone might be unwell, through observing their physical activity behaviours. They can be masking other problems that the person needs further support with. ● Consider whether there are any other changes in their behaviour that go hand-in-hand with the increase in physical activity
Be non-judgemental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Try to find out the person's motivations for being active. It may be the main way that they manage their mental health and it is important that they feel validated and supported
Ask	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enquire about the participant's plans, goals and aspirations over the short, medium and long term. For example, wanting to improve performance in an activity or training for an event is likely to result in increased activity levels over a specific time period. If there is no clear training plan or goal it may be a sign of physical activity becoming a problem. ● It's important to explore people's motivations for their goals and ask if you're concerned that the person is being active to try and cope with difficult feelings For example, if someone constantly feels they have to push themselves to go further, or are no longer enjoying the activity but feel that they have to do it.

Educate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on the fun, social and feel-good benefits of physical activity. If it becomes a chore, or if a person is feeling guilty, it may be that it's becoming a problem. ● Highlight the importance of a varied physical activity routine that includes cardio, strength, balance and stretching to improve flexibility. ● Discuss how rest days (i.e. no physical activity or active rest*) can help to improve both physical and mental health and allow time for the body and mind to recover. Help to identify alternative activities that the person can do and help to plan these into their routine. ● Reassure people that it's OK to take a break from physical activity and come back to it if there's a time it's not working for them. ● Share how to fuel the body for physical activity. This includes the importance of eating and drinking enough for the activities and signposting to dieticians for further support. <p>*Active rest can be described as taking part in light or easy activity where you're still moving but not at the intensity level you normally move, or doing something different to your usual routine.</p>
Observe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If people's physical activity patterns, their personality or sometimes their appearance changes, it may be a sign that something is wrong. <p>“When I was underweight I was told I looked great. I was underweight, massively over-training and my mental health was all over the place. I was ill and no one noticed.” Expert by experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look out for the signs of regular injury as this could be an indication of over-training. <p>“I went to A&E several times really quickly with suspected broken bones – no one noticed the frequency of my injuries.” Expert by experience</p> <p>It's important to remember that mental health problems affect us all differently impacting our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. There won't always be visible signs.</p>

Promote	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on physical activity for health, social connection and fun. ● Share positive body images promoting different shapes, sizes and backgrounds.
Care	<p>It is important to CARE, remembering your:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coaching or Customer skills ● Awareness of the individual ● Respect ● Empathy <p>See Guide 4: Making physical activities inclusive for people experiencing mental health problems for more information on CARE.</p>
Provide support to build a balanced activity plan	<p>You might provide support to develop a balanced activity plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This may include reduced cardiovascular activity, increased strength and flexibility work and a focus on technical skills, or low-impact activity such as yoga or meditation. ● Rest days should form part of the plan. This includes promoting the importance of other hobbies and interests on rest days and encouraging the person to think about things they can do for pleasure, relaxation or achievement outside of physical activity.
Encouraging people to keep a physical activity diary	<p>Keeping a diary or log may help the person to record their physical activity and thoughts and feelings focusing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Balancing the different type of activities across the week. ● Building in rest days. This may start with active rest – identifying activities to support their mental health at this time. ● Recording the amount of time spent being active and referencing the physical activity guidelines. <p>Keeping a diary may help the person to articulate their thoughts, feelings and motivations for being active and to share this with others.</p>

**Offer other
opportunities
to be involved**

- Ask them if they would like to buddy up, support the coach or leader or officiate during the session.
- Encouraging them to remain engaged in the session could reduce the chance of them leaving and over-exercising alone.

