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Trauma-informed approaches to physical activity

Trauma-informed physical activity (TIPA) isn't just about moving more. It's about **choice, safety, trust and connection** – the conditions that help people feel in control of their bodies and lives again. When programmes embed these principles, they don't just boost fitness; they support healing, confidence and community.

To understand more about how trauma informed approaches to physical activity work, Mind sponsored a PhD with **Loughborough University**. The researcher reviewed the existing evidence on trauma informed approaches to physical activity, did interviews with stakeholders in the physical activity space, and spoke with people taking part in physical activity programmes to support their wellbeing. The researcher used a **realist evaluation approach**, meaning that they focused on identifying **what works, for whom, and in what circumstances**.

The research found that:

- **Predictability builds safety.** Same time, same place, same faces reduces anxiety and makes it easier to turn up.
- **Choice restores control.** From opting in (or out) of activities to setting pace and intensity, autonomy is a core mechanism of change.
- **Connection is the catalyst.** Warm relationships, peer support and time to talk reduce isolation and keep people coming back.

“Being in a space where you can choose... just having freedom to have some control over your life... felt like euphoria.”

“I like having the same person all the time... When you get a different person every time you don't know how you could open up.”

“If it's not delivered every week, you don't get that structure and routine... When there's consistent delivery every week, you can look forward to something.”

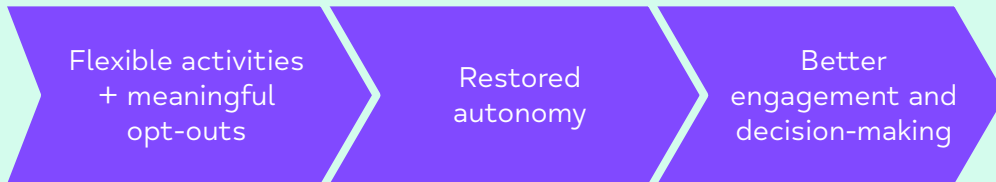
How TIPA works

Realist analysis identified 11 programme theories. In practice, three mechanisms are crucial to TIPA delivery:

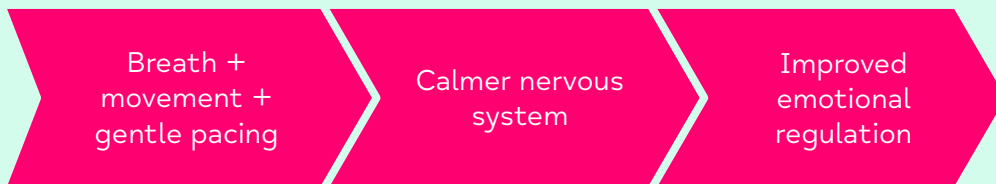
1. Belonging through connection



2. Agency through choice



3. Regulation through body awareness



Recommendations for practice

1 Co-design with participants

Why? Shared power builds trust and ownership

2 Frame as enjoyment and wellbeing

Why? Not framing activities as 'therapy' reduces stigma

3 Prioritise safety, consistency and autonomy

Why? Predictability lowers anxiety, choice restores control

4 Use relatable deliverers, share vulnerability

Why? Building trust is quicker when people feel understood

5 Build social connection intentionally

Why? Connection keeps people coming back



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