



For better  
mental health

# The Mind guide to physical activity

# The Mind guide to physical activity

**Physical activity can boost mental wellbeing and change your outlook on life. It can help people with anxiety and depression, and might even prevent such problems from developing in the first place. This booklet provides practical advice about ways of building more activity into your life, and identifies ways to help you stick to a more active lifestyle. It's not designed to give detailed information about individual activities.**

## **What are the benefits of having a physically active lifestyle?**

Arguably, the best reason for being physically active is that it can be fun, and a way of getting away from the stresses and strains of everyday life. Whatever activities you choose – and whether you do it in a group or on your own, indoors or out – you're likely to benefit psychologically.

Firstly, regular physical activity can lift your mood, help you deal with negative emotions (such as anger) and bring you a general sense of mental wellbeing. It can help you sleep better, reduce tension levels, feelings of stress or fatigue, and give you more energy. And these are changes that can happen straight after a session, not just through taking exercise regularly over a long period of time, particularly if the activity is moderately intensive. (See p. 4 for information about intensity levels.)

Secondly, studies have shown that people feel better about themselves once they start some sort of programme of physical activity. This might be because they develop a much more positive self-image, through changes to their body shape, as they begin to lose weight or feel their muscle tone get better. This, in itself, improves mental wellbeing.

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Perhaps even more importantly, taking part in an activity that gives them a sense of achievement can change people's self-image. It can help them to see just what they are capable of. Learning a new skill or achieving a goal, however minor, boosts self-esteem and motivation, and can start a more positive cycle.

Taking exercise can be an ideal way to meet and enjoy the company of other people. Joining a local walking group, going to classes at a gym or leisure centre, or going cycling with a friend or relative can give you a chance to meet and socialise with other people. It gives you all something in common and helps to break the ice. If you would prefer not to join in with other people, there are still lots of activities you can enjoy on your own, such as swimming or walking. (Perhaps you could take a dog instead!)

The other health benefits of exercise are already well known. People who are regularly active are at half the risk of developing coronary heart disease. It reduces high blood pressure, obesity and high cholesterol. Keeping up an active lifestyle is good for the bones, joints and muscles and can help to delay osteoporosis and arthritis. In keeping muscles strong and flexible, you can participate in everyday life to the full, with less risk of injury or falling. Being physically active can also help control conditions such as diabetes, and make you less exposed to some cancers (in particular bowel cancer). Research is still continuing.

### **What counts as being physically active?**

Physical activity can mean:

- simple, everyday activities, such as gardening, cleaning and walking to catch a bus,
- exercise, such as cycling, swimming or working out
- sports, such as playing football, golf, or netball.

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They can be done at three different levels of intensity.

### **Light intensity**

This would include light housework, light gardening, and walking at normal speed; activities that shouldn't make you feel any different from usual. As a rule, they don't involve lots of extra energy and so wouldn't make you breathe harder or feel any warmer.

### **Moderate intensity**

Energetic housework and gardening, brisk walking, cycling, swimming, dancing and resistance training at a gym fit into this category. It includes any activity that makes you breathe a little heavier than normal and feel warmer, but it shouldn't make you feel hot, sweaty or out of breath.

### **High intensity**

Activities such as fast cycling, running, football and aerobics will all make you breathe faster and deeper, and make you feel hot.

## **How much do I need to do?**

Adults who are not currently very active should be doing about 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, at least five days a week. This may sound like a lot, initially, but looked at more closely, it may not be too difficult to do.

If you choose everyday activities, such as housework, try and make sure you put in enough energy to make them moderate intensity. If you are not feeling a little warmer and breathing a bit heavier at the end, they are light intensity. You don't have to do it all at once. Try splitting it into two or three bites at different times. Take the dog for a 15-minute walk in the morning, followed by 15 minutes digging in the afternoon, and you've done it!

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There's great value to adding variety to your activities. You could consider mixing the walking with some gym-based activity, for instance.

People who are already very active, or who enjoy more vigorous activity, need to take about 20 minutes exercise, at least three times a week, to benefit significantly.

### **How can I judge how active am I?**

Think back to yesterday and ask yourself how much physical activity you did. Was yesterday a typical day or do you normally do more or less activity? Was it energetic enough to make you feel warmer and quicken your breathing?

In the early stages, particularly, it can be helpful to keep a daily diary of your activity, so you see how much progress you are making towards your goals. Write about your goals for the short term and the long term, and note down comments about how you feel. It can be useful to refer back to them, in a couple of months, to give you feedback on how well you've done.

### **How can physical activity help mental health?**

There are plenty of reports from a wide range of people about how exercise has helped them with problems such as anxiety and depression. And it has no side effects. Scientific research is now beginning to provide the evidence for this. It indicates that physical activity may even reduce the chances of someone developing such problems in the first place.

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Both aerobic activity (such as brisk walking, running and cycling) and resistance activity (such as using weights in a gym) have been shown to help people who experience moderate or more severe depression. Some people use physical activities as an alternative therapy incorporated into their individual care plans. Studies show that it can have the same antidepressant effect as some traditional forms of treatment, including psychotherapy and group therapy. Although it needs more research, physical activity seems to be used effectively alongside other treatments for mental health problems.

It also seems to have potential for reducing anxiety. Just one session can result in at least a brief reduction in stress or anxiety, and regular activity may have a long-term effect in reducing it. Some people with anxiety disorders report it to be just as effective as remedies such as meditation or relaxation exercises.

One of the most important ways that physical activity can help is in raising people's self-esteem. This can be particularly important for people who have mental health problems. They often have low self-esteem, partly at least because of the way society regards these difficulties. Physical activity has been shown to be especially helpful among children and middle-aged people whose self-esteem is quite low. So far, other research among young offenders, people recovering from drug or alcohol abuse and those diagnosed with schizophrenia suggests they too may benefit. Again, aerobic and resistance exercises seem to be the most valuable (see above).

The benefits described here can be valuable to people with experience of psychosis, such as schizophrenia. Physical activity can become a good strategy for coping with distressing symptoms. By reducing stress levels, it may prevent symptoms being triggered.

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Because of the importance of raising self-esteem and confidence, setting measurable and achievable goals is particularly helpful to begin with. As people become more active on a regular basis, it's thought the psychological benefits could stem from physical changes, for example, from changes in body temperature or in the concentrations of particular chemicals that affect mood.

### **What activity should I choose?**

It's often useful to consider what you want to get out of an activity before you choose which one to do. Do you want to do more physical activity purely for recreational purposes? If so, you could go for any activity you think you might enjoy. Do you want to tackle a physical problem, such as losing weight or lowering your blood pressure? It could be a good idea to get advice from an exercise specialist, as some types of activity are better than others at achieving this. Ask at your local medical practice or leisure centre about referral schemes for physical activity (see p. 9). Health clubs and gyms can also offer this kind of specialist advice and a personal assessment, but there is usually a cost attached to these services.

Do you want to do more physical activity as part of your overall treatment plan for a particular mental health problem? You could talk this through with your case manager. It may be that you could use exercise to help reduce stress, or to channel any negative feelings you may have. It could become a part of your treatment plan that is entirely under your control. It's up to each individual to decide what kind of activity would best suit them and their goal. Some people find Tai Chi very relaxing and a great stress-reliever. Others prefer a vigorous activity, such as running.

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It's important to choose an activity you will enjoy. You may have to try out a few first – but persevere! Would you prefer it to be indoors or outdoors, to be with other people or alone? Would you enjoy a competitive sport, or structured exercise, such as going to a gym or joining an aerobics class? Perhaps you would prefer to build more activity or recreation into your everyday life. You could try vegetable gardening, perhaps, or start getting off the bus a stop or two earlier than usual, so that you can walk.

### **What other factors should I take into account?**

Lack of time and money are common reasons people give for not being more active. It's best to consider these before you start, because physical activity can take up as little or as much of your time as you wish. Also, physical activity doesn't have to cost anything. Walking is one of the best forms of exercise there is, and it's free. Vegetable gardening may even save you money in the long run, if you get good at it! If time is limited, think about how to fit more activity into your daily routine – even taking the stairs instead of the lift could help.

Some district councils run a scheme that reduces the cost of local leisure facilities for people on a low income. It may be worth investigating this in your area. There are also a number of schemes operating around the country that allow a health professional (usually a GP) to refer patients to a local leisure facility, where an exercise professional can create a tailor-made physical activity plan for them. These schemes often mean people can enjoy the facilities at a reduced cost. They are especially useful for people who have a particular medical condition, or who need a little more support and expert supervision to help them to get started. Ask your GP practice, local leisure facility or district council about it.

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People often worry about whether they'll have everything they need. But not all activities require special clothes and equipment. Walking and gym, for example, just require comfortable, loose-fitting clothing and supportive footwear.

Sometimes people don't exercise (or don't continue with it) because they don't like doing it on their own. If you are the kind of person who would prefer to have some company while you are active, see if someone else would like to join in with you. Let other people know what you are doing, even if they don't want to go with you, so they can support and encourage you.

### **How do I get started?**

Because there's such a long list of ways to be active, you don't have to be confined to activities that you've tried before and not enjoyed. Taking up a new hobby or joining a new group may make you nervous, but there are ways of introducing yourself, gradually, to help ease your anxieties.

Leisure centres and health clubs welcome newcomers all the time, and there are likely to be beginners' classes that you can join, where everyone will be in the same boat. Once you are familiar with an activity or group, your anxiety will reduce, and you can begin to feel a sense of belonging and enjoy the social side of these activities.

First, ask yourself if you really want to be more active. You will get the most out of physical activity if you want to do it, rather than feeling you should do it. Don't force yourself, if you aren't sure now, keep asking yourself this question, occasionally, and only when you think you might like to, give it a try.

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Start off slowly if you are not used to activity. Don't push yourself too hard too soon, and don't rush to achieve your 30 minutes a day, straight away. Build it up gradually. You may only do 10 minutes walking to begin with. That's fine; stick with that for a week or two, until you feel you can add on a few more minutes. Before long you'll be fitter and able to cope without becoming breathless.

Set yourself goals. A mixture of short-term and long-term goals works well. To begin with, your challenge could be to go for a walk at least twice a week. But your long-term goal could be to try a completely new activity by the end of the year. It's important to make sure that your goals are achievable. Let's face it, we could all aim to climb a mountain, but not many of us would actually do it! Make sure you can measure your progress towards your goals, and reward yourself when you have achieved them. If you have access to a local gym or fitness centre, it can be very useful to have professional advice on hand to help you to set goals and develop a programme, using the available equipment and facilities.

### **Health concerns**

Most people are fit enough to start being more active. However, if you have concerns or have had any of the following health problems, talk to your GP or another relevant professional before suddenly increasing your activity levels:

- heart trouble
- high blood pressure
- unexplained pains in the chest
- dizziness or fainting
- bone or joint problems that exercise would make worse.

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## **What if I can't get motivated?**

One of the problems about getting started and keeping going is that if you are feeling down, getting motivated can be particularly difficult. Finding someone else who would like to take part with you, and setting yourself goals might be the answer.

It's important to recognise that there are going to be days when maybe you just don't feel like it – days when you have less energy, or when the thought of going out for a walk on a cold winter's morning just doesn't appeal! Without letting yourself off too easily, don't force yourself, either. You don't want to put yourself off altogether – it should be something you can look forward to, not something that's a chore. Don't worry, there's always another day.

On the days off, you could plan the next day's activity, instead. It's useful to think or talk through the challenges you may face. If you are planning to start a new activity or join a new group, think about how this might make you feel. Perhaps you will be apprehensive, in which case, is there anything you can do to overcome this? Would it help, for example, if you went to visit the gym before going to your first introductory session, just to familiarise yourself with it and get a feel for the place? Working out coping strategies like these can be a good way of helping you face new challenges and turn over a new leaf.

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## References

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## Useful organisations

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### **Mind**

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or Mind*info*Line on 0845 766 0163.

### **BASES (British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences)**

Chelsea Close, Off Amberley Road, Armley, Leeds LS12 4HP  
tel. 0113 289 1020, web: [www.bases.org.uk](http://www.bases.org.uk)  
For information about sport and exercise sciences

### **The British Psychological Society**

St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR  
tel. 0116 254 9568, web: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)  
For information about psychologists and psychology in the UK

### **Sports Council for Wales**

Sophia Gardens, Cardiff CF11 9SW  
tel. 029 2030 0500, web: [www.sports-council-wales.co.uk](http://www.sports-council-wales.co.uk)

### **Sport England**

3rd Floor Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4SE  
tel. 0845 850 8508, fax: 020 7383 5740  
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For information about where to get active

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### **Cannons Health and Fitness Ltd**

Cannons House, 40-44 Coombe Road, New Malden  
Surrey KT3 4QF  
tel. 0870 758 2333, web: [www.cannons.co.uk](http://www.cannons.co.uk)

## Further reading

- Anxiety and tension: symptoms, causes, orthodox treatment – and how herbal medicine will help* J. Wright (How To Books 2002) £6.99
- The complete guide to mental health* E. Farrell (Mind/Vermilion 1997) £9.99
- The food and mood handbook* A. Geary (Thorsons 2001) £12.99
- How to cope with exam stress* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with loneliness* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with memory loss* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to rebuild your life after breakdown* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to restrain your violent impulses* (Mind 2002) £1
- Lifting depression the balanced way* Dr L. Corrie (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Manage your mind: the mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £13.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2004) £1
- Relaxation: exercises and inspirations for wellbeing* Dr S. Brewer (DBP 2003) £4.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding schizophrenia* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding psychotic experiences* (Mind 2004) £1

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Mind does this by:

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- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

**autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.**

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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