



How to

improve your mental health using **physical activity**



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How to improve your mental health using physical activity

Physical activity has lots of benefits for our mental health. It can help us manage stress, feel more confident and boost our mood and self-esteem. It can also ease symptoms of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Many of us know that exercise is good for us. Yet, we can find getting regular physical activity to be difficult. Whether the obstacle is a demanding job, a busy family life, or a long-term condition, being consistent with physical activity isn't always easy.

To help you live a healthy and satisfying life, we have put together this pocket guide. In it, you'll learn about the benefits of physical activity for your mental health and strategies to help you add physical activity to your daily routine. But first, what does being physically active really mean?

Exercise is not only a key to physical health but to peace of mind.

Nelson Mandela

What is physical activity?

Physical activity means any movement of your body that uses your muscles and uses up energy.

The UK Chief Medical Officers' Guidelines recommend that the average adult does at least¹:

- ✱ **150 minutes** of moderate-intensity physical activity a week.
- ✱ **75 minutes** of vigorous activity a week
- ✱ **Strengthening activities** on two days per week

The guidelines also recommend that adults reduce extended periods of sitting.

However, for children, the guidelines are different. For children under five, they recommend 180 minutes (equivalent to three hours per day) once a child reaches walking age.

For children and young people aged five to 18, 60 minutes per day is the minimum recommendation.

They also suggest this age bracket includes vigorous intensity activities three days a week, to help strengthen their bones and muscles.²



✱✱ **Any activity is better than none, and more is better still. Even short bursts of activity can have a positive effect.** ✱✱

The Chief Medical Officer's guidelines

Around 67% of men and 55% of women aged 16 and over meet these recommendations.³ This means that 33% of men and 45% of women aren't getting enough physical activity.

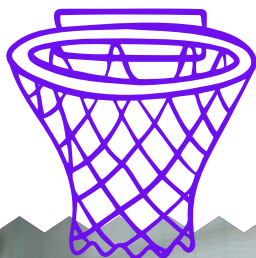
For children, approximately 47% are believed to be physically active, while 30.2% have less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day.⁴

So, if you're not currently meeting the guidelines, you're not alone.

What is moderate-intensity physical activity?

Any activity that raises our heart rate, makes us breathe faster and makes us feel warmer counts as moderate-intensity physical activity. This form of physical activity can be an activity we choose, such as going for a walk, hiking or riding a bike. Or it can be everyday activities, such as Hoovering, scrubbing the bathroom or playing with our kids.

We can identify if we are working at moderate intensity because we can still talk, but we can't sing our favourite song!





What is vigorous activity?

Vigorous-intensity activity causes us to breathe hard and fast and our heart to pump faster than with moderate-intensity activity.

We won't be able to say more than a few words without having to pause for breath. Vigorous-intensity activity includes running, playing tennis or swimming laps.⁵

What are strengthening activities?

Strengthening activities are any physical activity that uses resistance to contract muscles.

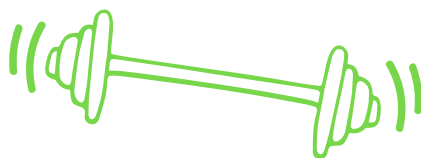
The resistance could be gravity, water or a resistance band, for example. When we say 'strengthening activities,' you may immediately think we're talking about going to the gym.

And while this does count, there are many other strengthening activities we can do. Some other examples include:

- Digging and shovelling while gardening
- Lifting or moving furniture
- Chopping wood
- Carrying a heavy rucksack for long periods
- Rowing a boat
- Squat exercises
- Scrubbing the floor



What is mental health?



The government's definition of mental health is "a positive state of mind and body, underpinned by social and psychological wellbeing."⁶ This definition also states: **"It enables and supports good relationships, improved resilience, improved health, meaning, purpose and control."**

Experts believe there are five steps to feeling mentally well⁷:

- 1 Connecting with other people**, as this improves our self-worth, creates positive shared experiences and gives us emotional support.
- 2 Being physically active**, because this raises our self-esteem, helps us set and achieve goals and improves our mood.
- 3 Learning new skills**, as this boosts our confidence, gives us a sense of purpose, and allows us to connect with other people.
- 4 Giving to others**, because we experience a sense of reward from doing so. It also gives us a sense of purpose and builds our relationships.
- 5 Paying attention to the present moment (being mindful)**, such as noticing our thoughts and feelings, as well as the world around us. Being mindful can change our perspective and make us feel more positive.

Mental health doesn't mean being happy all the time, and it doesn't mean we won't experience painful emotions such as anger, grief or disappointment. It simply means we will find it easier to manage, recover and move on from these feelings.

How does physical activity affect our mental health?

Physical activity has a huge potential to enhance our mental health. Even a short, brisk, 10-minute walk improves our mood and makes us feel more alert and energetic.

Participating in regular physical activity can increase our self-esteem and reduce stress and anxiety. It also prevents the development of mental health problems and can improve our quality of life if we have a mental health condition.



Effect on our mood

Physical activity can boost our mood in multiple ways. When we exercise, our brain releases feel-good chemicals called endorphins and serotonin. These naturally improve our mood, reduce our tension and stress and make us feel more energetic.

We can get immediate benefits from exercise. A short 15-minute bike ride or run can improve our mood for at least 30 minutes.

If we regularly include 10 to 30 minutes of physical activity into our week, this can enhance our positive feelings even more.⁸

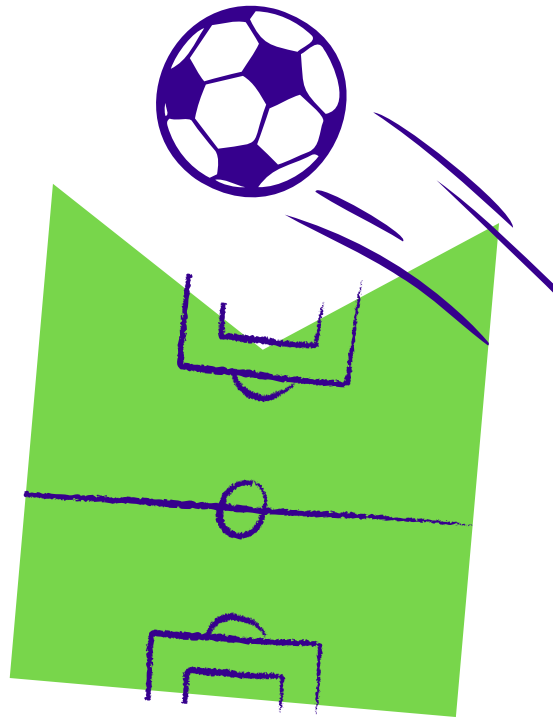
Effect on our stress

In the short term, stress can put us at risk of concentration difficulties, sleep changes and feelings of overwhelm. Long term, stress can increase our likelihood of struggling with mental health problems and heart disease.⁹⁻¹¹

Physical activity is extremely effective at improving our mental health, and one of the main ways it does this is through stress relief.

Physical activity relieves stress in two main ways. Firstly, the feel-good chemicals our bodies release while exercising boost our mood and make us feel more relaxed. Secondly, physical activity lowers the level of stress hormones (called adrenaline and cortisol) in our body, which makes us feel less stressed and anxious.¹²

Physical activity also reduces the negative effects that past and existing stress have on our bodies. When we experience mental stress, we feel it in several physical ways. Our muscles become tense and we may experience back pain, neck pain or headaches. We might get stomach problems or have a pounding heart rate or rapid breathing rate.



Physical activity can soothe these physical effects of stress by helping our bodies to relax.¹²

The type of exercise you do is up to you. Some people find a 20-minute walk the most relaxing, whilst others prefer to workout large muscle groups at the gym. The choice is yours!

If you're struggling with stress, or are worried stress is affecting your life, check out our guide [How to manage and reduce your stress – mentalhealth.org.uk/manage-stress](https://mentalhealth.org.uk/manage-stress)

Effect on depression

Depression can have a significant effect on our lives, leading to lower life satisfaction and increasing our risk of other health and mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, heart disease and cancer.

Physical activity can reduce both the physical and psychological effects of depression. Being physically active not only provides some protection against depression if you haven't experienced it before, but it also reduces depression symptoms.

Any form of physical activity, but particularly intense activities and walking, jogging, yoga and strength training can relieve the symptoms of clinical depression.¹⁶

You can find out more about the symptoms and different types of depression on our page, [Depression – mentalhealth.org.uk/about-depression](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-depression)

Effect on our self-esteem

Exercise can also increase our self-esteem. Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves, including how much we value and believe in ourselves.

Having low self-esteem means we see others as better than us, concentrate on our weaknesses, fear failing, struggle to express our needs, say no and set boundaries.

Having low self-esteem can increase our risk of depression, anxiety, stress and emotional problems.¹³ It can also make it harder for us to feel good about ourselves, which can increase the likelihood of risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol overuse.¹⁴

Studies show that physical activity boosts our self-esteem. It improves both how we see ourselves and our sense of self-worth.¹⁵

This can make us feel more confident about ourselves, have a more positive outlook on life, find it easier to express our needs and be less likely to dwell on past negative experiences and our weaknesses.

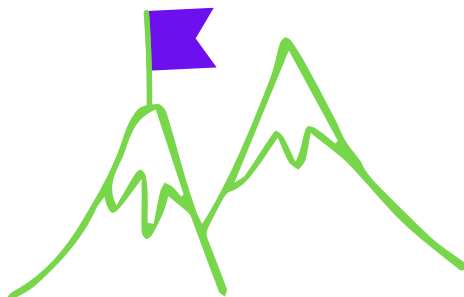


Effect on anxiety

According to 2022/23 statistics, 37.1% of women and 29.9% of men experience high levels of anxiety.¹⁷

Too much or prolonged anxiety can make us feel panicky, irritable, and detached from the world around us.

It can also make us more likely to withdraw from our family and friends and struggle to go to work. Physical activity can act as a form of anxiety relief, helping to reduce the symptoms of anxiety disorders and physical influence of anxiety on the body.¹⁸



It does this in the same way it reduces our stress – the release of endorphins and other feel-good chemicals helps our bodies feel more relaxed and calmer.

You can find out more about anxiety and its effects on our page, [Anxiety – mentalhealth.org.uk/about-anxiety](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-anxiety)

8 steps to be more physically active

Being physically active isn't always straightforward. Many barriers can stop us from getting the physical activity our brain and body need.

Here are eight steps that will make it easier to be more physically active.



1

Find a form of physical activity you love

You wouldn't choose to do activities you dislike. For example, if you were told doing the washing up was good for your physical and mental health, would that make you want to do it? Probably not. The same applies to being physically active. You're more likely to stay physically active and integrate exercise into your life if you find activities you enjoy doing.

Here are some examples of physical activities you could try:

- Dancing
- Swimming
- Hiking
- Skating
- Cycling
- Team sports
- Kayaking
- Gardening
- Yoga
- Frisbee
- Skipping with a rope
- Trampolining
- Hula hooping
- Surfing
- Boxing
- Running



2

Start small and build up over time

If you're nowhere near meeting the 150 minutes of physical activity per week, know that you don't need to try to force yourself to meet this immediately.

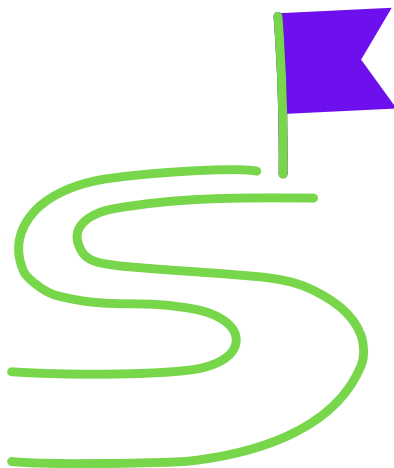
Take your time, and gradually increase how physically active you are. You can start by adding 10 minutes of movement into each day and then adding an extra 10 minutes each week. Before you know it, you'll be up to 30 minutes of physical activity a day.

3

Swap inactivity with activity

Becoming more physically active doesn't have to involve making elaborate changes to your routine. Instead, it could involve making small tweaks to activities you're already doing.

For example, you could use a walking treadmill under your desk if you work from home. Alternatively, you could take a walking meeting or get off the bus at a stop that's further away from home.



4

Set yourself a goal

Setting goals can help you perform better as it improves focus and motivation and gives you a sense of purpose. What's more, when you get closer to achieving a goal, it triggers the reward centre in your brain which makes you feel good about yourself.¹⁹

However, be careful with the type of goal you set. Research shows that goals concentrate on performance rather than the process itself can be demotivating. For example, a goal to "Do a 1-mile run in 12 minutes" is likely to be less effective than "Go for a run three times a week."¹⁹



5

Make physical activity a habit

You're more than three times more likely to exercise if the physical activity you're doing becomes a habit.²⁵ You can make physical activity a habit by finding activities you enjoy, starting small and gradually building momentum, and setting yourself up to succeed.

Setting yourself up to succeed means scheduling physical activity so it becomes a set part of your day. For example, going for walks at 7am, 1pm and 7pm. It can help to set reminders to begin with, until you notice thoughts in your mind like, "It's almost 7am – nearly time for my morning walk."



6

Get your family or friends involved



Social support also has a big influence on mental health. So, why not combine physical activity with spending time with family or friends?

Buddying up with someone, or choosing to be physically active when spending time together, can be a fun and easy way to incorporate more physical activity into your weekly routine.

What's more, research shows that working out with other people can help keep you motivated and hold you accountable so you're less likely to skip a session.²⁰

However, when choosing who to buddy up with, pick someone who is at a similar fitness level to you. Choosing someone who is much more physically active can be demotivating and disheartening.

7

Move more at home



Home is your place of rest, so it may be one of the places you move the least. For example, the majority of your day may be spent sitting at a desk in your home office, and your evenings might involve slumping on the sofa watching TV. While rest is very important, long periods of inactivity can negatively affect your health.

Research shows that sitting for long periods can increase your risk of depression, dementia, weight gain, diabetes and other health and mental health difficulties.²¹⁻²⁴ So, moving more at home is important.

You can move more at home by incorporating physical activity into everyday tasks. For example:

- 1** Breaking up your evenings with an after-dinner walk
- 2** Getting a standing desk, so you can stand while working
- 3** Doing daily stretches while sitting at your desk
- 4** Getting up and walking around once every hour



8

Remind yourself of your “why”

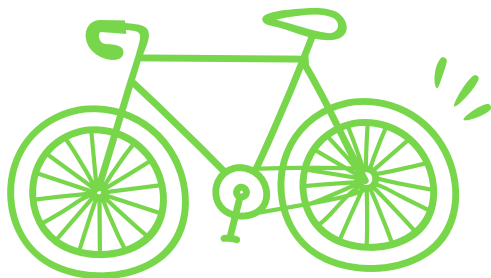
What’s your main motivation to be more physically active? Identifying this can help remind you why you’re doing it on days when you feel less motivated.

For example, on rainy days or when we wake up not feeling great, it’s easy to shrug off physical activity and think, “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Remembering your “why” in these moments can make it easier to get going.

Here are some potential reasons why you may want to be more physically active:

- To improve your mental health
- To improve your physical health
- To feel better about yourself
- To become more physically fit
- To prevent mental health conditions
- To ease the symptoms of an existing health condition
- To be able to take care of your kids or grandkids without getting as tired





Barriers to exercising for mental health

If being physically active didn't have obstacles, all of us would meet the recommendations. There are many barriers that may stop us from getting the physical activity we need.

Lack of time

A lack of time is one of the most common barriers to physical activity. We're all so busy with work, family commitments and hobbies that it can feel like we don't have time to pause for breath, let alone be physically active.

If this is the case for you, remember that when it comes to physical activity, every little bit helps. For example, you could:

- Squat 10 times while brushing your teeth.
- Do five minutes of stretching first thing in the morning.
- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- Get off the bus one or two stops earlier.

Physical barriers e.g. injury or illness

Long term conditions, such as arthritis or chronic fatigue, may limit our options when choosing how to be physically active, and physical injuries may require long periods of rest.

The pain, exhaustion or worries about making an injury or illness worse can make being physically active difficult. Plus, the frustration of not being able to move when we'd like to can be demotivating.

We can face this barrier by modifying activities to suit our current ability levels, listening to our bodies, and setting realistic goals for ourselves. If we're not sure what level of physical activity is achievable, we can speak to a physiotherapist or GP.



Body image

When we don't feel good about the way we look, it can be more difficult to reach our physical activity goals. We may be more likely to avoid going outside for a run or to the gym because we fear people judging us, we feel self-conscious, and we hold a negative view of ourselves.

We can face this barrier by catching our negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive ones. For example:

- Swapping "I really need to lose weight" for "My body is strong and powerful."
- Swapping "They're going to judge me" for "Most people are concentrating on themselves, not me."
- Swapping "People will think I'm not fit enough to be here" with "Everyone starts somewhere. I'm taking care of myself."

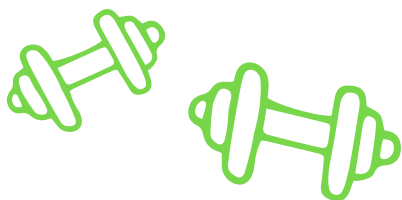
Expense

Physical activity can come with many costs. The cost of gym memberships, fitness classes, active wear and transportation can quickly add up and become overwhelming.

If you're living in an area with limited access to safe parks, walkable areas and recreational spaces, this can also make being physically active harder.

Here are four ways you can make physical activity more affordable:

- **Do online workout videos** using free videos or apps.
- **Use household items** such as tins of baked beans or bottles of water instead of dumbbells and barbells.
- **Choose free activities** like skipping in your garden, walking in a local park or home workouts.
- **Pick physical activities that don't require specialist gear**, such as dancing with some friends or running on the spot.



Fear of failure

Fear of failure can stop us from being consistent with physical activity, and it can even stop us before we start. Fear of failure often comes from negative feelings of not feeling "good enough," which can stem from negative past experiences.

Instead of concentrating on the possibility of failure, try these affirmations:

- "Every step I take is progress, no matter how small."
- "Success is not about being the best, it's about doing my best."
- "I choose effort over perfection."
- "It's okay to go at my own pace. Physical activity is unique to everyone."
- "I am learning to enjoy movement without fearing failure."

Feeling depressed, stressed or anxious

Mental health difficulties can make it hard to start or maintain physical activity.

- Depression can lead to low energy levels and a lack of interest in activities we used to enjoy, so being physically active can be tricky.
- Anxiety can increase our self-criticism and fear of judgement, making physical activity feel scary and intimidating.
- Stress often makes us feel overwhelmed, so physical activity can feel like an extra responsibility which we don't have mental space for.

We can support our mental health and motivate ourselves to be more physically active by connecting movement with our mood. When we connect physical activity with feeling more mentally well, it can help encourage us to get outside on days we're struggling.





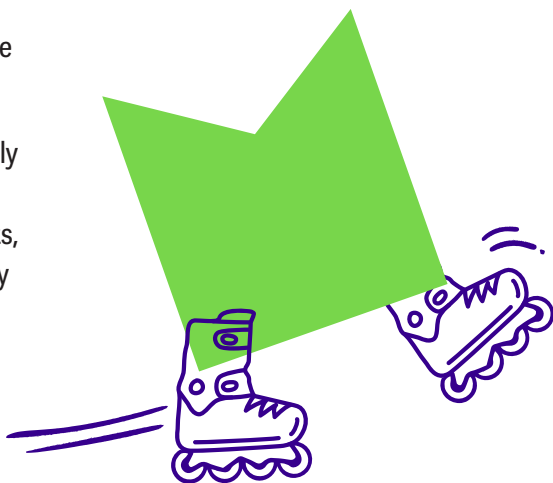
Lack of energy

When we feel tired after a long day, the very last thing on our minds may be physical activity.

We may lack energy due to stress, a heavy workload, poor sleep, medical conditions and so on, which may make physical activity feel overwhelming.

So, how do we continue to be physically active even when we lack energy? We can start with low-intensity movements, such as stretching or a walk – this may be enough to boost our mood.

We can also concentrate on fuelling our bodies with nutritious, healthy foods, and taking steps to **sleep better** – mentalhealth.org.uk/sleep-better



Can exercise harm my mental health?

Exercise and physical activity have many benefits for mental health. However, there are instances when exercise can harm our mental health. For example, over-exercising or doing physical activities that are too intense can harm our mental health.

Research shows that people who do around over 18 hours of physical activity a week (equivalent to 1,080 minutes) feel more stressed and struggle more with mental health difficulties.²⁶

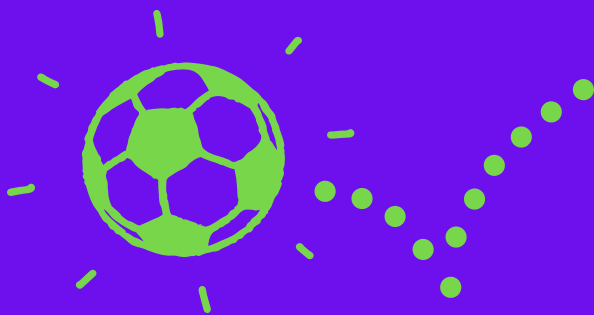
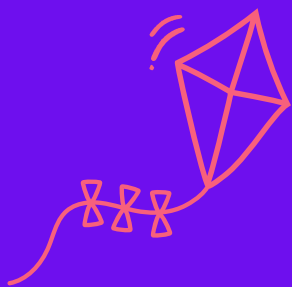
What's more, if exercise and physical activity are fuelled by a negative body image or an eating disorder, exercise could harm mental health. Studies show that those struggling with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa may be more likely to engage in unhealthily high levels of physical activity, which has a negative influence on mental health.²⁶

SUPPORT SERVICES

- ✉ Beat – beateatingdisorders.org.uk
- ✉ The National Centre for Eating Disorders – eating-disorders.org.uk

If you struggle with an eating disorder or with over-exercising, help is available. Contact your GP – mentalhealth.org.uk/talktoGP





Further ideas

for starting or keeping up with physical activity

NHS

The NHS Choices website has a number of tools to help people get started with physical activity, including exercises for older people, strength and flexibility videos, advice on taking up new sports, and advice on getting started with walking. The tools are available at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

The Great Outdoor Gym Company

Outdoor gyms are gyms where some gym equipment is provided in outside spaces for people to use for free. You can find the nearest free outdoor gym via The Great Outdoor Gym Company: [tgogc.com/find-a-gym](https://www.tgogc.com/find-a-gym)

The British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation's 'Health at Work' website provides further suggestions and some resources to get started with promoting physical activity at work: bhf.org.uk/healthatwork.



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Together, we can help everyone have better mental health.

Poor mental health is not inevitable, and we believe everyone deserves good mental health. No-one living in the UK should be deprived of the opportunity for good mental health because of who they are, the community they come from or where they live. We should all have access to strategies to help us cope. At the Mental Health Foundation, we believe everyone deserves to know how to manage their mental health.

Mental Health Foundation is the UK charity focused on preventing poor mental health and building and protecting good mental health. We research, develop and campaign for new and more effective ways to support and protect people's good mental health.

We hope you found this booklet informative and useful.



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