

Up and running!

How exercise can help beat depression
Information for Patients



Mental Health Foundation

This booklet is aimed at **anyone** interested in how **physical exercise** can help people recover from depression. It explains how people experiencing depression can use exercise to **help** them get better

What is depression?

Depression is a very common problem - affecting about one in six people at some point in their life. Depression can describe a range of moods and behaviours – from low spirits to a severe problem that interferes with everyday life. People who are depressed often lose their appetite and have difficulty sleeping, feel guilty or worthless, become anxious and tired, and find it difficult to concentrate. Some may also have thoughts about death or suicide.

Sometimes it can be difficult to decide whether you are responding normally to difficult times, or have become depressed. A rough guide in this situation is that if your symptoms significantly interfere with your life and last for two weeks or more, then you may be experiencing depression and should seek help.

How can depression be treated?

There are several different treatments for depression. The most common treatments include prescribed antidepressant medication and certain forms of counselling, which can help people explore different ways of thinking about and coping with their problems.

Another treatment option is physical exercise. Several scientific studies have shown that a regular programme of exercise can help people to recover from depression - lifting their mood, reducing anxiety and improving self-esteem and concentration. They also found that taking regular exercise could help protect people against becoming depressed in the first place.

Why does exercise work?

There's a range of reasons why exercise can help with depression:

- Exercise is believed to increase the release of the brain chemicals that affect our mood and make us feel happier.
- Exercise helps us to get active and meet new people. This stops us from feeling isolated and unsupported.
- Exercise can give us new goals and a sense of purpose. We have something positive to focus on and aim for.
- Exercise can boost our self-esteem - it can improve the way we look and how we feel about ourselves.

Will exercise work for me?

Exercise is one of the most popular treatments for depression when people actually try it - one survey found that 85 per cent of people with mental health problems who had tried exercise found it helpful. Often people say that, unlike antidepressants, exercise feels like a very 'natural' way to respond to feeling down - it gives them a sense of achievement and control, which can help counter the feelings of hopelessness. Also, exercise doesn't produce the unpleasant side effects often associated with antidepressants - in fact, it has positive 'side effects', including lower risk of heart disease, strokes, some cancers and obesity. And once the exercise habit is learned, it can become a part of an overall healthy lifestyle.

How do I get help with starting an exercise programme?

Many GPs can 'prescribe' exercise for patients, referring them to schemes where they will be helped to develop their own personal exercise programme, under the supervision of a qualified trainer. There are around 1300 schemes like this operating in the UK. Your GP will be able to tell you if there is a scheme in your area.

What happens when a GP prescribes exercise?

Your GP will discuss whether exercise is a suitable treatment for you - this will depend on your physical health and whether you are willing to commit to an exercise programme. If you both agree to proceed, your GP will fill in a form that is passed on to the local 'exercise referral' scheme. These schemes were set up especially to help people who might benefit from an exercise programme - for example people with heart disease, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and depression.

After being referred, you will be asked to go for an initial assessment with a qualified trainer, who will be able to discuss what kind of exercise will suit you best. This might include swimming or gym sessions, structured classes together with other people on the scheme, or even yoga or belly-dancing lessons. The sessions are usually provided free, or at a significantly discounted price, and the trainer will arrange regular follow-up meetings, as well as being available for further advice and support during the programme. The programmes usually last for between 3 and 6 months, and progress is monitored both by the professional trainer and your GP.

When I'm depressed, I feel like I don't have any energy. How would I be able to keep up an exercise programme?

It's true that starting an exercise programme can be challenging, especially if you feel down, and maybe haven't done much physical activity for a while. That's why it's important to start gently, and to develop a personal programme that is going to be manageable and fun. Staff on exercise referral schemes have been specially trained to help people who don't feel very fit or sporty – they will guide, motivate and support you, and can help you modify the programme if it does not feel right.

"Exercise helps wake me up. It makes me more lively, and lively is the opposite of depression." *Josie, 32*

"I would recommend exercise referral to anyone. I thought it would be about losing weight, but it's the other benefits - you're getting out and meeting people. I used to get terrible depressive feelings, but it's done me the power of good." *Richard, 60*

I like the idea of trying an exercise programme. What should I do?

The first step is to go to your GP and discuss it with him or her. Ask if he or she knows about the link between exercise and depression, and whether you can be referred to a local scheme. You could also show him or her this booklet.

What can I do if my GP says he or she does not have access to an exercise referral scheme?

It is important that you don't start an exercise programme without professional supervision, especially if you have not been physically active for a while. If your GP says he or she cannot refer you to a scheme, ask if he or she can recommend other ways in which you might be able to make exercise a part of your recovery. Many local authorities run walking schemes, while some offer opportunities for doing conservation work under supervision (these are called Green Gyms – see www.greengym.org.uk). Staff at your local leisure centre may also be able to provide advice on how you might safely begin an exercise programme.

My doctor has prescribed antidepressants for my depression. Can I ask for exercise referral as well?

Yes - often, people with depression feel like they do not have any choices, so having access to a range of different strategies may in itself help you to feel better. Your GP should be able to help you devise a broad-ranged and balanced plan to help you recover, which may include medication, counselling and/or exercise.

My GP hasn't mentioned exercise referral. Does that mean there isn't a scheme in my area?

Not necessarily - some GPs do not know they can refer patients with depression for exercise, and others don't think about offering exercise referral to their patients with depression. If you'd like to try exercise, it is worth asking your GP if there is a scheme in your area, rather than waiting for him or her to suggest it.

About the Mental Health Foundation

Founded in 1949, the Mental Health Foundation is the leading UK charity working in mental health and learning disabilities.

We are unique in the way we work. We bring together teams that undertake research, develop services, design training, influence policy and raise public awareness within one organisation. We are keen to tackle difficult issues and try different approaches, many of them led by service users themselves. We use our findings to promote survival, recovery and prevention. We do this by working with statutory and voluntary organisations, from GP practices to primary schools. We enable them to provide better help for people with mental health problems or learning disabilities, and promote mental well-being.

We also work to influence policy, including Government at the highest levels. And we use our knowledge to raise awareness and to help tackle stigma attached to mental illness and learning disabilities. We reach millions of people every year through our media work, information booklets and online services.

This booklet is aimed at anyone interested in how physical exercise can help people recover from depression. It explains how people with depression can use exercise to help them get better, and how they may be able to get 'prescriptions' for exercise from their GP.

Mental Health Foundation

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For more information about the benefits of using exercise as a treatment for mild or moderate depression, please visit www.mentalhealth.org.uk.

To order a copy of the Mental Health Foundation report *UP AND RUNNING? Exercise therapy and the treatment of mild or moderate depression in primary care*, or to order additional copies of this booklet please email mhf@mhf.org.uk

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