



Mental Health and Physical Activity Toolkit

Guide 2:

The relationship
between physical
activity and
mental health





About this guide

We've put together this guide to provide guidance and good practice to support people experiencing mental health problems to take part in physical activity in a way that suits them.

We'll discuss the benefits physical activity can have on mental health, and also how to support people if it becomes a problem.

This guide has been developed with experts by experience – people who have lived experience of what we're talking about.

Who is this guide for?

Anyone working or volunteering in sport, physical activity or mental health.

****Warning****

This guide covers a range of topics which may be upsetting and potentially triggering (especially pages 13 to 33). If you're feeling vulnerable, you might want to get support from:

- (For mental health): Mind's Infoline – call 0300 123 3393 (available 9am to 6pm weekdays except for bank holidays).
- (For eating problems): Beat's Helpline – call 0808 801 0677 (available 9am to 8pm weekdays and 4pm to 8pm on weekends and bank holidays).



What does this guide cover?

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The benefits of physical activity on mental health

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The benefits of physical activity on mental health

Many people find that being active is good for both their physical and mental health, and there's increasing evidence to support this. In fact, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), recommends three sessions of group exercise lasting at least 45 minutes a week¹ as one of the first treatments for mild-to-moderate depression.

Even a small amount of physical activity, such as a 10-minute brisk walk, can increase our energy levels, boost mood and help us interrupt racing thoughts.

“I go to football because it keeps me active, when I play all my anxieties and depression melt into the background. Being outside makes me feel free from all the negatives.”

Get Set to Go participant

Sujan's Story: Listen to Sujan discuss how joining 'Jolly Joggers' has had a positive impact on her mental health.

1 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2009) [Depression in adults: recognition and management.](#)



The impact of getting active on mental health

Six benefits of exercise for mental health

Physical activity can:

- 1. Improve sleep:** Taking part in regular moderate exercise can relieve tension leading to a restful night and improved sleep.²
- 2. Lower risk of depression** by up to 30%.³
- 3. Improve mood:** Exercise can release endorphins (sometimes called ‘feel-good’ hormones) that can lift mood.
- 4. Reduce stress and anxiety:** Physical activity releases cortisol which helps us manage stress. Being physically active also gives your brain something to focus on and can be a positive coping strategy for difficult times.
- 5. Increase self-esteem:** The sense of achievement people get from exercising or learning a new skill can help them feel better about themselves and improve their mood.
- 6. Improve social connections:** Taking part in physical activity can allow you to connect with more people and make new friends.

More information on the benefits of exercise for mental health can be found in [Loughborough University’s evaluation of phase 1 of our Get Set to Go programme](#) and [Mind’s Physical activity and your mental health page](#).

[EFL and Get Set to Go video: See participants talking about how being involved in the programme can have a positive impact on mental health.](#)

² NHS [10 tips to beat insomnia](#).

³ NHS [Live Well – Benefits of exercise](#).

Resources to support people to get started

Taking part in physical activity is not about running marathons or lifting heavy weights, it’s about supporting people to take part in activity that’s comfortable for them. Start small and focus on what the person enjoys about the activity. Encourage them to try different activities to find out what they enjoy and what suits them.

What if people feel unwell?

It can be difficult for people who feel unwell to get or stay active – and frustrating for them to hear about the benefits of being more active. Remember, physical activity doesn’t have to be the main purpose for an activity but can be an added benefit. For example, you could try mindful walks, litter picks, outdoor photography shoots, active games on computer consoles or virtual reality.

If someone feels unwell you may want to start with gentle walks focusing on non-active elements, like being in nature, then build more physical activity into their routine once they’re feeling a bit better.

It’s important to find a balance, and figure out what works best for the person. Sometimes this means being creative and trying some different activities until they find the thing that works for them. Or it may mean taking a break and encouraging people to return when they’re ready.

The impact of a peer support physical activity programme on participants

Peer support is when people use their own experiences to help each other. Research shows people who took part in physical activity in a group setting or with peer-led support reported an improved experience and increased motivation.⁴

“The groups are just great, I go to one and I’ve got best mates there now, we go out for meals, we do stuff, we all talk, when one of us is down, the rest of us help to get that person up.”

Participant, focus group

Benefits of taking part in regular peer support physical activity groups included:

- Helping people to feel calmer and more positive.
- Supporting better general mood, particularly on days where people were physically active.
- Increased energy and improved confidence.
- Increased self-esteem and pride because people recognised their own achievements.
- Reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Clearer minds and less intrusive or racing thoughts.

“It calms my mind, it stops me ruminating, it actively lifts my mood and it makes me feel a lot more positive about life.”

Elefriends, digital interview.

⁴ Mind and Loughborough University (2017) [Get Set to Go Programme Evaluation Summary 2014 to 2017](#).



Resources to help people to get started:

Resource	Overview
<u>Mind's Everyday tips for physical activity on mental health</u>	Information about how physical activity can support mental health, and tips for choosing an activity.
<u>Mind's Get Active, Feel Good</u>	Tips to help people get started and stay active.
<u>We are Undefeatable</u>	Information on how to get started and activities that will help people both at home and in the community.
<u>Mental Health Foundation's Looking after your mental health using exercise</u>	Information on physical activity for mental health.
<u>Moving Medicine's Getting active conversation</u>	Tips on conversations around physical activity and mental health.
<u>Royal College of Psychiatrists' Exercise and mental health: for young people</u>	Information about the link between physical activity and mental health and how to get started.
<u>Five Ways to Wellbeing</u>	Tips and guidance on daily actions to help people feel better and cope more easily with life's challenges. The Five Ways to Wellbeing developed by <u>The New Economics Foundation</u> are: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Learn and Give.
<u>Get Set to Go Programme Evaluation</u>	The evaluation provides key learning and how to overcome challenges in taking part in physical activity. You may also choose to signpost to the <u>local Mind in your area</u> to find out if they offer a physical activity service.



Examples of physical activity services/projects focusing on mental health

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Examples of physical activity services/projects focusing on mental health

There are an increasing number of programmes and projects that focus on supporting people experiencing mental health problems to be active. In this section, we'll highlight a selection of good practice examples from [local Minds](#), sport and physical activity providers and our Get Set to Go programme.

You can find more case studies on the [Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation Page](#).

Examples of mental health providers introducing physical activity	
<u>Oxfordshire Mind – Boxing for children and young people</u>	Oxfordshire Mind developed a range of successful courses including blending a mental health workshop with boxing skills. They also worked with local schools to adapt the course for young people, attracting students who might not be aware of the link between physical activity and wellbeing.
<u>Islington Mind’s Rainbow Sports programme</u>	Islington Mind introduced the Rainbow Sports programme as part of the services they offer. The service was designed to help motivate people within the LGBTQ+ community to take part in regular physical activity to support their mental health.
<u>Start-Again’s Healthy Lifestyles programme</u>	Start Again works with young people, their parents or carers and professionals to develop a young person’s aspirations and goals. The Healthy Lifestyles programme, developed in partnership with Forward Thinking Birmingham (FTB), uses sport and leisure activities to improve the wellbeing of young people who have experienced psychosis.
<u>Rampton Hospital and Nottinghamshire Mind</u>	This five-week Football Coaching Course was initially set up with the intention to upskill eight patients at Rampton Hospital. It gives them the opportunity to further their skill set and the possibility to use their learning to coach other patients.
<u>Springfield Mind and Think Active</u>	Springfield Mind and Think Active (an Active Partnership) created a joint staff post responsible for running Get Set to Go. This ‘hybrid’ approach helped each organisation learn from the other to support projects from both mental health and physical activity viewpoints.
<u>Creative Minds’ ‘safety net’ programme</u>	Therapy groups for children to improve their mental and emotional wellbeing. Each therapy group runs for two hours after school during term time. The first hour focuses on physical activity and is led by the club. The second hour focuses on mental health education.

Examples of physical activity providers introducing mental health programmes

<p>Watford FC Community Sports & Education (CSE) Trust and Just Talk Herts' programme</p>	<p>Watford CSE Trust work in partnership with local organisations including CAMHS, CCGs, education and VCS services to deliver a mental health programme across Watford and Hemel Hempstead. The project aims to equip young people (alongside teachers, parents and sports coaches) with the skills and knowledge needed to develop healthy and long-lasting coping strategies.</p> <p>#JustTalk delivered an online webinar as part of the East of England's Mental Health Conference for Sport and Physical Activity 2020.</p>
<p><u>Bedford Borough Council's Mindful Sport programme</u></p>	<p>Mindful Sport provides the opportunity for 12-18 year olds to be active in an informal and non-clinical space alongside CAMHS professionals. The sessions are run in partnership with Mind BLMK, East London Foundation Trust's CAMHS and Team Beds and Luton Active Partnership.</p>
<p><u>Notts County Football in the Community (FITC)'s Goals for Life programme</u></p>	<p>The project harnesses the power of physical activity through co-designed workshops to improve the health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 18.</p>
<p><u>Liverpool Football Therapy</u></p>	<p>Liverpool Football Therapy encourages adults experiencing mental health problems to use football as a recovery tool or as part of an on-going therapy.</p>
<p><u>England Athletics #RunAndTalk programme</u></p>	<p>Working in partnership with Mind, England Athletics launched their #RunAndTalk initiative in 2017. The aim is to inspire more clubs to prioritise mental health and promote the benefits of running for wellbeing. Since the programme started, over 21,000 people engaged in the programme with 422 running clubs/ RunTogether groups involved and more than 1,200 Mental Health Champions recruited.</p>

Case study

Bright Star Boxing Counterpunch programme

Bright Star runs boxing sessions for everyone at their boxing club in Shropshire. At the heart of their offer is Counterpunch: free Saturday sessions aimed at adults experiencing mental health problems. They involve boxing and mentoring alongside peer support.

Director Joe Lockley had seen first-hand how the power of boxing could bring people together.

“Now the challenge was to spread the physical and mental health benefits to more people in the community – including those who would never set foot inside a boxing club”.

Joe understands that many potential participants might be put off going to a boxing club, however friendly and welcoming it may be. So the charity actively reaches out to people in their community.

“We have a structured 12-week programme that we run out in communities”.

There’s a referral pathway with various organisations: housing associations, addiction recovery centres and mental health support services.

“We go through crucial elements like core beliefs, thoughts and behaviours, coping techniques and goal-setting. Participants receive mental health training and coaching qualifications. After doing the programme people are more likely to come to Counterpunch for support, because they’ve already got a relationship with us.”

This also helps develop coaches with lived experience of mental health problems, which in turn helps beat mental health stigma. For example, Stu Cook is Counterpunch Lead at Bright Star. Joe proudly explains that Stu had his own experiences of mental health problems and, after being supported by Bright Star, now “lives to support others.”

The free Saturday sessions involve 45 minutes of boxing and 45 minutes of mental health support.

“We will sit around the ring or in the office at three different points in the session and start conversations around mental health, around what they would like to achieve and around how they are feeling. We have found being around those who talk about their mental health encourages others to open up and it creates an incredible atmosphere of belonging where everyone opens up.”

Research shows that 96% of people completing the programme experience improvements in their mental health. On a human level, people inspired and supported by the programme have the chance to gain new qualifications and give back to their community.

“I used to think that getting your hand lifted up at the end of a bout was the best, but when you know you’ve supported someone who’s going through something difficult, that’s definitely the best feeling in boxing.”

Joe Bright, Bright Star Boxing Director



When to approach physical activity with care

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Approaching physical activity with care

Physical activity is personal – we all have different preferences, tolerances and fitness levels. Some people find short sessions suit them best, others enjoy being active for longer. We may find physical activity is helpful sometimes but not always, or that it just doesn't work for us.

There may also be factors that affect how much activity is safe for us to do. Or there may be some situations when we need to take extra care in case it starts to become a problem. If people are unsure or worried about their physical activity levels they should discuss this with a medical professional.

It's always important to approach physical activity with care. Below we explore some of the ways people may face challenges with physical activity, and how we can best support them.

We'll cover:

- **Anxiety and panic attacks**
- **Side effects of [medication](#)**
- **Over-exercising**
- **Exercise addiction**
- **Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S)**
- **Eating problems**

In March 2021, we delivered a webinar on 'Exploring when physical activity "becomes a problem"'. The webinar explored when physical activity becomes a problem through people with lived experience of mental health problems sharing their experiences. To watch the webinar recording please [click here](#).



Anxiety and panic attacks

**Everyone feels anxious sometimes:
it's a natural response when we feel under threat.**

Physical activity, particularly aerobic activity, can help combat stress and release tension, reducing anxiety. It also encourages your brain to release serotonin, which can improve your mood.

However, some people might find that exercise can cause sensations that may feel like they're having a panic attack.

Signs and symptoms of panic attacks

- Feeling light-headed or dizzy
- Pins and needles
- Sweating or feeling very hot
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- A pounding or racing heartbeat
- Pain in your chest or abdomen
- Struggling to breathe
- Feeling like your legs are shaky or are turning to jelly.

For more details, watch this [video](#) of people sharing their experiences of panic attacks.

Supporting a person who experiences anxiety or panic attacks

When planning for and introducing your sessions:

- Encourage people to tell you about any mental health problems, including anxiety and panic attacks, on their registration form or PAR-Q (Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire) (see [Guide 7: Measuring the impact of a physical activity and mental health service](#) for a Get Set to Go example of a PAR-Q). Ask them about their symptoms, including what staff should look out for and how they would like to be supported. For example, you could ask if they have any breathing exercises or grounding techniques they'd like to be reminded of if they start feeling very anxious or begin to have a panic attack.
- Encourage people who experience panic attacks to take small steps to being more active. Start small and build up so they get used to the activity each week. Think about the environment in which they'd prefer to exercise. For example, they may like to use gyms at quieter times.
- Check in at the start of sessions with participants to see if they have any injuries or changes in their health or wellbeing that you need to be aware of.
- Encourage participants to take breaks as needed and agree a system for identifying whether they need support when they're taking a break. For example, giving a thumbs-up if they're OK so you know whether or not they need support.
- Identify a safe space that people can go if they need to take a break or if they experience a panic attack during a session. Ensure participants know where this is before the session begins.
- Ensure you have emergency contacts available and that your risk assessment, safeguarding and operating procedures include plans for seeking medical support and if necessary breaking confidentiality (see [Guide 9: Safeguarding and mental health](#)).

If someone is experiencing a panic attack during a session:

It's understandable to feel frightened if someone has a panic attack during a session you're running. But it can help if you:

- Try to stay calm.
- Gently let them know that you think they might be having a panic attack and that you're there for them.
- Encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to do something structured or repetitive they can focus on, such as counting out loud, or asking them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down.
- Encourage them to stamp their feet on the spot.
- Encourage them to sit somewhere quietly where they can focus on their breathing until they feel better.
- Never encourage someone to breathe into a paper bag during a panic attack. This isn't recommended and it might not be safe.

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

“What really helps me is to apply an ice pack or cold water to my wrists or forehead as this helps to shut down the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response.”

Expert by experience

“I keep a photo diary of all the things I’ve managed to do! [It] Makes me think: ‘I can do this’. So when I go and sit in a café, or go for a walk, I take a picture to record that I’ve done it, and look back when I feel scared...it encourages me that maybe I can do something [again] if I’ve done it before.”

Expert by experience

Take a look at [Mind's guidance on anxiety and panic attacks](#) to find out more about symptoms, causes and how to support people.

Side effects from medication

Some medications can have implications for the type and level of physical activity that's safe for people to do. Side effects of some medications, such as antipsychotics, can include:

- Blurred vision
- Problems regulating body temperature
- Sensitivity to the sun
- Sleepiness
- Stiffness or shakiness.

Before starting physical activity, it's important that people on any medication speak to their GP or psychiatrist about what level of exercise is safe and what precautions both they and you, as the service provider, should take for their welfare.

Supporting a person who is taking medication

- Encourage people to tell you about any mental health problems, including medication on their registration form or PAR-Q (Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire) (see [Guide 7: Measuring the impact of a physical activity and mental health service for a Get Set to Go example of a PAR-Q](#)). Ask them about any side effects they experience and how to help mitigate them. For example, offering activities indoors or at different times of the day.
- Ask what staff should look out for and how they would like to be supported.
- Encourage regular breaks to rehydrate and rest if needed.
- Encourage participants to take precautions when it's sunny – like wearing a cap or sunscreen.
- Provide a safe space to sit out if people are feeling any side effects.
- Encourage people to visit their GP to find out what physical activity is safe for them.

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

Take a look at [Mind's guidance on medication and physical activity](#).

When to approach physical activity with care – over-exercising, exercise addiction and eating problems

In this section we'll explore over-exercising, exercise addiction and eating problems.

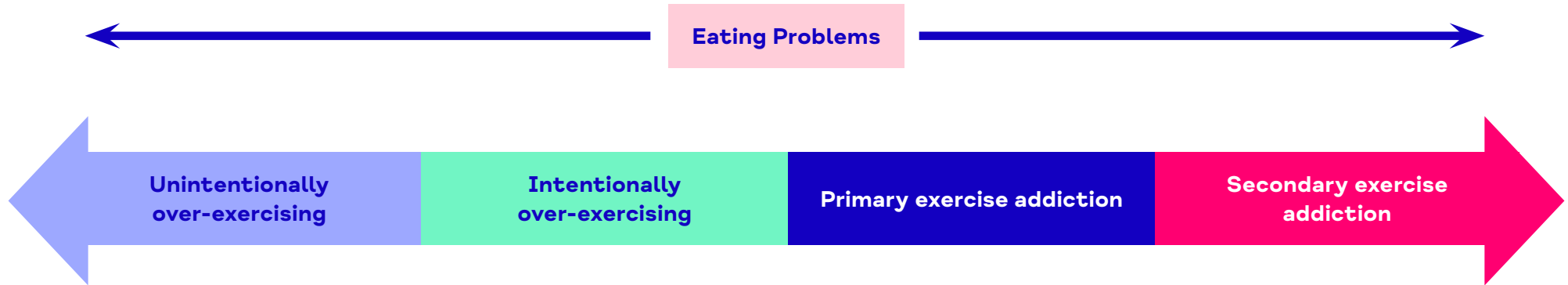
- It's important to recognise that the symptoms of each can overlap and they can also co-occur (happen at the same time).
- It's important not to make assumptions about someone's health or to try and make a diagnosis. Speak to the person to explore their needs and experiences and signpost to further support.
- The level of support a person requires can vary depending on whether their exercise behaviour is intentional or unintentional, and on the underlying motivations.

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



When physical activity becomes a problem continuum

This diagram shows when exercise can start to become a problem. Eating problems may co-occur at any time on the continuum. This isn't about defining people, but ensuring they receive the support they need.



- **Unintentionally over-exercising:**

This is when the amount, frequency or type of exercise someone is doing becomes unsafe for them without them realising or planning it. For example, if they're training for an event or just enjoy the activity. They may be able to stop with little or no support.

- **Intentionally over-exercising:**

Someone may be aware the exercising they're doing is unsafe for them. However they feel the positives outweigh the negatives, so they continue. Someone intentionally over-exercising may be at risk of developing exercise addiction if they don't receive low-level support.

- **Primary exercise addiction:**

When someone feels compelled to exercise even when they aren't enjoying the experience anymore. For example, exercising to cope with day to day life. A person with exercise addiction is unable to stop even if they want to, and may need professional support.

- **Secondary exercise addiction:**

When someone experiences exercise addiction (exercising to cope with day to life, unable to stop and feeling regularly unwell) alongside an eating problem.

- **Eating problems:** An eating problem is any relationship with food that people find difficult. Eating problems can co-occur in addition to over-exercising or exercise addiction.

Over-exercising

Over-exercising and exercise addiction are on a spectrum. This means they're closely linked and the signs and symptoms are very similar.

Over-exercising could be described as 'doing a bit too much'. It may be unintentional, for example if people don't know about the importance of rest and recovery.

Exercise addiction is a more severe problem, where people's lives revolve around exercise in order to get the same positive effects and feel in control.

Everyone's limits are different. For example, someone new to physical activity will probably be able to do less than a person who is very active.

Someone over-exercising might still enjoy the experience, but be unaware it can reverse the positive effects activity has on their physical and mental health.

“A gym manager spoke to me about my habits, being in the gym every day. He was the only person that noticed I had a problem and I wasn't well.”

Expert by experience

Over-exercising can be:

- Exercising more frequently than is safe for that person (for example, every day or multiple times a day because they enjoy it).
- Not allowing your body to have a day off to rest and recover.
- Taking part in activity when we feel unwell or tired.
- Exercising through an injury or returning too soon to activity.

Effects of over-exercising

- Injury and long-term physical damage to tendons, ligaments, bones, cartilage and joints.
- Reduced muscle mass.
- Impact on relationships, mood and in other areas of life.
- Regularly feeling unwell and picking up colds and illnesses more often.
- Feeling agitated and irritable.
- Impact on menstrual cycle including irregular periods.

Signs and symptoms of over-exercising

- The person exercises at a high intensity most days without allowing the body to recover.
- The activity starts to affect a person's day to day life such as relationships, work or other responsibilities. For example, they may turn down social plans because they 'want' to exercise.
- Feeling anxious or irritable about missing an opportunity to take part in physical activity.
- Pushing the body to go further, faster or heavier – training longer or more times a day.

Spotting signs and symptoms of over-exercising can be difficult among people who are already very active. However, even athletes are at risk of over-exercising (or over-training) if they are training without enough time to rest and recover between training sessions.

See [Tips to support people who are experiencing negative effects of physical activity](#) for more information.

Exercise addiction

An addiction is not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it could be harmful to you.⁵ The charity [Action on Addiction](#) states one in three people experience a form of addiction throughout their lives.

Exercise addiction is not regularly discussed and sometimes not taken seriously enough.

“I was told that it was a good thing I was exercising. I found myself exercising for 10 hours a day but no-one told me how to rest.”

Expert by experience

“There’s no AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] for a person experiencing exercise addiction.”

Expert by experience

People may experience exercise addiction alongside an [eating problem](#). This may include anorexia, binge eating disorder, bulimia or other specified feeding or eating problems (OSFED). The relationship between eating problems and exercise is complex.

People experiencing eating problems are 3.7 times more likely to experience exercise addiction.⁶

Addiction substitution

People who experience addiction (for example to drugs, alcohol or gambling) may substitute one addiction for another. This is known as addiction replacement⁷ – sometimes called addiction substitution or transfer addiction. The substitute addiction often starts as something that is harmless or positive when kept in moderation such as work, shopping or exercise, but these activities can themselves become addictive.

This usually happens when the emotional or psychological need that caused the addiction is still present and compels the person to switch addictions. For example, someone addicted to alcohol may find they switch addictions if they reduce their alcohol intake but haven’t been supported to address their underlying difficult feelings.

Effects of exercise addiction

- Injury and long-term physical damage to tendons, ligaments, bones, cartilage and joints.
- Reduced bone and muscle mass.
- Heart problems.
- Impact on relationships, mood and ability to function in other areas of life.
- Feeling anxious and agitated.
- Impact on menstrual cycle including irregular periods.
- Infertility.

⁵ NHS [Live Well – Addiction: What is it?](#)

⁶ Trott, M., Jackson, S.E., Firth, J. et al. (2020) [A comparative meta-analysis of the prevalence of exercise addiction in adults with and without indicated eating disorders.](#)

⁷ Addiction Helpline UK (2014) [The 8 Most Common Addiction Substitutions.](#)

Signs and symptoms of exercise addiction

The participant may:

- Feel compelled to take part in activity every day to cope with daily life.
- Feel that they aren't doing enough or feel guilty when they're not able to take part.
- Feel anxious when unable to take part in exercise.
- Take part when they're feeling unwell or injured.
- Miss important social events because they 'have to exercise'.
- Engage in physical activity in secret.
- Engage in physical activity even when they want to stop. Feel withdrawn when having a break from activity⁸.

People experiencing exercise addiction may show similar behaviours as people who have other addiction problems. However, spotting signs and symptoms can sometimes be difficult, particularly if the participant is training for a competition or event.

If you think someone you know may be experiencing these symptoms, try not to make assumptions but assure them you are here to listen to them without judgment.

See [Tips to support people who are experiencing negative effects of physical activity](#) for more information.

[Lived Experience Story](#): Fiona Thomas shares her story on experiencing exercise addiction and what support and steps she took to support herself.

Exercise addiction and over-exercising may be a form of [self-harm](#) as the person does not allow their body to recover or continues to train when feeling exhausted or injured. It can be used as a way to deal with difficult feelings or emotions.

Case studies and tools

- [Lived Experience Podcast – In my shoes: exercising for the right reasons.](#)
- [Case Study from Get Set to Go – Carolyn, peer volunteer at Bath Mind.](#)
- [Loughborough University's Disordered Eating in Athletes CPD course](#) aims to equip coaches with the strategies to look out for eating problems. It provides them with tools on how to approach and support athletes who may be struggling with eating concerns.

8 Dr Mistry, A. et al (2020) Case Studies in Sports Psychiatry (pages 15-28).

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S)

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) is a condition of low energy availability affecting athletes of all levels and ages.

Facts about RED-S

- It's often caused by a combination of over-exercising and under-fuelling, perhaps as a result of increasing physical activity too quickly or not eating enough or both.
- Over time it can affect both physical and mental health.⁹
- It's more common in higher-level athletes because they compete at a level where body weight and shape affects performance. But it can affect people of all abilities.
- RED-S is often linked with over-exercising, or can occur as a result of an eating problem.
- People experiencing eating problems have a 20% higher risk of developing RED-S. The behaviour that contributes to RED-S can be intentional or unintentional.

Continuum of underfuelling¹⁰

RED-S can occur during any of the stages on the continuum. The treatment a person receives depends on where they are on it.



Signs and symptoms of RED-S

Because it's hard to spot signs and symptoms, health professionals, coaches and athletes rarely recognise or diagnose RED-S.

Signs and symptoms of RED-S are similar to those of over-exercising and eating problems:

- Poor recovery between training sessions.
- Feeling irritated and irritable about missing the opportunity to exercise.
- Feeling anxious about their weight or talking about food more than usual.
- Controlling their food intake.
- Having difficulties with rest days and over-exercising.
- Becoming withdrawn from the team or from family and friends.
- Struggling to sleep or developing poor sleeping patterns.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Becoming injured more often, or the injury reoccurring.

⁹ Dr Mistry, A. et al (2020) Case Studies in Sports Psychiatry (pages 15-28).

¹⁰ Adapted Table SportMed School (2017) Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports (RED-S).

Supporting a person with RED-S

It can be easy to confuse the signs of RED-S with other conditions or mental health problems. Despite this, early intervention is important, particularly among children and young people due to potential impact on development.

- Try to be non-judgemental.
- Signpost to a qualified [sports nutritionist](#) or dietician to ensure food and drink intake is sufficient for their activity levels.
- Encourage them that their best is good enough.
- Signpost to sports psychologists if appropriate or incorporate sports psychology practices into training plans. For example, how to build intrinsic motivation (doing it because they enjoy it and value it), goal setting, and activities to build self-esteem.
- Signpost to [Trainbrave](#) guidance.
- Signpost to local services for talking therapies or counselling if needed.

See [Tips to support people who are experiencing negative effects of physical activity](#) for more information.



People who experience eating problems

An eating problem is any relationship with food that a person finds difficult. People experiencing [eating problems](#) may need to take care with physical activity.

Eating disorders are a medically diagnosed type of eating problems. Diagnosis is based on eating patterns and involves medical tests on weight, blood and body mass index (BMI).

The relationship between eating problems and exercise is complex. People experiencing eating problems can be more at risk of over-exercising, exercise addiction and RED-S. For example, someone experiencing anorexia may feel they need to over-exercise as a way of controlling their weight or burning calories after eating. Other people's experience may start with over-exercising, which may later lead to an eating problem.

Signs and symptoms of eating problems

Warning: The following examples may be upsetting and potentially triggering. If you are feeling vulnerable at the moment, you might want to move on to the next section.

Signs and symptoms differ between eating problems and diagnoses, but people who experience eating problems may be familiar with some of the following:

- Restricting the amount of food eaten.
- Feeling anxious about eating.
- Eating in secret or feeling anxious about eating in public.
- Feeling tired.
- Having difficulty focusing or concentrating.
- Thinking a lot about body shape and size and comparing to other people.

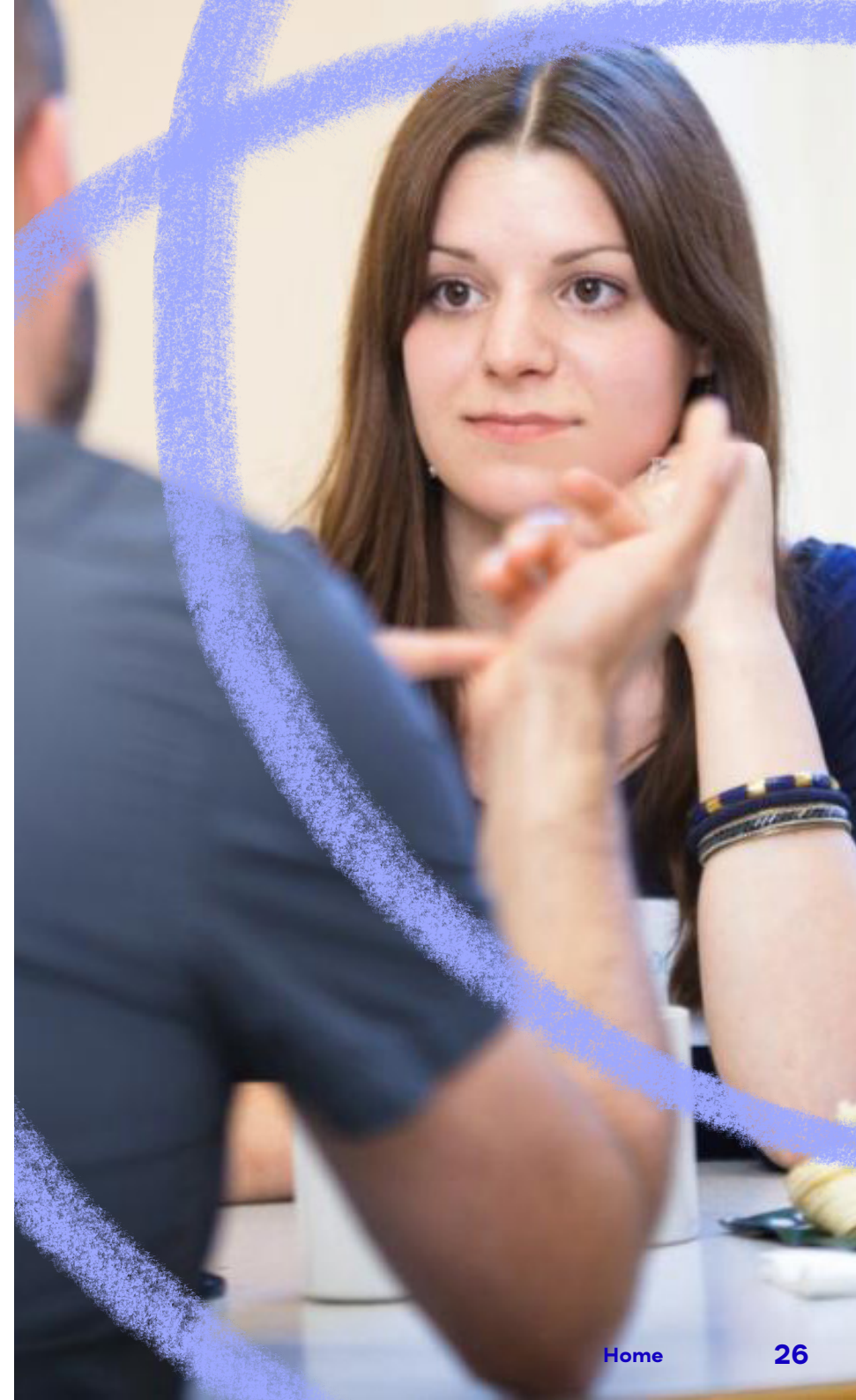
Many people think that someone with an eating problem will be over or underweight. People might also think that certain weights are linked to certain eating problems. Neither of these points is true. While some people may experience a change in their appearance, not everyone will. It's important not to assume that you can tell what eating problems someone has from their appearance.

“I sometimes wear oversized or baggy clothing to work out in, to hide my true body shape and size.”

Expert by experience

Supporting a person experiencing an eating problem

- Listen – make sure the person knows you're there to listen and offer support.
- Don't make assumptions – try not to interpret what their eating problem means without listening to them. This could make them less able to share their difficult emotions and seek support.
- Encourage them to seek professional help. See our [treatment and support information](#) on available treatments.
- The eating disorder charity Beat has more information on [how to talk to someone with eating problems](#).



Opening up conversations about when physical activity becomes a problem

“Doing too much can be a difficult topic.”

Expert by experience

There's little research or insight into when physical activity becomes a problem in community physical activity settings. It's a seldom talked about topic: people who may be doing too much physical activity may find it difficult to talk about it or may not be aware that it's a problem. So don't make assumptions, and approach conversations sensitively and non-judgementally.

True or false?

Challenging myths and misconceptions about over-exercising, exercise addictions and eating problems.

1 Over-exercising is always linked to eating problems or addiction.

False. While over-exercising can be linked to an eating problem or addiction which may need specialist support, there are many reasons that people can find physical activity a problem. For some, it can start as a helpful coping strategy that becomes difficult to take a break from. For others, it's a way to avoid difficult thoughts and feelings. It can mask what is truly troubling someone. On the outside the person may look athletic and healthy, but it may be masking wider problems.

2 Over-exercising can be a form of self-harm.

True. Exercising too much can cause both physical and emotional harm.

3 People will be aware about how much physical activity they're doing and be willing to speak about it.

False. People who are over-exercising may not realise how much activity they're doing or that it has become a problem. And even when people are aware of how much activity they're doing, it can be frightening to talk about it and think about making some changes. Equally, we know at the opposite end of the physical activity spectrum people may over-estimate how much they're doing when they're just starting out.

4 All people who are over-exercising should be told to stop or to do a mindful activity such as yoga.

False. Being active can be a hugely beneficial coping strategy. Completely taking this away



from someone could lead to their mental health getting worse. Everyone is different: it's important to work with the person to find out their individual needs. This may include: finding a way for them to be active in a more structured way that's safe for their physical and mental health, working with them to reduce the amount of physical activity they do and signposting to professional mental health support.

5 Having a difficult relationship with physical activity can be lonely or isolating.

True. As it is a rarely discussed topic it can be hard for people to express how they are feeling and to feel validated. It may be difficult to articulate their experiences and this issue may seem unrelated to any wider problems they may be experiencing. Listening and being non-judgemental is important to help people feel that they can open up.

“It can be really isolating. There is no AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] for people who are over-exercising.”

Expert by experience

“One of the reasons I struggled with exercise was that I found it difficult to deal with the feelings the depression and post-traumatic stress disorder brought and I certainly couldn't express them. Exercising helped numb these feelings and without realising it I ended up over-exercising. I only stopped when I developed conditions that left me in horrendous pain. I would have been grateful had others recognised I had problems and if they did recognise the problems, had tried to talk to me. None of these conversations will be easy but they are vital.”

Expert by experience





Tips to support people

Guide 2:

The relationship between physical activity and mental health

The benefits of physical activity on mental health

Examples of physical activity services/projects focusing on mental health

When to approach physical activity with care

- Tips to support people

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.

<p>Educate</p>	<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>
<p>Observe</p>	<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>
<p>Promote</p>	<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.

<p>Care</p>	<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>
<p>Provide support to build a balanced activity plan</p>	<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.
<p>Encouraging people to keep a physical activity diary</p>	<p>Keeping a diary or log may help the person to record both their physical activity and their 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>
<p>Offer other opportunities to be involved</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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.

Signpost

Encourage the person to talk to someone they trust such as friends or family.

Signpost to their local GP, [local Mind](#) or local mental health organisation. Alternatively they could call an anonymous helpline such as the Samaritans on 116 123, Mind's Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or text Shout to 85258 (see [Guide 1: Introduction to mental health](#) for more information on mental health support and helplines).

Signpost to specialist support such as:

- Eating disorder or addiction teams
- [Dieticians](#)
- [Beat](#)
- [Mind's useful contacts guide](#)



Have a question or would like more information?

You can find more information at [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk).
Or why not take a look at the other guides in our
[Mental Health and Physical Activity Toolkit](#).

If you have any further questions, please contact
our Physical Activity team at sport@mind.org.uk.

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