

MOVING MORE
IS **GOOD** FOR OUR
MENTAL HEALTH

SO, **WHAT'S**
STOPPING US?



**MENTAL
HEALTH
AWARENESS
WEEK**
13-19 MAY 2024

KEY POINTS

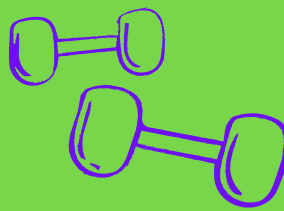
The evidence of the benefits of movement to both physical and mental health is well documented. However, despite its apparent simplicity, for many people the advice "move more for your mental health" is easier said than done. More than one third of UK adults (36%) do not meet the recommendations set out by the World Health Organisation.

The Mental Health Foundation recently undertook a mixed methodology study across the UK and spoke to a range of people to help us develop a more detailed understanding of the barriers to physical activity for people more at risk of poor mental health.

Almost half (45%) of UK adults feel that their mental health and wellbeing can be improved through physical activity.



Awareness of the benefits of physical activity is high, with **82% of UK adults** acknowledging its importance for mental health and overall wellbeing.



Around one in seven survey respondents (**14%**) said that **high costs stopped them** from moving more.

More than one in six people (17%) in the UK say that stress in their daily life is preventing them from moving more. This rises to almost one in three (30%) of young people aged 18-24.



Over a third (37%) of adults in the UK find it challenging to allocate time for physical activity. Additionally, **more than one in five individuals** (22%) report being too busy to exercise in a typical week.



Notably, young adults aged **18-24 are most likely to identify time constraints** as a barrier to exercising (35%).

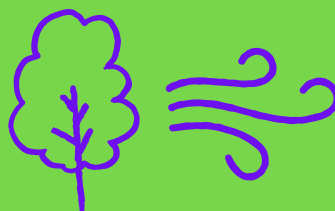
Young people aged **18-24 were more likely to say that anxiety prevents them** from being more physically active – 24% v 15% of general population.

One in seven people (15%) said that a long-term condition or disability prevented them from doing more physical activity. This rises to around one quarter of respondents aged 50 or over (24%).



In our survey, **28% report feeling too tired or fatigued** to engage in physical activity. Among different age groups, young adults aged 18-24 are the most affected, with 38% citing lack of energy / tiredness as a barrier.

The weather is a common barrier to movement for people across the UK with **around one third** (31%) saying this prevents them from doing more physical activity in a typical week.



Other people found that **body image and cultural barriers** stopped them from doing physical activity.

This Mental Health Awareness Week, the Mental Health Foundation is encouraging people to find #MomentsForMovement in their daily lives as we all try to move more for our mental health.

Introduction

Regular physical activity is proven to improve mental health, quality of life and wellbeing.¹ Despite these benefits being well established, physical inactivity continues to be a global health issue.²

In the UK, 36% of adults (aged 18+) do not meet the physical activity recommendations set out by the World Health Organisation.³ At the same time, the UK Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines emphasise that people who are the least active have the most to gain from doing more. Even small increases in physical activity levels can result in a range of physical and mental health benefits.

Physical inactivity negatively affects both physical and mental health. Research has found that people who are inactive have three times the rate of moderate to severe depression compared to active people.⁵

There is also strong evidence to support the role of physical activity in the reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety.⁶ Regular physical activity can reduce your

risk of depression by up to 30%.⁷ In addition, numerous other mental health benefits of being active have been identified, including increased self-esteem, reduced stress, and improved quality of life.⁸

And yet, over a third of people are not meeting the recommended guidelines. In our research however, when we asked the UK population if they believed that regular physical activity is important for mental health and wellbeing, 82% of UK adults agreed. So, why the disconnect?

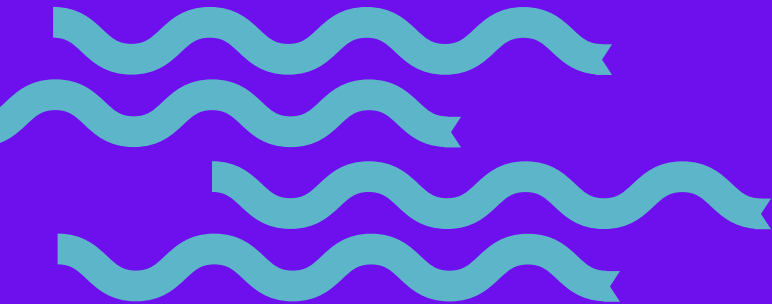
We can all find it difficult to be active from time to time. However, there are also a number of factors that can affect someone's ability to move more, including their income, gender, age and ethnicity.⁹ Higher levels of inactivity also disproportionately affect certain populations, such as people with long-term health conditions and people living in areas of socio-economic deprivation.¹⁰

Recent research suggests that existing inequalities in inactivity have been further widened by the Covid-19 pandemic, and that this gap is most significant for some people from minority ethnic communities and people from lower socio-economic groups.¹⁰ However, to address inequalities in physical inactivity and support people to move more, it is important to understand the barriers faced by the population in relation to being physically active.

"Any activity is better than none, and more is better still".⁴



Our research



The Mental Health Foundation wanted to better understand the views and experiences of people at higher risk of poor mental health in relation to physical activity. So, late last year we held focus groups across the UK and spoke to a range of people, including: families and young people affected by poverty and financial strain; people living with long term health conditions; asylum seekers and refugees; and people with lived experience of poor mental health.

Next, in March 2024 we worked with Opinium to conduct an online survey of 6,000 UK adults aged 18+ (weighted to be nationally representative) to help us develop a more detailed understanding of the challenges and barriers to physical activity for people more at risk of poor mental health. This document details our findings.ⁱ

Understanding the benefits

Our bodies and our minds are connected, so looking after ourselves physically also helps us prevent problems with our mental health. Moving our bodies through sport, gardening, dancing, cycling, walking the dog, doing the cleaning, or going to the gym, for example, are great ways to improve our mental health and physical health.

Exercise releases “feel good” hormones, that reduce feelings of stress and anger. It also helps us feel better about our bodies. It can improve our sleep too. If it involves other people, like being part of a team, a class or group we see regularly, that can also boost our mental health.



The mental health and wellbeing benefits of moving more include:ⁱⁱ

- less tension, stress, and mental fatigue
- a natural energy boost
- a sense of achievement
- more focus and motivation
- feeling less angry or frustrated
- having fun
- an opportunity to connect with others

Our findings indicate that among the general population, lack of awareness of the benefits of physical activity for mental health and wellbeing is not the issue. In our survey, more than four in five people (82%) agreed that regular physical activity is important for mental health and wellbeing.

It's evident that respondents understand and acknowledge the significance of physical activity in daily life in terms of better sleep, reducing the risk of depression and managing stress. However, despite this understanding, one in four individuals reported engaging in less than 30 minutes of activity per week.

i. This data was collected by Opinium Research. The research sample was 6,000 UK adults and the data was weighted to be nationally representative. The survey took place between the 12th – 21st March 2024.

ii. NHS Mental Health Matters <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/be-active-for-your-mental-health/>

Understanding of physical activity benefits

Regular physical activity is important for overall physical health	84%
Regular physical activity is important for mental health and wellbeing	82%
Physical activity contributes to better quality sleep	80%
Being physically active can reduce the risk of depression	76%
Physical activity can help me to manage stress	74%
I feel more energised and alert after being physically active	73%
Physical activity improves mood	71%
I feel more confident and positive about myself when I engage in physical activity	70%

This was mirrored by discussion in our focus groups where the mental health benefits of moving more came out strongly and unprompted:

“I know when I do go out for a walk, I come back feeling a lot better.”

“If you walk through the forest, you might not do a long walk, but even just a walk in the forest, you feel so much better after it...”

“You feel just a sense of accomplishment, so that’s why it boosts my mental health.”

Nearly half of the survey respondents (45%) believed that their own mental health and wellbeing would improve by doing more physical activity. This is especially true of those respondents who felt that their mental health had been poor in the previous month (60%).

More than half of the respondents in our survey believed moving more would lead to better sleep (54%). Evidence shows that regular physical activity can lead to improved sleep quality, reduced sleep latency, and better overall sleep quality. Moreover, physical activity has shown promise in managing sleep disorders like insomnia.¹¹ In our focus groups women especially commented on the impact on their sleeping patterns if they engaged in physical activity:

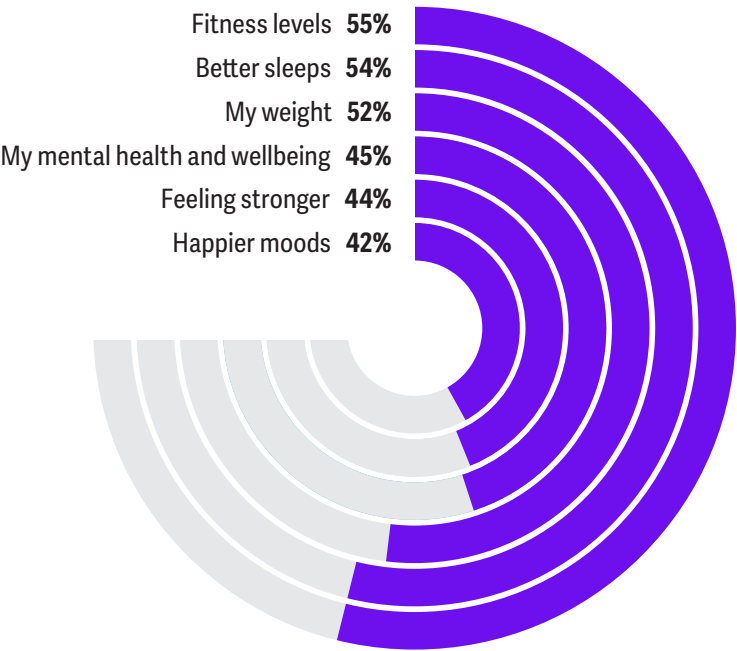
“It does help... if I do a long walk with the dog in the evening, I feel I sleep much better...”

For others, feeling stronger (44%) and happier (42%) were identified as benefits they expected from increased physical activity. In our qualitative study, feeling stronger was specifically highlighted by young men as a positive outcome they believed would result from exercising more:

“I know that I’m increasing (my) bone density, and making joints stronger if I exercise...”

However, this awareness did not always translate into regular participation. So, what is stopping so many of us from prioritising physical activity in our daily lives?

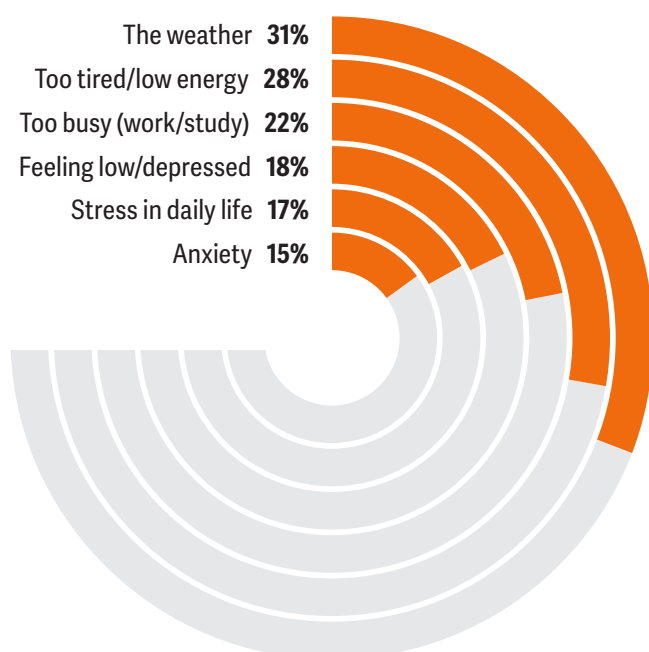
Which of the following do you believe you can improve by doing more physical activity?



What stops us moving more?

Every person is unique and has their own reasons for not engaging in more physical activity to support their mental health. However, there are common barriers to movement that affect various groups. Our research indicates that a variety of barriers can hinder an individual's ability to be more active.

In a typical week, which of the following stops you being more physically active?



Moreover, unpredictable weather patterns can disrupt plans for outdoor activities, leading to frustration and demotivation. Additionally, seasonal changes in weather, such as shorter daylight hours in winter or a very warm summer's day, can affect people's energy levels and mood, making it more challenging to muster the motivation to be active outdoors.

Overall, the perceived barrier of weather to physical activity stems from its potential to inconvenience, discomfort, and disrupt plans, as well as its impact on mood and energy levels.



Fatigue / tiredness

In our survey, 28% of respondents identified being too tired as a barrier to physical activity. Notably, women were more likely to cite tiredness as a reason for not being more active (32%), as were students (39%) and young people aged 18-24 (38%). This finding was supported by participants in the qualitative study, who frequently mentioned feeling tired and having limited time, prompting them to prioritise activities perceived as more 'relaxing' as a way to maintain their mental wellbeing.

Interestingly, weather emerged as the most common reason, cited by nearly a third of respondents (31%). In the focus groups participants explained that high winds can make outdoor activities uncomfortable or even unsafe, discouraging them from engaging in physical activity. Bad weather can also limit the availability of outdoor spaces and facilities, further reducing opportunities for exercise. For parents of young children in our group, being active was very much linked to getting outdoors, so weather was a key barrier:

"My two don't like cold or rain or wind. They just won't go out in it..."

"Just being tired from your general, normal, everyday schedule... I mean I can't personally see why I should then go on a walk?"

We found that fatigue was a huge barrier for some people in our research. They cited when feeling tired or exhausted, they lacked the energy and motivation needed to engage in physical activity. For some of those with long-term conditions they mentioned that their fatigue can make even simple tasks feel challenging, let alone more strenuous activities like exercise:

“I find it hard to try and motivate myself to do anything (when tired) ...”

Additionally, fatigue can be a symptom of various underlying health conditions, such as anaemia, thyroid disorders, or sleep disorders, which can directly impact an individual's ability to be physically active. In such cases, addressing the underlying health issue is essential to overcoming fatigue and increasing activity levels.¹² Moreover, factors such as stress, poor nutrition, and inadequate hydration can contribute to feelings of fatigue, further reducing a person's desire and ability to exercise.

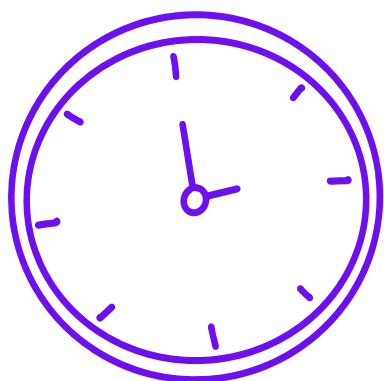
Lack of time

For just over one in five respondents (22%), the overriding barrier was being too busy, with young people aged 18-24 most likely to cite this reason (38%).

In our focus groups, individuals elaborated that carving out time for physical activity posed a challenge, especially when juggling competing priorities like work, household responsibilities and childcare.

Additionally, for some, the time needed to arrange practical matters like childcare made engaging in physical activity seem less feasible. This was particularly true for single parents. Similarly, almost one third of parents of children aged 0-3 (32%) said that childcare issues stopped them for doing more physical activity in a typical week.

“There's a bit of a mental barrier then, in knowing how much effort you've got to put in just for an hour or an hour-and-a-half of fun basically.”



Poor mental health

For others, feeling low or depressed (18%), stressed (17%), or anxious (15%) was also a barrier to being more active. This is despite high awareness of movement and physical activity being beneficial to mental health. Young people aged 18-24 were the most likely to say that feeling low or depressed (24%), stressed (30%) or anxious (24%) stopped them from being more active in a typical week.

In the focus groups, people mentioned that when they were feeling low, it often sapped their energy and motivation, making it harder to muster the drive to engage in physical activities. Among those with lived experience of poor mental health, it was noted that they can find it difficult to see the benefits of exercise or may even perceive it as an additional stressor rather than a helpful activity. Moreover, for some, low mood led to a lack of interest in activities that were previously enjoyable, including exercise.

Cultural barriers

Women from some minority ethnic communities expressed difficulty in finding local activities that aligned with their cultural preferences, particularly due to closures of women-only spaces. One participant shared:

“A lot of places closed... I don't want to attend a mixed gym so I would go to a ladies' gym... and it's all shut now because [of] the cost of running it.”

Additionally, individuals with limited knowledge about local facilities, such as asylum seekers and refugees, faced challenges in knowing where to begin. We spoke to a group of asylum seekers who talked about the financial challenges they face including limited access to resources for transport, sports equipment, or activity fees. Furthermore, some of the group had limited proficiency in written English which made it more difficult to gather information around local activities in their area. Consequently, limited knowledge about available local physical activity groups and their benefits, as well as a lack of information on how to access these resources, can prevent asylum seekers and refugees from participating locally.

“I would like to meet a group to walk with, but I don't know where to find the information.”

Self-esteem and body image

While physical activity was recognised by some participants as boosting self-esteem and improving body image, concerns about physical appearance and feelings of inadequacy often hindered participation, especially among younger women.

Around one in ten survey participants (9%) said that not liking the way their body looks prevented them from exercising more, and this rose to almost one in six (16%) of 18-24 year olds. These concerns were particularly associated with structured exercise:

"Especially when you go to the gym and you're seeing so many other people who know what they're doing [...] because they look a certain way, you're thinking that they're looking at you, that you don't know what you're doing."

Physical barriers

Individuals living with long-term conditions cited pain, fatigue, and managing fluctuating symptoms as common barriers to being more active. In the UK-wide survey, one in seven people (15%) said that a long-term condition or disability prevented them from doing more physical activity. This rises to around one quarter of respondents aged 50 or over. Menopausal symptoms were also noted as obstacles, as was previous illnesses.

Focus group participants explained:

"I have my limitations these days, and that's a hangover from the cancer. My energy levels aren't what they used to be."

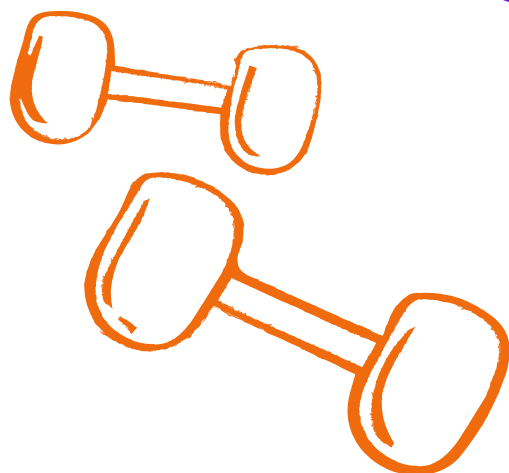
"I hit menopause and it kind of all went from there. My life just ended. Getting out of bed was just a struggle. I really didn't know it was going to be that bad..."

Cost

Around one in seven survey respondents (14%) said that high costs stopped them from moving more. This was elaborated on within the qualitative study as the expense associated with exercise classes and gym memberships emerged as a significant barrier, particularly against the backdrop of rising living costs. Additional expenses such as childcare and appropriate clothing further compounded the issue.

While many participants favoured free activities like walking, challenges such as poor weather and shorter daylight hours often impacted motivation. Limited access to green spaces, inadequate public transport, and closures of local facilities further hindered access to free or low-cost activities. One participant shared:

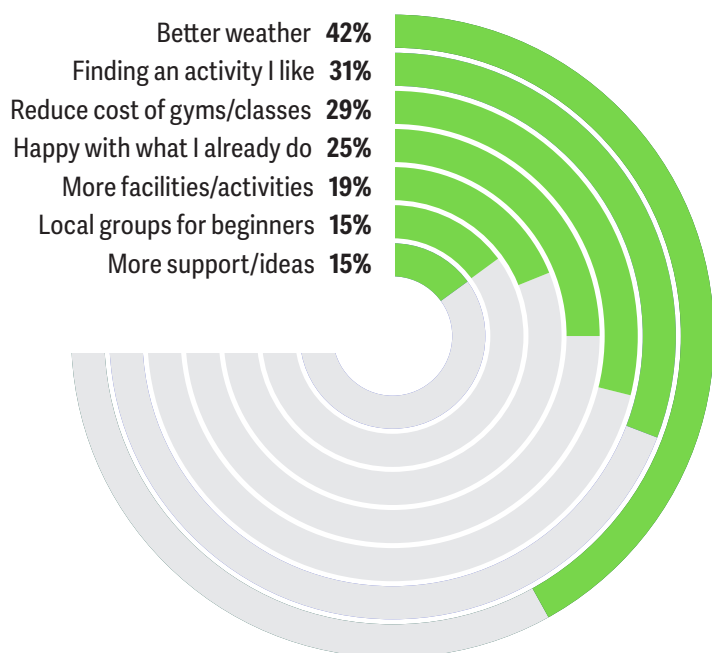
"There's very little locally now. It all closed down during Covid-19 and never re-opened. No exercise classes around my way now... only expensive fancy gyms..."



How can we support people to move more?

What our research showed was that the barriers to undertaking physical activity are wide and varied, and many people need support. We asked in our survey what would help you become more physically active.

Which of the following would help you become more physically active?



Find an enjoyable activity

It's clear that – other than better weather (42%) – people need help to find activities they enjoy (31%) that are low cost and local (29%). This was also borne out in the focus groups where people felt that doing an activity they enjoy can transform exercise from a mundane task into a fulfilling and enjoyable experience.

They explained that when they enjoyed an activity such as dancing or walking with friends, it doesn't feel like a chore. Instead, it becomes something they looked forward to. This enjoyment provides intrinsic motivation, making it easier to stick with the activity over time.

More than one third of UK adults (34%) believe physical activity is a chore and don't enjoy it. But, when you genuinely enjoy an activity, and particularly when you participate with other people, you're more likely to engage in it consistently, leading to long-term benefits. This not only makes it easier to be more physically active but also enhances your overall wellbeing and quality of life.

"I do feel much more motivated if I've got someone saying, 'Come on, let's go to the gym' or, 'Come on, let's go out for a walk'."

"Feeling supported by people around you. I'd say that would probably help me."

There are countless physical activities to choose from, ranging from team sports to walking or dancing to gardening. Exploring different activities allows people to find what suits their interests, preferences, and fitness level, increasing the likelihood that they will stick with it in the long run.





Social connections

In the focus groups, much emphasis was placed on the social connection aspect of physical activity. This is especially important as research shows that both low levels of physical activity and elevated levels of loneliness are independently linked to poorer mental and physical health outcomes, as well as increased mortality rates.¹³

Participants highlighted the importance of having someone to motivate them and chat with, as it increased their likelihood of being more active. The majority acknowledged the social benefits of physical activity, with women often emphasising these aspects more than men. One participant shared:

"I've made a lot of friends from the gym... I've found that really positive."

Another mentioned having a 'gym family.' Furthermore, the social aspect was particularly significant for some, such as those involved in Meetup walking groups. Having a peer for motivation was highlighted as "crucial" by some.

Cost of gyms / classes

The increasing cost of gyms and exercise classes was seen as a barrier to being more physically active and so, of course, people were keen on such costs being reduced (29%).

In our research respondents talked about the expense of activities for children including travelling to those activities (fuel, public transport costs etc). In addition, women mentioned the difficulty and cost of attending women-only classes / sessions:

"It's expensive... I can't afford it... I have one gym that offers [women-only sessions] once a week and I can't afford that."

However, if the cost of gyms and exercise classes is prohibitive, there are still plenty of ways to move more with little expense. Our respondents mentioned activities such as walking, jogging, hiking, or cycling in local parks or neighbourhoods. These activities not only provide exercise but also allowed them to enjoy nature and fresh air which provides an additional boost to their wellbeing.

Some of our respondents in the research found that workout videos and apps available online for free or at low cost had been helpful, especially during the pandemic. They mentioned a variety of physical activities, including bodyweight workouts, yoga, Pilates, and cardio routines, which can be done in the comfort of home with minimal or no equipment:

"Just doing the walking videos at home has helped me... and no one can see me..."

What was clear from the people in the study was that getting active did not have to break the bank. With a bit of creativity and resourcefulness, some found affordable or even free ways to incorporate more physical activity into their routine.



What can be done?

The evidence of the benefits of movement and exercise to both physical and mental health is well documented. However, despite this, for many people moving more for their mental health is easier said than done.



As discussed in this report, numerous barriers, many of which are beyond their control, hinder individuals from being able to embrace movement. And, when people miss out on opportunities for physical activity, they are missing out on the chance to prevent poor mental health.

During Mental Health Awareness Week and beyond, the Mental Health Foundation is sharing information and advice to help people to move more for their mental health in their everyday lives.

We want to help people overcome barriers to movement, like lack of time or facilities, as well give tips to people who may be lacking in confidence or only just starting out. The guidance will also explain how to get extra mental health benefits from the movement we do. For example, getting out in nature, connecting with others, and having fun.

Visit our website to find out more
mentalhealth.org.uk/movement-tips

Ultimately, there is only so much we can overcome as individuals. Like most things that are good for our mental health such as eating a healthy diet, staying out of debt, or getting good sleep, it is much easier to be physically active when we feel secure in our homes, have adequate income to cover essential living costs, are not living with a long-term health condition, and are not subject to racism or discrimination.

Being able to protect our own mental health should not be a luxury. But too many people are denied the chance to do things that are good for mental health due to poverty, financial strain, and inequality. It is these root causes that must be addressed if we are to achieve our vision of good mental health for all.

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