

# Exercise & Mental Health



## What does mental health look like in Australia?

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It is the sad reality that each year 1 in 5 Australians will experience a mental illness, yet there is still a poor understanding and acceptance of mental illness. Due to this, it often goes undiagnosed and either untreated or poorly treated.

People living with a mental illness die much earlier than the rest of the population, mostly due to preventable cardiovascular disease. Dying 15 to 20 years earlier means that life expectancy for people with mental illness is similar to that seen in the population at large in the 1950s.

Mental illness can have an impact on a person's cognitive, behavioural and social functioning. Those with a mental illness often struggle to engage in their regular work, social and physical activities to the full extent which further impacts the illness as social isolation then often occurs.

Mental illness includes a range of conditions including affective, anxiety, psychotic, personality, and substance related disorders. General Practitioners (GPs), alongside Psychologists and Psychiatrists, form part of a multidisciplinary care team aimed at improving the long-term mental health and well-being of patients.

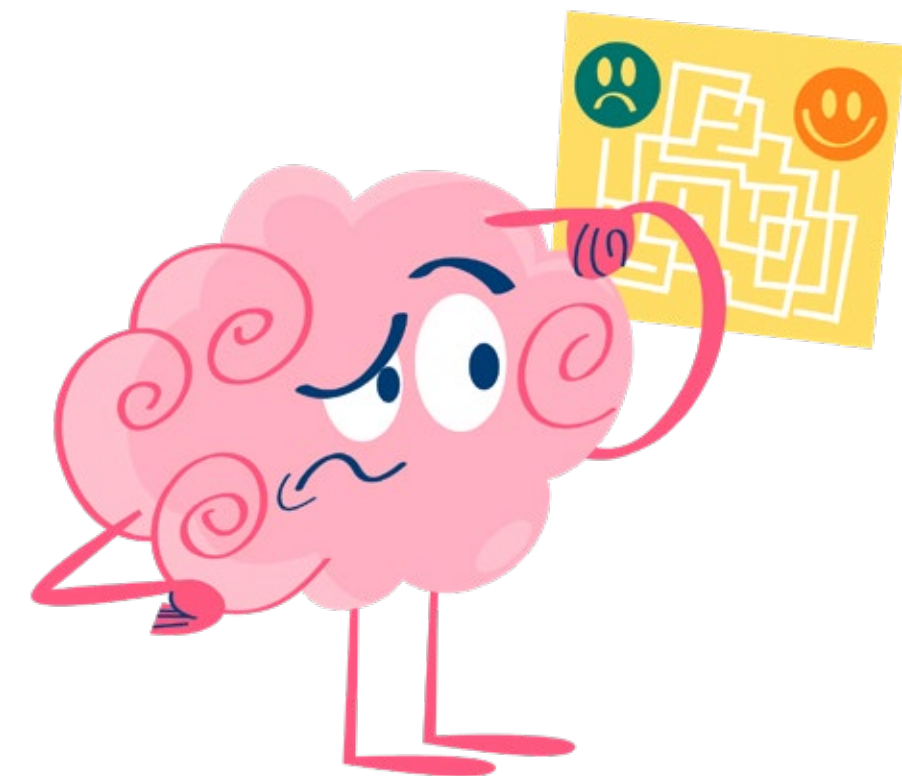
For full background information on mental health conditions please visit Beyond Blue or the Black Dog Institute.

## Why exercise is important

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There is mounting evidence that suggests exercise is an effective component of treatment for people living with acute and chronic mental illness. With exercise making a big difference in mood and promoting a positive mental health, whilst also helping to reduce the symptoms of mental illness, there is a significant need for exercise to be a fundamental part of mental health treatment.

It's important to remember that it's not about what type of exercise is the best kind, it's about what works for the individual, and that doing something is better than doing nothing at all. Even one workout a week is known to have great benefits.



## The Stats

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Physical inactivity is the cause of approximately 9% of premature mortality worldwide, with people experiencing a mental illness being particularly vulnerable to inactivity. The high risk of poor physical health in those with a serious mental illness is acknowledged as one of the major reasons for high mortality rates. The relative risk of death is estimated to be 2.2 times higher in people with mental disorders compared to the general population and this is largely due to chronic physical health problems rather than the mental health issues.

With 20% of the Australian population experiencing a mental illness in any given year, overwhelming research has shown that physical activity is not only an effective part of treatment alongside standard care, but can also help protect against future episodes of mental illness.

Results of the 2018 HUNT study highlighted that 12% of cases of depression could have been prevented by just one hour of exercise a week.

Further research tells us that physical activity can then protect against developing future mental disorders. A study in The American Journal of Psychiatry found physical activity can protect against the emergence of depression, regardless of age and geographical region.

The research team found consistent evidence based on data from more than 260,000 people that physical activity decreases the odds against depression development by 17%. The results were consistent in analyses that have adjusted for potential variables like sex, age, smoking and body mass index.

## The Effects on our Physical Health

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Generally, individuals experiencing mental health conditions will also experience some elements of poor physical health, and vice versa.

According to data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australia's Health 2016 National Report Card, mental health conditions were reported as a comorbidity among:

- 36% of people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- 30% of people with back pain and problems
- 29% of people with asthma

Australians who are then living with a mental illness:

- Are 2-3 times more likely to suffer from diabetes than the general population
- Are almost four times more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease (CVD) and also significantly more likely to die from CVD as opposed to those without mental illness
  - » Coronary heart disease carries the independent risk factor of depression, which can affect the recovery of those with CVD and increase the risk of future heart problems.

These physical health implications on those living with a mental illness is due in part to the range of lifestyle factors such as poor diet and low levels of physical activity. Given this well-known relationship between physical and mental health, it is imperative that individuals living with a mental health condition have access to a multidisciplinary treatment to enhance their quality of life and improve their physical and mental health outcomes.

## Who are the exercise professionals?

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Just like any physical illness or disability, treatment for a mental illness should be provided by a tertiary qualified health professional. It's therefore best to work with an exercise professional that has the skills and knowledge to help you manage your mental health condition with physical activity.

This makes Accredited Exercise Physiologists (AEP) pivotal in the multidisciplinary treatment environment. Working alongside General Practitioners (GPs) and Psychologists/Psychiatrists, these accredited professionals can tailor a plan suited to the client's needs, ability and motivation level, and address any psychosocial barriers that the client may address towards exercise participation.

By consulting an Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP) you will be working with someone who cares about your well-being and can prescribe an individual exercise plan to help you get started. The development and adherence towards good positive habits like exercise allow for the development and increase in client confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness, which are all important aspects in the management of mental illness.

In populations with mental illness, regular physical activity prescribed by an accredited exercise professional has been shown to:

- Improve cardio-respiratory fitness and reduce all-cause mortality risk
- Help control weight gain induced by medication (despite any side effects, medication still plays an important role in treatment)
- Improve chronic disease outcomes, especially type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease
- Decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Improve sleep quality and increase self-esteem

It can take time for the benefits of exercise to be noticeable. Studies show a significant reduction in depressive symptoms after eight weeks. By introducing exercise interventions for those with mental health issues, evidence shows that there can be significant improvements in physical and mental health. However, it can be more difficult for those experiencing mental illness to initiate and maintain an exercise program due to the complex nature of their health.

To get in contact with your local accredited exercise professional to help start the process, visit the ESSA website: [www.essa.org.au](http://www.essa.org.au) or speak with your GP for a referral to an Accredited Exercise Physiologist.

## Overview of Mental Health & Exercise

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The provision of the specific and client focused exercise plan becomes crucial, not just for the short-term benefits on mental health, but more importantly for the long standing effect exercise has on overall mental health and wellness.

Exercise, when provided suitably and in a way that is specific and individual to the needs of the client, is an excellent addition to other treatment for the ongoing journey towards good mental health.

If you know of someone in your life who is wanting to commence exercise but is living with some mental health challenges, or if you yourself have or are living with a mental illness, make your first choice an Accredited Exercise Physiologist – they are qualified allied health professionals who can work with you to better your mental health through appropriately designed exercise.

# Exercising for depression

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While the exact cause of depression is unknown, a number of factors can be associated with its development such as life events, changes in the brain, a family history of depression, serious illness, or drug and alcohol use.

## WHAT TYPE OF EXERCISE IS EFFECTIVE IN TREATING MAJOR DEPRESSION?

As well as having a significant effect on mood, regular exercise can help to reduce the risk of diseases commonly associated with depression such as heart disease and diabetes, the rates of which are higher in people with a mental illness. Aerobic exercise and weight lifting have been shown to be effective in reducing the symptoms of major depression.

- Moderate intensity aerobic exercise such as walking, running or cycling: 30 – 60 minutes per session at least 3 days per week.
- High intensity resistance training: 3 sets of 8 repetitions for 60 minutes at least 3 days each week.

## DOES EXERCISE HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT WHEN COMBINED WITH MEDICATION?

Although it is strongly recommended to not change or stop taking medication, exercise does have similar effects to medication but none of the side effects. Exercise can also counteract the side effects of some medications such as reducing the risk of falling by strengthening muscles and helping control body weight and blood pressure.

It is accepted worldwide that exercise is an effective treatment and management tool for mood related disorders, including depression, and should be incorporated into any depression treatment plan.

## WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE INTENSITY TO IMPROVE MOOD?

Using guidelines similar to that for the general public is recommended – moderate to vigorous intensity a few times a week. Different studies have shown beneficial results with everything from walking and yoga (low intensity) to 80% of maximum weight training (high intensity).

While this might be confusing, it's best to look at the silver lining: any intensity from low to vigorous could be beneficial, depending on the person exercising.

If you're looking to start using exercise as a way to manage your depression, it's advised that you first speak with an Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP). Although it's possible that any intensity might work for you, it's important to have clear goals, strategies and plans in place to ensure you find an exercise program you can stick to. An AEP can also make sure any other health conditions are taken into account.



# Exercising for anxiety

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Feeling anxious? Movement is medicine. In a world of deadlines, distractions and information overload, there are 5 simple steps that can help soothe feelings of anxiety.

## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Did you know that one in every six young Australians experiences anxiety? Chances are, you might be one of them, or at least know someone who is. Feeling worried is actually a normal part of life, but occasionally the fear response gets turned up too high, when nothing is posing a danger to us. Along with consulting your General Practitioner, who may refer you to counselling under the Mental Health Treatment Plan, try the following physical activity tips to regain control of your brain during moments of anxiety.

### 1. BREATH IN, BREATHE OUT

Breathing can happen automatically, like right now, or you can manipulate your breath – think about when you sniff a flower, blow out candles, or sing loudly in the car.

Feeling worried or stressed out can create shallow, ineffective breaths, and the brain will respond accordingly. Stimulating the vagus nerve by breathing deeply can bring about the relaxation response.

### 2. TAKE A HIKE...

Which may not always be convenient, but if you can replicate the great things about hiking (the walking part and the nature part), you'd be off to a good start! Aerobic, rhythmic, predictable activities such as walking, cycling and swimming all feel good for a few reasons. They can allow you to correctly assess nervous system responses – the heart is beating faster, but it's because of exercise, not high levels of stress. Anti-anxiety benefits have also been proven if walking in a 'green', natural environment, and bonus points if there is water present.

### 3. GET UP, STAND UP!

Research out of Deakin University, Melbourne has demonstrated that sitting too long is linked to anxiety; that too much time in front of a screen can over-excite the fight or flight response, disrupt sleeping patterns and eventually lead to social withdrawal.

Standing up periodically comes with a multitude of health benefits. For the restless mind, it can provide a 'refresh' button and interrupt the flow of anxious thoughts. If you work or study predominantly at a desk, set an alarm every 30 minutes to stand up – your mind and body will thank you!

### 4. YOGA (GREEN SMOOTHIES, OPTIONAL)

Yoga classes also create a sense of community, and many lessons include guided meditation at the end, another known anxiety zapper. As for after-class hydration options, try to stay away from sweeteners and stimulants which can stir up the nervous system. Water is always a good option – it's what we are made of.

### 5. JUST DO SOMETHING

You have the power to break an anxious cycle, whether it is with a deep anchoring breath or a quick walk around the block. Remember not to put unrealistic expectations on yourself which can create more worry. Start by adding just one thing to your day – set aside time for breathing, or schedule in a lunchtime walk.

Bring awareness to the fact that you can choose to give power to worry – or you can choose to move.

### SO IF EXERCISE WAS A PILL FOR ANXIETY, HOW WOULD YOU TAKE IT?

Research recommends 30 minutes, 3 times, every week. An Accredited Exercise Physiologist can also help with strategies to achieve this.

For a quick fix, remember that just 10 minutes of walking in nature can lift your mood and decrease fatigue levels!

# How to exercise with your mental health at home

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Struggling to leave the house? That's okay too. There's a range of exercises you can do within your home that can help to keep you active or get started on your new exercise journey.

## USE YOUR BODY

Your body is THE best piece of workout equipment you could possibly need! Without even leaving your house, or needing any other fancy equipment, you can train practically every muscle group in your body effectively.

Start by completing however many that you can, as some exercise is better than nothing, and then slowly increase the intensity and challenge each time when you feel strong enough to.

As with any exercise, it is still important to ensure you're doing exercises correctly so not to cause any injury or strain to your joints. An accredited exercise professional can advise on correct movement.

Here are a few examples of body weight exercises anyone can do, at any time, all within your own home and room. However, we always suggest talking to a GP or an Accredited Exercise Physiologist first.

### 1. SQUAT JUMPS

They strengthen the entire body, and improve your flexibility. They're also a great move for getting your heart rate up!

### 2. WALKING LUNGES

To build strength in your legs, and improve your balance.

### 3. PUSH UPS

Targets upper body, shoulders and abs.

## USE 'STUFF' E.G. A STAIRCASE OR A STURDY CHAIR

- Incline Push Ups
- Step Ups
- Split Squat with foot Elevated

If you're not sure where to start, or if you're concerned about exercising or completing any movements, contact an Accredited Exercise Physiologist for advice.



## What is recommended?

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Here are some simple exercise recommendations, but speaking with an Accredited Exercise Physiologist can help determine and prescribe the right exercise plan for you and your mental health diagnosis, in conjunction with any other mental health treatments you're receiving.

- Aerobic exercise and weight lifting have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of mental conditions such as major depression but it's recommended trying a variety of different types of activities and choosing one that you enjoy the most.
- You don't have to join a gym – activities such as swimming, walking the dog, jogging whilst listening to music, riding a bike, gardening, bushwalking, yoga and weightlifting can all be beneficial to your mental health. Choose an activity you enjoy.
- Thirty minutes brisk walking a few times a week is a good general starting point, and can be built on from there. It's better to do something than nothing. Every little bit can help.
- Get an accountability buddy – this might be a friend, family member or health professional – someone to help keep you on track during the hard days.
- Make a clear plan – take the requirement of daily decision making out of the picture – the 'do I or don't I' – a clear plan makes going ahead with your plans that much easier.
- Get outside – being in nature has extra mood boosting properties. A research team from the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry found that outdoor exercise was associated with increased energy and revitalisation, as well as decreased confusion, anger, depression and tension, when compared with exercising indoors.
- Agree to 10 minutes as a minimum each time you've scheduled a workout. Even when you don't feel like it, if you at least do 10 minutes, you're keeping the habit going. Often getting started is the hardest part!

## What do our professionals have to say?

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### 5 ACCREDITED EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGISTS (AEPS) SHARE HOW AND WHY THEY EXERCISE FOR THEIR MENTAL HEALTH.

Playing roller derby and attending the gym helps keep me present in the moment rather than worrying about the things on my mind. It also gives me a mood boost to be around others and reminds me that I am strong and powerful and capable of getting through anything.

- Lauren Foote, AEP

It comes down to 'me' time. As health professionals, we are always looking after 'others' (plus family time, etc.). My preference is to exercise outdoors (as I work indoors!), particularly road cycling through the beautiful Adelaide hills, or mountain biking. My strength training then supports those pursuits.

- Max Martin, AEP

I exercise to keep my mind clear, focused, happy and motivated. I love the boosted feelings of success and strength it gives me. It also helps me sleep. I play netball, go to gym, pole dancing and love to hike and bush walk.

- Gemma Bird, AEP

I exercise to help keep my mind clear as well and stop worrying about things I can't control. Exercise is something I can always control: what I do, how much I do and how hard I push myself. I play 5-a-side soccer and touch football, and attend the gym.

- Eden MacNeil, AEP

I exercise for the meditative state my mind goes into when I start – whether it's strength or aerobic, as soon as I start, I feel an immediate sense of relief, control and empowerment from achieving activity goals.

- Jack Woods, AEP



## Things to remember

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- It's more beneficial to work with an appropriately educated exercise professional such as an Accredited Exercise Physiologist who understands the complexity of the challenges faced with mental health conditions, and has the skills and knowledge to help individuals manage their condition and any barriers they may come up against
- Higher doses of exercise may be more effective at improving mental illness but people may be less likely to stick to them. Something is better than nothing. As such, start slowly and build up gradually e.g. if you have not been exercising at all, start with a 10-15 minute walk each morning, and gradually increase this to 30 minutes per day.
- Set short-term realistic goals for exercising each week (e.g. 3 x 20 minute walks per week); plan to exercise at specific times of the day that fit in with your lifestyle and write your plan down.
- Remember that it can take time for the benefits of exercise to occur. Exercise studies have shown a significant reduction in some mental illnesses, such as depression, after eight weeks or more.
- The best time to exercise depends on when you have the most energy and motivation – whatever time works best for you. Once you find a time that works for you, try to stick to it. Not only will it become a habit (like brushing your teeth before bed), but studies show that once your body adjusts to exercising at a specific time each day, it will start to perform better at that time than any other time of the day.



## Need extra support?

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Speak with your GP. Your doctor is often a good place to start for most mental health conditions. GPs can provide you with a referral to see an Accredited Exercise Physiologist and may refer you to other services for mental health. You can also get in touch with these national help lines and websites:

### **BEYOND BLUE** 1300 224 636

Works to raise awareness of depression, anxiety and suicide prevention, reduce the stigma surrounding these issues and to encourage people to seek support when they need it.

### **BLACK DOG INSTITUTE**

Information on symptoms, treatment and prevention of depression and bipolar disorder.

### **BUTTERFLY NATIONAL HELPLINE** 1800 334 673 (1800 ED HOPE)

The service is available to people with eating disorders, their carers and loved ones, and any professionals who need some assistance in knowing what to do next with a patient (note: this is general advice and not formal clinical consultation).

### **CARERS AUSTRALIA** 1800 242 636

Short-term counselling and emotional and psychological support services for carers and their families in each state and territory.

### **HEADSPACE** 1800 650 890

Free online and telephone service that supports young people aged between 12 and 25 and their families going through a tough time.

### **KIDS HELPLINE** 1800 551 800

A free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

### **MENSLINE AUSTRALIA** 1300 789 978

A telephone and online support, information and referral service, helping men to deal with relationship problems in a practical and effective way.

### **HEAD TO HEALTH**

An innovative website that can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

### **MINDSPOT CLINIC** 1800 614 434

An online and telephone clinic providing free assessment and treatment services for Australian adults with anxiety or depression.

### **NATIONAL ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED HEALTH ORGANISATION (NACCHO)**

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and Aboriginal Medical Services in each state and territory.

### **RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA** 1300 364 277

A provider of relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.

### **SANE AUSTRALIA** 1800 18 7263

Information about mental illness, treatments, where to go for support and help carers.



**1800KINAWAY**