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Mental Health

and Physical Activity Toolkit

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 week 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.

The impact of getting active on mental health

Six benefits of exercise for mental health:

- 1. Improve sleep:** Taking part in regular moderate exercise can relieve tension leading to a restful night and improved sleep.
- 2. Lower risk of depression** by up to 30%.
- 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.

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.