

Mental Health Awareness Week 2024

Moving more for our mental health

June 2024



Introduction

Mental Health Awareness Week is a UK wide initiative, which took place between the 13th-19th May this year. The week aims to challenge stigma surrounding mental health and enable individuals to understand and focus on both their mental health and others' (Mental Health Foundation, 2024). This year, the theme is centred around the concept of movement and the benefits of physical activity to our mental health.

At Cordis Bright, we are committed to normalising talking about mental health in the workplace and creating a working environment where everyone can thrive. During our observance of Mental Health Awareness Week, team members shared their reflections on what movement means to them and their mental health. This revealed a wealth of hidden talent in activities including walking the dog, hiking, running, dancing, cycling, weightlifting, rowing, golf and rugby. While the chosen activity varied, everyone was agreed on the importance of getting outside, taking time for ourselves, and connecting with others. In one way or another, movement had helped all of us to get through challenging periods. We also ran social activities including a lunch time walk and yoga session to give us an opportunity to move together during the working day and reap the potential benefits on our mental health.

Our work often focuses on mental health too. We have delivered evaluations of programmes ranging from direct therapeutic interventions to public health initiatives intended to promote population wellbeing, including through promoting access to green space and physical activity. To read more about our work on mental health, please visit our website: <https://www.cordisbright.co.uk/our-sectors/mental-health>

This short blog post summarises the evidence relating to the link between mental health and physical activity, the social barriers that can exist to participation for some, and how these can be overcome.

How does movement impact our mental health?

Movement can have profound effects on our mental health and wellbeing. Research has shown that individuals report more positive mental health, happiness, and life satisfaction when they are more physically active (Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2018 in UK CMO PA guidelines, 2019; Sport England, 2021). Furthermore, it has also been shown to reduce the risk of stress, depression, and anxiety, whilst also improving self-esteem, mood, and quality of sleep (NHS Live Well, 2021).

What types of physical activity boost our mental health?

The UK government recommends that adults spend around 150 minutes a week doing moderate intensity activities or around 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity (UK CMO PA guidelines, 2019). However, movement does not have to be extensive to bring about benefits to our mental health, with research highlighting that as little as 15 minutes is enough to positively impact our wellbeing (Asics, 2024).

The British Medical Journal (2023) found walking, jogging, yoga, and strength training as the most effective forms of exercise for managing depression, with the latter two forms considered the most acceptable and easiest to follow. However, being physically active could mean anything as simple as walking more, going shopping, cleaning the house, or even gardening.



What is the importance of social determinants of mental health and movement?

Social determinants are defined as non-medical factors which impact health and mental health outcomes; these include the conditions people are born, grow, work, live, and age in, as well as the wider set of forces and systems that shape our daily lives. Social determinants have been shown to be potentially more important than healthcare or lifestyle choices in influencing health, accounting for around 30-50% of health outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2024).

As such, social determinants can impact our ability and opportunities to move and participate in physical activity. In their Active Lives Adult Survey, Sport England (2024) reported that socioeconomic status has a substantial influence on movement levels, with those of lower affluence significantly less active than other socioeconomic groups. This could be due to living in an environment without access to green space, for example, where opportunities for outdoor exercise are more limited, particularly for individuals who might struggle to afford a gym membership or similar.

How can we overcome barriers to engaging in physical activity?

Common barriers to physical activity

The benefits of physical activity are often focused on physiological benefits, which may result in individuals feeling pressured to be active, rather than focusing on the way movement can make us feel and the encompassing mental health benefits.

The most common barriers to engaging in physical activity typically include:



Overcoming barriers to physical activity

Try to identify five top tips for moving when it doesn't feel easy:

- Explore what movement means to you
- Find what feels right
- Celebrate your achievements
- Don't forget the daily moves
- Be kind to yourself

Trying new activities with friends, family or colleagues can help overcome low self-motivation. Similarly, taking away any external pressures and building in small SMART (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Timely) goals can help one work towards small wins. If one activity doesn't feel enjoyable, try something new. If you don't fancy a social activity, try listening to an audiobook or podcast at the same time.

Many staff members at Cordis Bright have touched on their personal experience with movement and physical activity, highlighting how this changes during different parts of your life. For some people, poor engagement in typical sport at school has been turned around into finding a passion and love for alternative types of movement later in life.

More information on overcoming specific barriers to physical activity can be found on the CDC website here: <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-basics/overcoming-barriers/index.html>.

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