

Increasing Physical Activity in Psychological Treatment

An evaluation of the impact
on treatment outcomes for
anxiety and depression

Summary



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Cite as: National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health. Increasing Physical Activity in Psychological Treatment: An Evaluation of the Impact on Outcomes of Treatment for Anxiety and Depression. Report. London: National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2024.



Executive summary

Aims and methods of the evaluation

The primary aim of this evaluation was to assess whether incorporating a physical activity component into psychological treatments in NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression services improved mental health outcomes for people with depression or anxiety disorders, including those with long-term physical health conditions (LTCs).



The evaluation also assessed:

- the experience of staff and service users while engaging with the physical activity interventions
- different delivery models of physical activity and their association with different levels of (1) feasibility and acceptability of and (2) engagement in physical activity.

The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

It should be noted that some of the interventions were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have had an impact on their delivery and effectiveness.



Key findings

The evaluation demonstrates that incorporating physical activity into psychological treatments is feasible and can contribute to positive effects on mental health outcomes in NHS Talking Therapies services.



The key findings were:

- Psychological treatments that incorporate physical activity had a positive impact on depression and anxiety disorder symptoms using NHS Talking Therapies' recommended outcome measures^a and metrics.^b These symptom changes were in line with changes seen in similar populations in the services.
- After the interventions, most people said they had become more physically active.
- Staff engaged with the physical activity interventions, and were supportive of and saw value in them. Staff said they were open to working in new ways, and that these factors helped them implement the interventions.

Other findings

- A range of physical activities were engaged in by participants in the study, typically supported by:
 - increasing activity incrementally
 - integrating it into their routines
 - adapting it based on their condition and need.
- Physical activities that took place outdoors were particularly valued.
- Staff valued physical activities and believed that it was possible to integrate them into routine clinical practice.
- There were challenges with the measures of physical activity used, which participants found difficult to comprehend and complete.
- When developing physical activity interventions, the nature of the individual's mental health problems and the presence of LTCs may have an impact on the type and timing of the delivery of such interventions.

a The nine-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and seven-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7).

b Recovery, reliable recovery and reliable improvement.

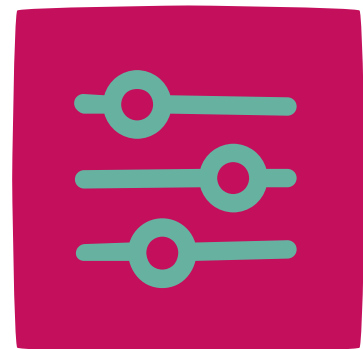


Recommendations

Delivery of physical activity interventions

Level and type of physical activity

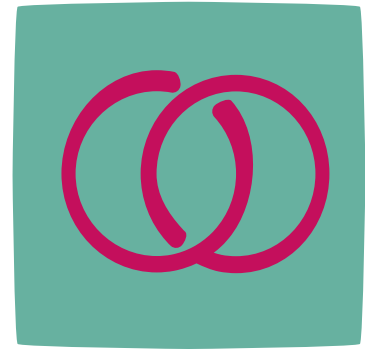
1. At assessment, ascertain a person's current physical activity level and explore whether they would be interested in incorporating physical activity into their psychological treatment.
2. Ensure that physical activities are within people's capabilities:
 - a. Offer a range of physical activity options that include lower-intensity activities (such as walking and strenuous household tasks) and higher-intensity activities (such as jogging, swimming, cycling, aerobics and weights)
 - b. If people have previously had positive experiences of certain types of physical activity, encourage them to engage with those again
 - c. Ensure that the types of activity incorporated into psychological treatment are:
 - ▷ appropriate (so that people can engage with them within the available time and space), and
 - ▷ accessible (so that people are physically able to engage with them, and the activity is adapted to meet their needs, including any LTC) for the needs and requirements of all participants.





Supporting uptake of and engagement with physical activity

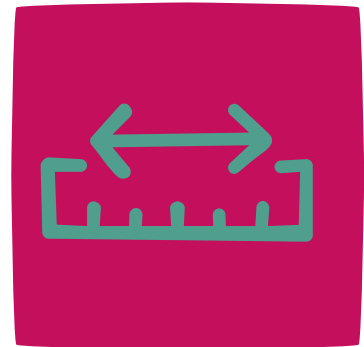
3. Ensure that there are opportunities for individuals to be physically active, and:
 - a. Consider the environment (for example, in the home, in a gym or outdoors), so that individuals feel comfortable engaging with and sustaining the physical activity
 - b. Identify and develop solutions to overcome barriers to engaging with physical activity, and consider:
 - ▶ incorporating physical activity into daily routines, for example walking to work or taking the stairs instead of an escalator
 - ▶ starting with small amounts of physical activity and increasing gradually in a way that feels achievable, enables engagement in the activity and manages symptoms (called 'pacing').
 - c. Encourage people to embed socialising into physical activity, such as meeting up with friends, to increase motivation.
 - d. Create opportunities for being active in groups, such as walking groups.





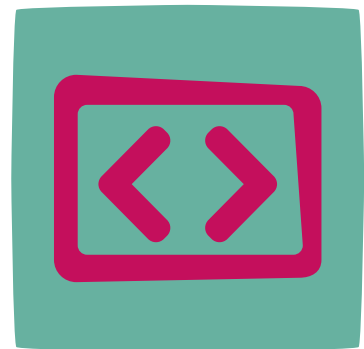
Measures of physical activity

4. When using a self-report measure of physical activity, ensure that:
 - a. it is inclusive of the variety of activities and length of time spent engaging with physical activity
 - b. it is simple to comprehend and complete
 - c. adaptations are made where appropriate.
5. NHS England should consider establishing a routine outcome measure of physical activity that would be of value across a range of healthcare settings. The measure would determine whether physical activity is part of a treatment plan and whether that part of the plan is adhered to.
6. Consider the use of accelerometers in future research studies so that physical activity can be monitored and recorded more accurately.



Embedding the interventions in services

7. NHS Talking Therapies services should provide training to staff about incorporating physical activity interventions into psychological treatment to support the embedding of physical activity interventions in the services.
See Incorporating Physical Activity Interventions into NHS Talking Therapies: A Toolkit ([Annex B](#)) for advice about how this can be achieved.





Future research recommendations

8. Evaluations are needed to ascertain whether incorporating physical activity into NHS Talking Therapies psychological treatment has more impact on improving clinical outcomes and physical activity levels for mild-to-moderate presentations than for moderate-to-severe presentations.
9. Further studies, including randomised controlled trials (RCTs), of psychological treatments that incorporate physical activity should:
 - a. include measures of long-term effects and cost effectiveness
 - b. evaluate how different methods for the delivery of psychological therapies that incorporate physical activity (such as Walk and Talk; see [Annex B](#) for a description of this intervention) impact on mental health outcomes and physical activity levels
 - c. focus on the impact of physical activity on anxiety disorders, such as generalised anxiety disorders (GAD) or the anxiety associated with comorbid LTCs, as research in this area is less well developed than for depression.
10. An RCT should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of physical activity interventions incorporated into a psychological treatment provided in NHS Talking Therapies services. The groups should:
 - a. be randomly allocated to either psychological treatment that incorporates physical activity or psychological treatment alone
 - b. provide the same psychological treatment for both groups.
11. Research is needed to establish a simple validated measure of physical activity, that is inclusive of a range of physical activities, carried out in a variety of settings over different lengths of time. This measure should be easy to comprehend and fill in.





12. Further research is needed to identify:

- a. what kind of physical activity intervention might be of most benefit for specific presentations (for example, psychological treatments that incorporate physical activity or physical activity interventions as an adjunct to another treatment)
- b. at what point in a person's treatment pathway it would be most beneficial to introduce or suggest an intervention that incorporates physical activity.

The full report and associated documents can be found here:

www.sportengland.org/NHSTI



