



Mental health and swimming

This fact sheet is full of information, tips and advice about how you can help an individual participate in swimming and other disciplines, if they experience mental health problems.

What is mental health?

Just as we have physical health, we all have mental health too. Mind defines good mental health as being generally able to think, feel and react in the ways that you need and want to live your life. But if you go through a period of poor mental health you might find the ways you're frequently thinking, feeling or reacting become difficult, or even impossible to cope with. This can feel just as bad as a physical illness, or even worse.

Approximately one in four people will experience a mental health problem in any given year. Common mental health problems include depression and anxiety, while less common problems include schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Mental health problems can affect anyone and can have a wide range of causes that can be complex and interrelated. It's likely many people experience a combination of causes – although some people may be more deeply affected by certain factors than others.

What swimmers need to know about mental health problems

- Being active can have a positive impact on mental health including: improving mood, increasing self-esteem, lowers the risk of depression, slows dementia and cognitive decline, improves sleep and reduces stress.
- Swimming has helped to reduce the symptoms of anxiety or depression for 1.4 million adults in Britain. Almost half a million British adults with mental health problems have stated swimming has helped to reduce the number of visits to a medical professional regarding their mental health.
- Swimming and being in water can help with relaxation.

Tips for supporting swimmers

Do:

- start off small and build up their swimming levels at a pace that works for them, even small amounts of swimming can give them a natural energy boost
- encourage them to attend with someone they trust to help them get started. Swimming pools should allow them to attend with a friend or support worker for the first few sessions while they get used to the new surroundings
- look for groups of like-minded people, some swimming pools will have sessions aimed at people with mental health problems.

"I'm embarrassed about my body and don't feel comfortable wearing swimwear":

- try to reassure them that they are not alone and everyone has to start somewhere, many people share similar anxieties about their bodies
- they could look for women or men only sessions, which may help to support people who feel uncomfortable about attending mixed-gender sessions
- there are a wide range of swim t-shirts, wetsuits and cover ups now available to help people to access swimming comfortably
- allow participants to take their towels or bathrobes poolside.

Remember:

- if they experience **anxiety or panic attacks** they might find that swimming can cause some sensations which may feel like they are having a panic attack, such as being unable to catch their breath or breathlessness, raised heart rate, feeling shaky or dizzy
- starting off slowly may help them to spot the difference between the physical effects of swimming and those of a panic attack, if they do experience a panic attack, try to exit the pool and find a quiet space to recover or remain in the shallow end of the pool
- when swimming, it's also easy to hyperventilate as water may be colder than they expect so best for them to test it out by dipping their toe in and climbing into the pool gradually.

- to encourage them to take deep, slow breaths when they take a break or after a set number of laps/lengths to help reduce the likelihood of them starting to hyperventilate.

Avoid:

- triggering situations, for example, if they want to avoid crowds they may want to go swimming at a quiet time (e.g. early morning, during the day, or late evening)
- excessive swimming especially if it is taking over their life. If they feel anxious when they miss a session or if swimming is becoming more important than work, family or friends, they may be developing an unhealthy relationship with physical activity and potentially an exercise addiction. Mind have developed a guide to help physical activity providers support people who may be experiencing an exercise addiction.

Medication:

- can also have implications for the type and level of swimming it may be safe for them to do. They can always check with their GP or psychiatrist what level of swimming is safe for them, especially if they experience **side effects**
- can also cause dehydration and this can be exacerbated when swimming. People can continue to sweat and lose fluids when they're in water so include breaks in sessions and remind them to stay hydrated.

Tips for coaches, clubs and operators

- Remove uncertainty by providing clear information on websites and promotional materials so people know what to expect when they arrive. For example, if changing rooms are in a changing village or gender specific, or if there is a requirement for lockers (e.g. £1 coins required and whether they get this back).
- Provide a friendly and welcoming environment by increasing staff's mental health knowledge and confidence through training.
- Ensure that clear signage is in place, directing to the changing area, toilets, showers, pool and back again.
- Use structured and timetabled sessions and keep changes to a minimum where possible.
- Consider delivering wellbeing swimming sessions during quieter periods. For example, some pools might offer relaxation swimming sessions where they play gentle music and make use of soft lighting to create a more tranquil atmosphere.
- Programmes and sessions should focus on increasing the motivation of participants by helping create feelings of autonomy – wanting to be active because they enjoy it rather than because they feel pressured into it.
- Deliver group sessions which promote connection with others, creating an empathic and welcoming environment. Where possible, sessions should be peer led and designed and/or delivered by people with lived experience of mental health problems. Mind has guidance on involving people with lived experience in physical activity.
- Encourage social elements both within the session through working in pairs and small groups and afterwards by encouraging people to talk over a hot drink.
- Operators should consider completing the **Quest GPLUS37 Module** - Engaging with Disabled People and People with Long Term Health Conditions (incl. IFI Mark Accreditation) to better understand audiences.

Additional advice

For more information about mental health, please visit the following websites.

Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity+ eLearning: ukcoaching.org/courses/elearning-courses/mental-health-awareness-for-sport-plus

Mind's Mental Health and Physical Activity Toolkit: mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/sport-physical-activity-and-mental-health/resources/mental-health-and-physical-activity-toolkit/

Mind's information on helping someone else seek help for a mental health problem: mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/helping-someone-else-seek-help

Mind's A-Z on mental health: mind.org.uk/information-support/a-z-mental-health/

Find a local Mind service: mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds/

Mind have developed a guide to help physical activity providers support people who may be experiencing an exercise addiction: mind.org.uk/media/11958/maintaining-a-healthy-relationship-with-physical-activity-spa.pdf

Mind has guidance on involving people with lived experience in physical activity: mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/sport-physical-activity-and-mental-health/resources/mental-health-and-physical-activity-toolkit/guide-3-involving-people-with-lived-experience-of-mental-health-problems-in-the-design-and-delivery-of-your-work/

Study says swimming benefits mental health: swimming.org/swimengland/new-study-says-swimming-benefits-mental-health/