

Content warning – the following resource covers elements of when physical activity can become unhealthy. We will be touching on topics including eating problems and over-exercise/exercise addiction. If you find any of the content triggering, we encourage you to reach out to Mind's Infoline on **0300 123 3393** or Samaritans on **116 123** for immediate support if you need it or see mind.org.uk for further information.



What to do when your relationship with physical activity is becoming unhealthy

Spotting the signs and where to get support

We know physical activity can be an amazing way to support our mental health and help us feel good. But it isn't helpful for everyone all the time, and can lead to problems for some of us.

Anyone can develop an unhealthy relationship with exercise. This may be more likely if you have certain types of mental health problems. Some people use exercise to cope with day-to-day life or manage difficult emotions. This may make it harder to recognise when we need support with how we're feeling.

What is over-exercising?

Over-exercising can mean exercising for too long or too intensely without enough rest for your personal limits.

What is exercise addiction?

Some of us may feel unable to stop, or not in control of how much we exercise. This is sometimes called exercise addiction.

Quick facts

**Over
a third**

of people (38%)
say they take part in
physical activity, sport
or exercise as a way
to manage difficult
feelings or emotions.¹

**One
in six**

people (18%) take
part in physical
activity, sport or
exercise when they
are unwell or injured.¹

Around
2 in 5

people (39%)
say they feel guilty
when they miss a
session of physical
activity, sport
or exercise.¹

7 signs of an unhealthy relationship with physical activity:*

1

**You can't stop
exercising without feeling
worried or distressed**

5

**You're making
excuses to
be active**

2

**Exercise is
affecting your job
or relationships**

6

**You no longer enjoy
exercise, or it has started
to feel like a chore**

3

**You don't take breaks
when feeling tired,
injured or unwell**

7

**You feel that physical
activity is the most
important thing in your life
and defines who you are**

4

**You're exercising
hard every day, or
several times a day**

*Physical activity is personal, so experiences of an unhealthy relationship may differ. As a result, people may showcase different signs to the ones listed here.

¹ Yonder (formerly Populus) were commissioned by Mind to conduct an online sample of 2089 UK adults 18+ between 26th and 27th April 2021. Data is weighted to be representative of the population of Great Britain. Targets for quotas and weights are taken from the PAMCO survey, a random probability F2F survey conducted annually with 35,000 adults. Yonder is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. For further information see www.britishpollingcouncil.org/

How to improve your relationship with physical activity

Take rest days. Rest can help your body and mind to recover

You could check in with yourself with a [body scan](#) or massage or look to engage in a new hobby such as reading, meditation or photography. Rest is personal, some of us may find it difficult to start with. You may start with active rest (light or easy activity where you're still moving - but not at a high intensity).

Switch up your routine

Mix up your routine with low impact exercise such as walking, yoga or stretching – any activity that doesn't work your muscles too hard.

Connect with others or try something new

Try to connect with others outside of physical activity. Try activities or hobbies that allow you to have a rest from your normal routine – choose something that helps you feel good.

Be kind to yourself

Look to take part in physical activity because you enjoy it. Be kind to yourself. Not every day will lead to a personal best, and that's OK.

Be mindful of your routine

Aim for a balance and be mindful of the exercise you do – it might help to keep an activity diary to ensure you're getting the right mix.

Need some support?

Speak to someone you trust about how you're feeling. That could be a friend, family member, coach, instructor or a service such as Mind's Infoline – **0300 123 3393**

Resources that may help:

- [Information on the relationship between physical activity and mental health.](#) This includes guidance on developing a healthy relationship with physical activity, signs, symptoms and signposting to support.
- Mind's information on [seeking help for a mental health problem.](#)
- Mind's information on [physical activity and mental health.](#)