

In partnership with:



'Return to play'

Mental health guidance to
support the return of sport
& physical activity



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Introduction

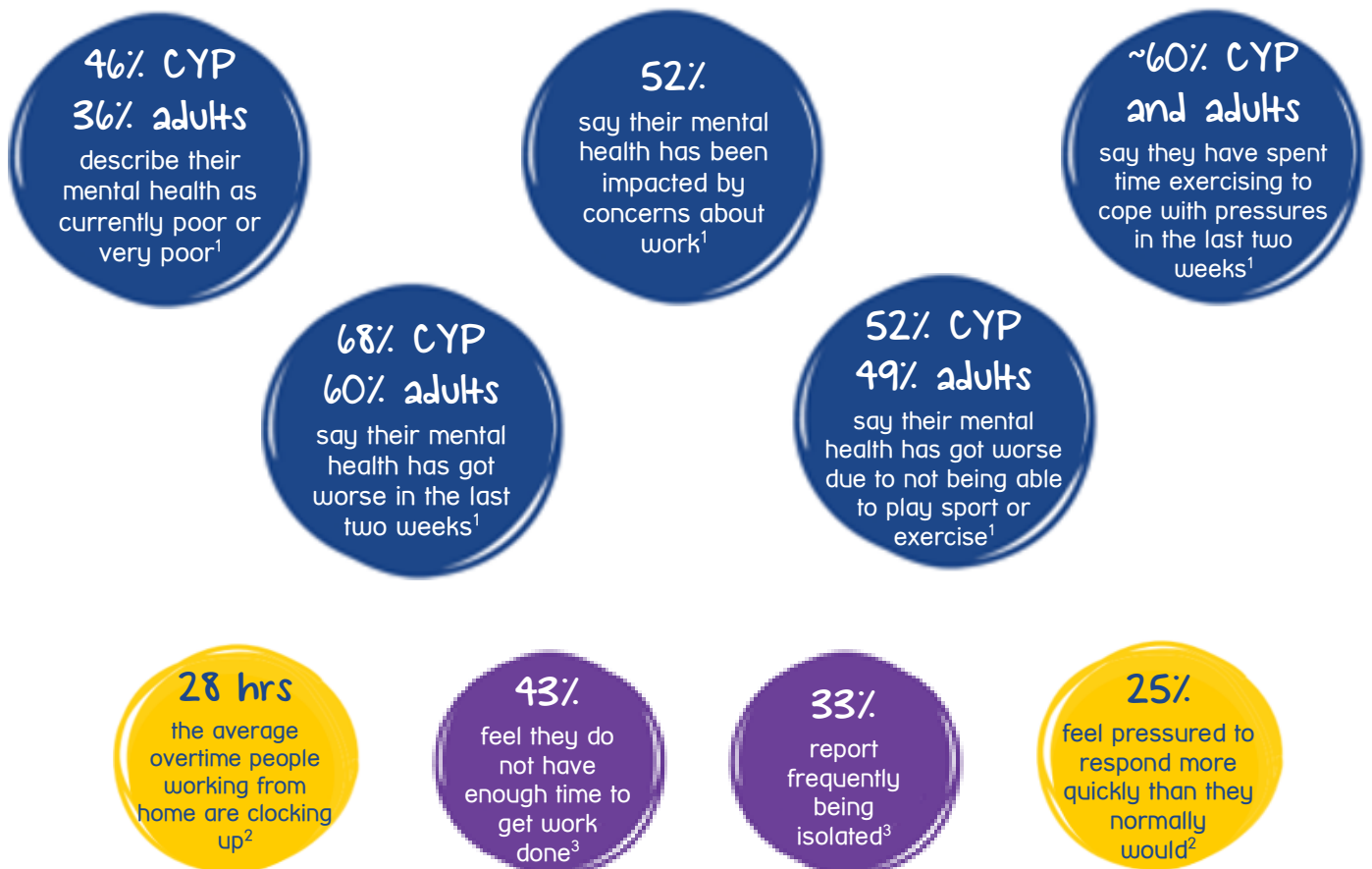
About this guide

This guide aims to equip the sport and physical activity sector with the tools and information required to support the mental health of staff, coaches, volunteers and participants as we 'return to play'.

This guide is aimed at organisations, clubs and groups that wish to provide the very best experience for their workforce and participants as lockdown restrictions are eased and sport and physical activity returns. It includes guidance, good practice, tools and insight to help the sector to provide an environment that supports the mental health of the people working, volunteering and participating in sport and physical activity.

Impact of COVID-19 on mental health

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has and continues to have a huge impact on our mental health. Below are findings of several surveys hosted during the last few months.



1 Mind Coronavirus Survey (2020) (unpublished)

2 LinkedIn and Mental Health Foundation Research (2020)

3 IES Working at home survey – Interim findings (2020)

Impact of COVID-19 on the sport and physical activity sector

Although exercise was one of the four reasons why people could leave their home during the first stages of lockdown, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the sector. It has resulted in:

- The temporary closure of all sport, fitness and exercise facilities
- Significant financial implications for organisations, businesses and the sector's workforce (particularly those who are self-employed)
- Furloughing of a high percentage of the sector's workforce and some being made redundant
- The majority of the remaining workforce have been working from home which has led to some feeling isolated, working long hours and an 'always on' working culture
- The sector's workforce juggling commitments such as caring responsibilities and childcare
- Moving activities and sessions on to virtual platforms
- Limited interactions with colleagues, members, customers and clients
- All business operations being conducted virtually
- Uncertainty and anxiety around what the future may hold for the sector and the organisations and workforce within it. This includes potential drops in membership and participation numbers
- Adapting to new ways of working and ever-changing priorities.

When I can't leave the house, access my medication or even food and both my mental and physical health has been suffering; getting active is the last thing on my mind.

The general public have been more conscious of being active to support their mental health during lockdown whereas people with existing mental health problems have found it harder to be active at this time, impacting negatively on their mental health.

- Sport England data showed that across the first six weeks of lockdown, an average of 63% of people said they were keeping active to manage their mental health¹.
- UCL's COVID-19 Social Study shows that people with existing mental health problems have been less active during this time and this has contributed negatively to their mental health².

1 Sport England (2020) – www.sportengland.org/news/surge-appreciation-exercise-and-activity-during-lockdown

2 UCL (2020) - https://b6bdcb03-332c-4ff9-8b9d-28f9c957493a.filesusr.com/ugd/3d9db5_9dec89d6b9c24e45819db478998dc3af.pdf

Supporting yourself

It has never been more important to look after your mental health and wellbeing. One of the most widely used frameworks to help you do this is the New Economic Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing. It is a set of evidence-based actions that promote wellbeing. Think of it as your five a day for mental health.

Five ways to wellbeing

Connect

- Talk to a friend or family member on the phone.
- Write a letter or a note to a neighbour.
- Take part in an activity with a friend whilst on the phone such as a walk around your own gardens or a quiz.



Learn

- Rekindle an old hobby or learn a new one.
- You could read a book, play an instrument, get crafty or research something you've always wondered about.



Be active

- Move more during the day.
- Try to sit less, dance, stretch or walk around the house.
- If you have a garden or can get outside, take a walk in the fresh air.



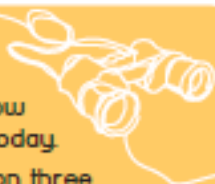
Give

- Pay a compliment to a friend, family member or neighbour. Here are a few of our favourites:
 - "You are supportive"
 - "You are considerate"
 - "You are patient"
 - "You are friendly"
- Draw a rainbow and place it in your window for people walking past.
- Encourage someone else to get active using the tips you have learnt.



Take notice

- Take notice of how you are feeling today.
- Each day focus on three things you are thankful for.



Supporting your workforce

For this section, we use the terms workforce and staff to represent employees, coaches and volunteers including those who are self-employed.

We have all gone through a massive adjustment period during lockdown whether it be working from home, being furloughed or still going into work. This has impacted everyone's mental health and wellbeing.

This section will look at how you can support your workforce who are: 1) returning to work, 2) working from home, and 3) furloughed.

Supporting those who are returning to work

As lockdown begins to ease, facilities and clubs will soon be restarting their activities. This means some of the sector's workforce will be returning to their place of work (e.g. offices, facilities, clubs).

Some staff may be excited to return whilst some may be feeling anxious. It's different for each of us. However, early evidence shows that many staff will be returning with impacted mental health.

Employers have a duty of care to identify and manage risks to ensure your workplace is sufficiently safe to return to.

To provide a safe environment for your workforce you will need to comply with the **Government's Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance**.

To help you with this, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have developed a **COVID-19: returning to the workplace guide**.

Before they return...

1. Inform your workforce when you are planning to bring back furloughed staff

Although there is no legal minimum length, we suggest providing as much notice as possible. This is particularly important for those who need to arrange cover for carer or childcare responsibilities.

2. Line managers should organise a call with each member of staff prior to them restarting

The line manager should:

- Discuss concerns the individual may have including their commute, health and competing responsibilities (e.g. carer or childcare). Everyone's situation is unique so it is important staff are able to ask questions and voice their concerns. These need to be taken into account to reduce anxiety and ensure staff feel supported by their employer
- Ask if the individual requires any reasonable adjustments to return to work. Wellness Action Plans (see [page 18](#)) can help line managers with this. They are a great tool to ease the return to work process for staff as it can capture anything that may impact an individual's mental health and what reasonable adjustments they might need. Reasonable adjustments may include:
 - Flexible working – working from home if their role allows or using a hybrid approach of working from home the days they aren't required in the workplace
 - Changes to their working hours – avoiding peak hours if they need to use transport and flexibility for carer or childcare responsibilities
 - Time off at short notice – for health reasons and/or carer or childcare responsibilities
 - Phased return to work – gradually building up their hours to help their return to work
 - Change in job responsibilities or location – moving those who are vulnerable to positions of reduced risk (e.g. moving to back office function instead of a reception desk function)
- Highlight the adaptations and policies that have been put in place to provide a safe environment to work in (e.g. hygiene, cleaning and PPE). Some facilities are looking to do this via walkthrough videos (see good practice examples on [page 9](#))
- Run through changes in company services and procedures, how customer queries and issues will be addressed, and any agreed changes to work duties or tasks
- Ask staff for feedback and encourage them to share their ideas

- Give an overview of what their first day and weeks will look like
- Based on the conversation and adjustments identified, ask if the individual is happy to return to work. If they're not, then ask what else you could do to help them with the process.

3. Notify staff of all changes

All staff should receive updates to policies, working practices and their job role in writing before returning to work.

Upon their return...

1. Run a re-orientation or re-induction process

This should cover the adaptations and policies that have been put in place to provide a safe environment to work in as well as changes to company services and procedures.

2. Allow staff time to settle back in and adjust

Many of your workforce will be returning after not working for a significant amount of time. It is important you allow them time to settle back in, answer their questions and check-in regularly. Wellness Action Plans (see [page 18](#)) can help with this process as they can identify if a staff member is finding the re-adjustment difficult and what reasonable adjustments they might need (see [page 7](#)).

3. Have clear communication and dialogue with returning staff

This includes:

- Staff check-ins where the focus should be on health, safety and wellbeing.
- Ensure line managers are aware of the resources available to support your workforce (see [page 17](#)). In addition, it is important line managers feel confident and able to have conversations with staff around mental health (see [page 20](#))
- Communicating measures being introduced to manage the ongoing situation
- Reassure staff that their health, well-being and safety is your top priority

3. Review how your workforce are responding to returning to work

You could ask for their feedback and input during check-ins, team meetings and/or via anonymised surveys.

Every member of your workforce is different and won't respond to returning to work in the same way. You need to be flexible in your approach and have clear and regular communication with each member of staff to understand their needs.

Good practice examples – returning to work

Video walkthroughs so employers can demonstrate the changes (e.g. physical such as one-way access, hygiene, cleaning and PPE) they have made to ensure the workplace is a safe environment for the return of staff. These videos are also useful for when participants return (see good practice on [page 16](#)).

Holding return to work inductions for all staff a week before facilities open. This is to get everyone back as a team to walk through the facilities to highlight what changes have been made and answer any questions or concerns.



Supporting those who are working from home

It's likely that many of us will be working from home for the foreseeable future and as a result, the usual support we access in our workplaces may not be there for us. This new way of working may lead to staff feeling anxious, isolated and disconnected. Therefore, organisations need to look at how they can support their staff's mental health remotely.

Top tips – working from home

1. Have regular virtual check-ins with individuals and as a team

Find a tool that works for your team (e.g. Microsoft teams, Skype, Zoom or by phone). Make sure these individual and team check-ins are scheduled in advance. You could use a 'working from home Wellness Action Plan' to help you with individual check-ins (see [page 18](#)).

2. Encourage work/life balance and routine

Support clear boundaries for the working day and implement a structured routine (in and out of work). Support healthy habits by encouraging your staff to define their working day in their calendars, set reminders for the end of the day and to take at least a 30-minute lunch break. Lead by example and ensure you role model appropriate behaviours by not responding to emails or notifications late at night.

3. Provide flexibility for staff with carer and childcare responsibilities

Allow interruptions during the working day and be understanding by scheduling calls when staff can join.

4. Establish new ways of working

Be clear, open and honest about the changes being made, whilst acknowledging that some new ways of working may be trial and error. Promote two-way dialogue and ensure staff are able to provide feedback and escalate concerns or issues.

5. Promote support tools for staff (e.g. Employee Assistance Programme)

Whatever wellbeing support your organisation has available, make sure your staff know about it and how to access it. See [page 17](#) for information on support for your staff.

6. Create moments for social connection

Consider the opportunities available for your staff to connect socially (see good practice examples on [page 11](#)).

Every member of your workforce is different and won't respond to working from home in the same way. You need to be flexible in your approach and have clear and regular communication with each member of staff to understand their needs.

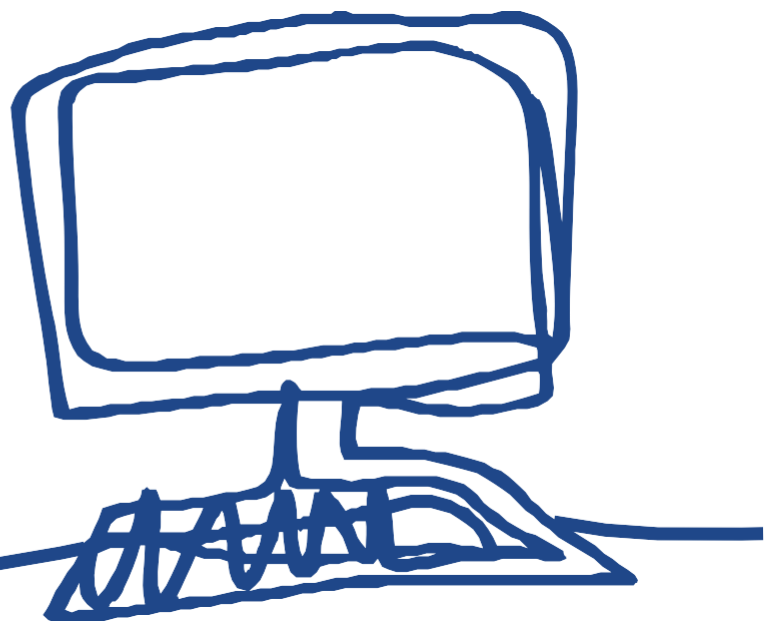
Good practice examples – working from home

Mental Health Champions and Mental Health First Aiders providing guidance and support on how staff can look after their mental health and wellbeing whilst working from home.

Line managers taking part in training to increase their knowledge and confidence in supporting staff remotely.

Hosting virtual social sessions that are available for staff and their families. These tend to work best around lunchtime or at the end of the working day (e.g. at 4pm).

Conducting staff surveys to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown on the wellbeing of your workforce as well as a channel for staff to raise concerns and provide feedback.



Supporting those who are on furlough

The coronavirus outbreak has forced many organisations to furlough staff. This may help organisations financially and staff with caring and/or childcare responsibilities, but it can also impact your workforce's mental health. Furlough can result in staff feeling:

- Worried about the implications it will have on their job when they return
- Guilty that other colleagues are picking up their work
- Isolated or lonely particularly if they live on their own
- A lack of purpose or motivation as well as reduced self-worth.

Top tips – furloughed staff

1. Communicate clearly, regularly and with transparency

Line managers should offer regular check-ins with furloughed staff, at a time and frequency that suits the staff member (e.g. once a fortnight), with a focus on their health and wellbeing. Wellness Action Plans can help with this process (see [page 18](#)).

Communicate organisational updates including developments around furlough. Staff may ask for these to be sent to their personal email addresses. In addition, it is important line managers feel confident and able to have conversations with staff around mental health (see [page 20](#)).

2. Help staff to stay connected

Hold informal sessions to bring people together over digital platforms to facilitate social connection (see good practice example on [page 13](#)). Encourage those still working to maintain regular contact with furloughed workers, wherever possible.

3. Signpost to mental health support

If you have an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), remind employees that they will still have access to this while they are furloughed and encourage them to use it (see [page 19](#)). Promote other services, internally and externally, that they can access (see [page 17](#)).

4. Promote ways staff can look after their mental health and wellbeing

Five Ways to Wellbeing is a popular evidence-based wellbeing framework that may be useful for your staff (see [page 5](#)). Many people have found furlough leave a good opportunity to learn something new; there are free courses available online from the [Open University](#) and [Edx](#).

**Plan ahead for furloughed staff returning to work.
See supporting those who are returning to work on page 6.**

Every member of your workforce is different and won't respond to being furloughed in the same way. You need to be flexible in your approach and have clear and regular communication with each member of furloughed staff to understand their needs.

Good practice examples – furloughed staff

Inviting furloughed staff to join all staff briefing so they are aware of organisational developments.

Inviting furloughed staff to feedback and input into the organisation's support offer during check-ins and/or via anonymous surveys.

Mental Health Champions and Mental Health First Aiders providing virtual support to furloughed staff.



Supporting your participants

For this section, we use the term participants to represent participants, players, customers and members.

As lockdown restrictions start to ease and facilities begin to open, participants may have mixed feelings about 'returning to play'. Some may be excited to get back and re-establish routines and friendships whilst others could be feeling anxious about how they can take part safely. This section highlights top tips and good practice sport and physical activity providers can implement to help reduce these anxieties to ensure everyone, including those with mental health problems, have a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment to be active in.

I will be happy to be able to join the [running] group and see everyone. It will be good to get back to some routine and work together towards a goal.

I have many mixed feelings. Deep down I think the powers that be are rushing it all through too soon.

I've been feeling nervous about it [getting back to group activity].

Top tips – participants

1. Promote the positives of returning to play to your participants in a reassuring, unpressured and non-judgemental way

Remember some people are excited to get back to physical activity whilst others are anxious and facing additional barriers.

2. Involve participants in discussions and solutions to reopening your facilities and/or activities

It is extremely important to get participant feedback and input to understand how you can support them effectively to 'return to play' (this is referred to as a co-design or co-produced approach). It will be particularly useful to speak to participants who are anxious about returning to understand what measures you can put in place to reduce their anxieties.

3. Communicate the measures you have taken to make your facilities and/or activities safe for participants

This includes changes to hygiene (e.g. cleaning and the availability of sanitiser), practical (e.g. one-way systems) and logistical (e.g. reduced session size, taking bookings online and over the phone).

Video tours are an effective way to showcase the changes made (see good practice examples on [page 16](#)). It is important to communicate these measures via a range of online and offline channels including your website, social media and direct correspondence (e.g. personalised text messages or phone calls).

4. Provide the opportunity for participants to ask questions and raise concerns

To make this as easy as possible, have a designated role or named contact participants can contact before reopening, at the start of activities and for the first few weeks and months. This will help to reduce anxieties participants may be experiencing and ensure you recognise how to provide a welcoming experience for everyone.

5. Provide both face-to-face and digital offers to your members where possible

Participants who are shielding or those who are anxious to return may need more time before they start attending facilities and/or activities. By continuing to offer a flexible approach, you will engage more participants.

6. Encourage participants to attend with a friend, family member or support worker

Some participants may require supporters who are within their rights to attend and be within social distancing guidelines.

7. Provide a friendly welcome

The social distancing guidelines can feel quite clinical and scary. Remember the importance of a friendly, warm welcome. Where possible build in time for social connection (safely) remembering we need to be socially distant not emotionally distant.

8. Offer welcome back sessions (free or reduced)

Provide graded/phased return to sessions focussing on wider wellbeing benefits and lifestyle advice such as nutrition. Manage the participant's expectations about their abilities especially if they haven't done the activity for a long time.

9. Provide quiet area

Returning to activity may be overwhelming for some so a quiet space where participants can take some time for themselves can be invaluable.

10. Be flexible

Every participant is different and won't respond to 'returning to play' in the same way. You need to be flexible in your approach and provide the opportunity for participants to input, feedback and raise concerns.

Signpost participants to mental health support if they need it.
See helplines on page 13.

Good practice examples – participants

Leisure operators are looking to conduct virtual tours or video walkthroughs to highlight the changes and measures (e.g. hygiene, practical and logistical) they have put in place to ensure it is a safe environment to 'return to play'. You could use the same videos for staff returning to work (see good practice examples on page 9).

Activity providers are running re-orientation or re-induction sessions for staff so they can provide support for participants when they return (see page 8). In addition, it is important staff feel confident and able to have conversations with participants around mental health (see page 20).



Support available

There is an extensive range of tools and services you can access to support your staff and participants as we 'return to play'.

Support	Support around...			
	Returning staff	Staff working from home	Furloughed staff	Participants
Wellness Action Plans (WAP)	X	X	X	
Working from home WAP		X	X	
Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity eLearning	X	X	X	X
Mind's Coronavirus and your mental health information hub	X	X	X	X
Mind's Workplace Wellbeing courses	X	X		
Mental health for small workplaces free eLearning	X	X		
Mind's Workplace Wellbeing wider support	X	X	X	
Employees Assistance Programme	X	X	X	
Mind's Sport, Physical Activity and Mental Health Regional Networks	X	X	X	X
Mind's bereavement guidance	X	X	X	X
Helplines	X	X	X	X
How to have conversations around mental health guidance	X	X	X	X

Wellness Action Plans

Are an easy, practical way of helping you to support your own mental health at work, and helping you to support the mental health of your team members.

Everyone can complete a WAP, you don't need to have a mental health problem in order to feel the benefits.

By completing a WAP, you will be able to list:

- approaches you will take and behaviours you can adopt to support your mental wellbeing
- early warning signs of poor mental health that your manager can look out for
- any workplace triggers for poor mental health or stress
- potential impact of poor mental health on your performance, if any
- what support you need from your line manager

[Click here](#) for more information and to access templates.

We have also developed a specific **Working from home WAP** ([click here](#) for more information and to access templates).

Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity eLearning

This is a good starting point for anyone in the sport and physical activity sector. The course takes 2 to 3 hours to complete and is aimed at anyone who delivers or supports sport and physical activities.

The course is currently free (usually £18) until the end of August 2020.

[Click here](#) to access the course.

Mind's Coronavirus and your mental health information hub

Provides reliable information and advice on how to support your mental wellbeing during this period. This includes practical advice on coping with staying at home, tips for employers on supporting yourself and your team, and managing feelings about lockdown easing.

[Click here](#) to access the information hub.

Mind's Workplace Wellbeing training courses

We provide expert training and consultancy for individuals and organisations who would like to increase knowledge of mental health.

[Click here](#) for more information and to see the courses we deliver.

Mental health for small workplaces free eLearning

This short, free eLearning course can build your confidence in thinking and talking about mental health in the workplace. Available for organisations with less than 250 employees.

[Click here](#) for more information and to sign up to the course.

Mind's Workplace Wellbeing wider support

Our Workplace Wellbeing team have created a range of resources and support services to help organisations and staff during the Coronavirus pandemic. These include:

- [Supporting remote workers through the coronavirus webinar](#)
- [Coping with the challenges of working from home toolkit](#)
- [Supporting staff with children at home guidance](#)
- [Supporting yourself and your team; advice for managers](#)
- [How to manage your wellbeing while furloughed guidance](#)
- [Coping with redundancy during the pandemic guidance](#)

Employee Assistance Programme

An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is an employee support scheme. If you have an EAP, ensure all staff (furloughed, returning and working from home) are aware they can access it for any personal or professional mental health or wellbeing problems, which may have a detrimental impact upon their work or general wellbeing.

Mind's Sport, Physical Activity and Mental Health Regional Networks

Mind has created Regional Networks throughout England to unite organisations from across the sport, physical activity and mental health sectors. Their aim is to increase the number of groups that are equipped with the skills to support and engage people with mental health problems in physical activity.

[Click here](#) for more information on the Regional Network programme and the lead organisations.

Mind's bereavement guidance

[Click here](#) for information on bereavement, where to go for support, and suggestions for helping yourself and others through grief.

Helplines

- [Mind's Infoline](#) – call 0300 123 3393; 9am-6pm Monday-Friday except bank holidays.
- [Samaritans](#) – call 116 123; 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (free from any phone).
- [Shout](#) – text SHOUT to 85258; 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (free from any phone).

[Click here](#) for a list of helplines and listening services.

How to have conversations around mental health guidance

Managing conversations

- Find a quiet place where the person feels comfortable to speak. For those working from home, it may be a space away from flatmates or family members. A conversation about mental health shouldn't feel like a formal interview.
- Actively listen to the person by giving them your undivided attention. Leave any questions or comments until the person has finished, so you don't interrupt them.
- Once someone knows they're being given the space and time to talk, they're more likely to open up. If someone approaches you wanting to talk, it may not be possible for you to give them the time they need there and then. Instead, show them you recognise that they've taken a positive step by speaking to you, explain why you can't talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If they are in urgent need of help, be sure to signpost them to support.

IMPORTANT

If someone needs urgent medical attention due to their mental health, call 999, direct them to their GP or Accident & Emergency at their nearest hospital (if appropriate), or the Samaritans on 116 123 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

Alternatively, the yellow box at the top of every page on the Mind website (mind.org.uk) will help direct people appropriately.

- Reflecting the words they've used can encourage them to open up more.
- Use empathetic statements such as: "I appreciate this must be difficult for you..."
- Avoid clichés. Comments like "pull yourself together" or "you're just having a bad day" are unhelpful.
- Remind them that mental health problems are more common than people think, and that they can affect anyone at any time.
- Avoid asking too many questions, especially closed questions (which require a 'yes' or 'no' answer) and those that begin with the word 'why.' Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:
 - Can you describe how you're feeling?
 - How do you look after yourself?
 - What support do you have in place?
- Reassure them that it's positive that they want to talk about their experience, and that they've acknowledged they want support (if this is the case).

- Ask if they're aware of sources of support, and signpost them to relevant information and help. It may be helpful to ask "What would you like to happen in this situation?" This will help to empower and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can't.
- The important thing is to listen rather than give advice – the individual needs to be able to act for themselves. Signpost them to sources of support, rather than telling them what you think is best.

Starting conversations

Sometimes starting a conversation about mental health is sometimes the hardest task, and it's important not to be discouraged by negative experiences.

You may want to practice or role play conversations with a close friend or family member until you become more comfortable. It's important to know your own boundaries and be clear on what personal experiences you're happy to reference in conversation.

Here are some tips to help start conversations:

- Ask someone how they are doing or feeling. Encourage them to engage by asking an open question focused on them and/or their wellbeing. Remember that sometimes people will say they're fine when they're not. [Time to Change's Ask Twice campaign](#) highlights the importance of asking how someone is doing or feeling twice to encourage a genuine response.
- Use your own personal experiences as a conversation starting point. Be clear on what you're happy to share, before you get started.
- Talk about how you maintain personal wellbeing, relax or de-stress (for example, if use sport or physical activity as part of your daily or weekly routine).
- Use topical news stories to highlight interesting points.

See [helping someone with a mental health problem guidance](#) for more information and tips.

Closing conversations

Closing conversations effectively helps to reassure the participant that their thoughts and feelings have been listened to, and helps to clarify next steps.

- Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. If this doesn't happen, provide a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end. You could say something like: "It's been good to talk. We've covered a lot and we will have to wrap up soon because I have another session/meeting/call," or something similar.
- Summarise the conversation and anything you've both agreed to do. For example: "You've told me you're going to speak to your GP about how you're feeling, and I will email you details of your local Mind."
- Ask practical questions such as "Will someone be there when you get home?" or "Is there a friend you can go and see?"

- Offering a listening ear and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard can go a long way to help someone. It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps they'll take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what you've discussed, and to consider what they may want to do next could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close, especially if you feel there's nothing more you can say at that time.

If you feel it would be helpful, that it's appropriate within the boundaries of your role, and that you're able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet and talk.

In partnership with:



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 /mindforbettermentalhealth

 Search for Mind.

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