Supporting mental health in the workplace through physical activity

The impact of COVID–19

The coronavirus (COVID–19) pandemic has left a deep and lasting impact on the mental health of millions in our country. However, for some of us physical activity has played a key role in keeping us well throughout lockdown and keeping physically active is more important than ever.

During lockdown:

- More than half of adults (60%) and over two thirds of young people (68%) have said their mental health got worse during lockdown.
- 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 health.
- The general public have been more conscious of being active to support their mental health during lockdown but people with existing mental health problems have found it harder to be active at this time, impacting negatively on their mental health.

Mental health is just like physical health: everybody has it, and needs to look after it.

There is a strong link between physical health and mental health and in the workplace, things like the physical workplace environment, job design and including movement and activity in the working day can have a significant impact on our wellbeing.

This resource, supported by mental health charity Mind, provides information and guidance to help individuals and employers support mental health.

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There's never been a more important time to invest in mental health

Investing in employee mental health and wellbeing results in:

Improved engagement – Growing evidence supports the links between employee engagement and wellbeing, resilience and absence, as well as work engagement being associated with higher levels of psychological wellbeing.

Reduced sickness absence – Stress and other mental health problems are the biggest cause of absence from work.

Reduced presenteeism – The cost of poor mental health to business is not just related to absence. Sometimes people with poor mental health come to work when they are unwell, which can impact performance.

Reduced staff turnover – Evidence shows that those with a long-term mental health condition lose their jobs every year at around double the rate of those without a mental health condition, and at a much higher rate than those with a physical health condition – amounting to around 300,000 dropping out of the labour market annually (Stevenson and Farmer 2017).

This all leads to a healthier and more productive workforce

One in six workers are affected by mental health problems each year

The cost of poor mental health and wellbeing is now £44 billion – £47 billion to UK employers

- Absence – £8.1bn
- Presenteeism – £26.5-£29.2bn
- Turnover – £9.2bn
- Self-employed – £1.2bn

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The five ways to wellbeing

Physical activity is one of the five key ways to wellbeing, it can further enable opportunities for connection with colleagues and support us in taking notice of our surroundings or in learning something new.

Be active

Regular physical activity is associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety across all age groups and is essential for slowing age-related cognitive decline and for promoting wellbeing.

Learn

Continued learning through life enhances self-esteem and encourages social interaction and a more active life. Learning a new sport or active skill can help with this. Give an activity you've never tried before a go with a friend or colleague.

Give

Individuals who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. Research into actions for promoting happiness has shown that committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with an increase in wellbeing. If you're already active, try offering your time to a sports group, teach someone how to play a new sport or offer to be an active travel buddy.

Connect

There is strong evidence that indicates that feeling close to and valued by other people is a fundamental human need and one that contributes to functioning well in the world. Physical activity or team sports can give us a great opportunity to connect with others and make friends, it can be fun and social.

Take notice

Reminding yourself to 'take notice' can strengthen and broaden awareness. Studies have shown that being aware of what is taking place in the present directly enhances your wellbeing and savouring 'the moment' can help to reaffirm your life priorities. The next time you take a lunchtime walk, really try and take in your surroundings and pay attention to the world around you.

How can physical activity support our mental health and wellbeing?

Sport and physical activity can be used to build resilience, to enable and support mental health recovery and to tackle stigma

Mental health benefits of being active:

Reduced anxiety and happier moods

Reduced feelings of stress

Clearer thinking

Increased self-esteem

Reduced risk of depression

Physical activity has a wide range of health benefits – for mind, body, and for social and emotional wellbeing. As well as improving overall physical fitness, being more active can have a range of physical benefits:

Reduced risk of some diseases

Reduced risk of physical health problems as bodies adapt to stress

Healthier organs

Healthier bones

Healthier weight

More energy

Improved sleep

How can physical activity support our mental health and wellbeing?

There are a number of things you can do to support physical activity in your workplace. Head to the FSB activity hub for more information and resources to support the health and wellbeing of yourself and your employees – www.fsb.co.uk/active.

There you will find resources to support:

- Active travel: A guide for Employers and Employers
- How to have an active working day in three simple steps
- Top tips for an active working day
- Moving Meeting guide
- Boost Team morale through an active challenge

Why not get involved in Move for Mind this September? Set yourself an exercise and fundraising challenge and raise money for better mental health. It's 30 days, your way – whether it's daily virtual workouts, running 30 miles or cycling 300k over 30 days. You can choose how you'll get active to fundraise for everyone experiencing a mental health problem. You can join as a team, or complete the challenge as an individual.

There is no official start date, you can start from any day in September. Join the challenge and see what a difference 30 days can make .

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Stuck for ideas of what to do to get active?

Whether you want to add activity to the start of your day or in 10 minute bursts between tasks, there are lots of free resources to try on Join the Movement. Check out the hub for workouts and apps to find your inspiration.

www.sportengland.org/jointhemovement

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