



Mental health and swimming

This fact sheet covers how you are able to participate in swimming and other disciplines, if you 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 you need to know about mental health problems and swimming

- 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 swimmers

Do:

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

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

- try to reassure yourself that you're not alone and everybody has to start somewhere, many people share similar anxieties about their bodies
- you could look for women or men only sessions, which may help you if you 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
- some pools will allow you to take your towels or bathrobes poolside but check with reception before you do.

Remember:

- if you experience **anxiety or panic attacks** you might find that swimming can cause some sensations which may feel like you're having a panic attack, such as being unable to catch your breath or breathlessness, raised heart rate, feeling shaky or dizzy
- start off slowly as this may help you spot the difference between physical effects of swimming and those of a panic attack, if you 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 you expect so best to test it out by dipping a toe in and climbing into the pool gradually
- take deep, slow breaths when you take a break or after a set number of laps/lengths to help reduce the likelihood of you starting to hyperventilate.

Avoid:

- triggering situations, for example, if you want to avoid crowds you 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 your life. If you feel anxious when you miss a session or if swimming is becoming more important than work, family or friends, you may be developing an unhealthy relationship with physical activity and potentially an exercise addiction. Mind have developed a guide to help 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 you to do. You can always check with your GP or psychiatrist what level of swimming is safe for you, especially if you experience **side effects**
- can also cause dehydration and this can be exacerbated when swimming. You continue to sweat and lose fluids when you are in water so remember to stay hydrated.

Additional advice

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

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

How to get more active:

mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/sport-physical-activity-and-mental-health/get-active-feel-good/

Find your local Mind service:

mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds/

Mind have developed a guide to help people who may be experiencing an exercise addiction: mind.org.uk/media/11962/what-to-do-when-your-relationship-with-physical-activity-becomes-unhealthy-public.pdf

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