



**LIFE IS EASIER
IF YOU ARE FITTER**

Mental Health and Exercise

CAMPUS GYM FACILITIES



Abertay University have on campus gym facilities in the bottom floor of the Graham Building. Abertay Sport promote a welcoming and friendly environment for everyone to exercise and our experienced staff can help with first time user to reach their fitness goals.

LIFE IS EASIER IF YOU ARE FITTER

MENTAL HEALTH & EXERCISE

This Leaflet is for anyone who wants to know:

- how being active can make you feel better
- how exercise can help combat depression and anxiety
- how active you need to be to feel better
- how to get active safely and the options available to you at Abertay
- how to be referred for an exercise programme

Introduction

Exercise keeps our hearts and bodies healthy; but how?

We often talk about the mind and body as though they are completely separate – but they are not. The mind can't function unless your body is working properly – but it also works the other way. The state of your mind affects your body.

So – if you feel low or anxious, you may do less and become less active – which can make you feel worse. You can get caught in a harmful cycle..

The Benefits of Exercise?

To work properly, your body needs regular exercise - and most of us feel good when we are active.

Until the last 100 years or so, you had to be quite active to just live your everyday life. It is now easy to live a life with very little physical exercise.

If you keep active, you are:

- less likely to be depressed, anxious or tense
- more likely to feel good about yourself
- more likely to concentrate and focus better
- more likely to sleep better
- more likely to cope with cravings and withdrawal symptoms if you try to give up a habit such as smoking or alcohol
- more likely to be able to keep mobile and independent as you get older
- possibly less likely to have problems with memory and dementia.



Do not worry about not doing enough – get started by building a bit more physical activity into your daily life now. Even a small change can boost your morale, give you a sense of achievement and help you to feel better in yourself.

It does not have to be about running around a track or working out in a gym. It can just be about being more active each day – perhaps just walking more, or taking the stairs rather than the lift. If medical problems stop you from doing one thing, there may be others that you can do.

“ Since I don't stay in halls, going to the gym and doing an exercise class is a great way for me to feel part of the Uni and meet some new people. ”
Robin (18)

WHAT MIGHT WORK FOR ME

Activity should:

- Be enjoyable – if you don't know what you might enjoy, try a few different things
- Help you to feel more competent or capable. Gardening or DIY projects can do this, as well as getting you more active.
- Give you a sense of control over your life – that you have choices you can make (so it is not helpful if you start to feel that you have to exercise). The sense that you are looking after yourself can also feel good.
- Help you to escape for a while from the pressures of life.
- Be shared. The companionship involved can be just as important as the physical activity.

WHY DOES EXERCISE WORK?

We are not yet exactly sure. There are several possibilities:

- Most people in the world have always had to keep active to get food, water and shelter. This involves a moderate level of activity and seems to make us feel good. We may be built – or “hard wired” - to enjoy a certain amount of exercise.

Harder exercise (perhaps needed to fight or flight from danger) seems to be linked to feelings of stress, perhaps because it is needed for escaping from danger.

- Exercise seems to have an effect on certain chemicals in the brain, like dopamine and serotonin. Brain cells use these chemicals to communicate with each other, so they affect your mood and thinking.

- Exercise can stimulate proteins in the brain called Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factors. These help new brain cells to grow and develop. Moderate exercise seems to work better than vigorous exercise.
- Exercise seems to reduce harmful changes in the brain caused by stress.

“ Joining a sports club was the best decision I made when I started Uni, within the first week of Uni I already had ten new best friends. ”

Charlie (19)

HOW MUCH EXERCISE IS ENOUGH FOR ME?

- Firstly – any exercise is better than none.
- But a moderate level of exercise seems to work best.
- This is roughly equivalent to walking fast, but being able to talk to someone at the same time.
- It is recommended you do about 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise on at least 5 days of every week. This can be done in one 30 minute session or broken up into shorter 10 or 15 minute sessions.
- This can not only lower the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, but also seems to help depression – so you get a double benefit.
- Don't start suddenly - build more physical activity into your life gradually, in small steps.

WHEN SHOULD I EXERCISE?

As regularly as you can. There will be days when you just do not feel like exercise – you may feel tired or be too busy or anxious about something. If you keep to your routine and exercise at times like this, you will almost certainly feel better.

Why?

If you are tired, exercise tends to give you energy. If you are worried, it can take your mind off your concerns for a while. Even if you cannot exercise, a 15 minute walk can help you to clear your mind and relax. You may find it helpful to listen to music at the same time. It is best not to do too much in the evening. Being active will generally help you to sleep but, if you exercise late in the evening, you may find it difficult to settle.

Exercise and Coping

If you are active you will probably find it easier to deal with life's problems and challenges. So - if those problems stop you from regularly exercising, it is worth

remembering that finding time for exercise may well help you to deal with such problems. Exercise can also help you to cope better by improving how you feel about yourself and getting you together with other people.

How well does exercise work for depression?

For mild depression, physical activity can be as good as antidepressants or psychological treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

It can certainly be harder to get active when you are depressed. But being active lifts your mood and gives you a sense of being in control and in touch with other people. Exercise releases endorphins which reduce stress and improves your sense of well being.

“ I’m a post-graduate and my course can be really stressful but a half hour walk in the sunshine at lunchtime makes things much more manageable. ”

Jo (27)

GETTING DOWN TO IT

Any physical activity needs to be something that you can do regularly. But lots of things can stop you, especially if you feel down. You may feel that you:

- do not have the energy – just try going for a walk, every little helps and you will have more energy for having done some exercise
- do not feel confident enough – try something on your own or find a partner or a Gym Assistant who can support your physical activity
- do not know anybody to exercise with – contact the Sports Office who can put you in the Gym Buddy scheme or put you in touch with any of the sports clubs
- do not have the right clothes – walking or cycling can be done in any clothes (within reason!)
- cannot afford it – walking, cycling, going for a jog, throwing a frisbee in the park are all free
- not the sporty type– you don’t have to be running a marathon or challenging for a trophy to benefit from a bit of physical activity
- will not feel any different for doing it – it is proven that exercise combats depression and improves sleep, concentration and a feeling of self-worth
- I have never done it – so it might be the best thing you ever try
- I was not good at sports at school – there are 1000s of ways for you to do some exercise, most of which you did not get to try at school
- I would feel silly – try an exercise class or a sports club where everyone’s in the same boat as you or try something easier like going for a walk or a jog in the park

- Other people would make fun of me – no one will make fun of you for trying something new and exercise does not have to look like exercise (e.g. cycling or walking)
- It will not help unless it hurts - ‘No pain, no gain’ – the ideal target is moderate exercise which does not leave you breathless, no pain required
- It is sweaty and uncomfortable – only if you want it to be
- I am too tired – doing exercise will help you sleep better and improve your energy levels in the long-term
- I would rather do something else – exercise is easily integrated into your existing routine, walk or cycle instead of taking the bus or stay on the dancefloor for an extra ten minutes! That being said do not do anything you don't want to
- I think it will make me feel worse – if you feel worse then change something, do something different or do not work as hard (it is meant to be fun!)
- I do not know where, when or how to start – contact the Sports Office for information on the gym, exercise classes, sports clubs, local Dundee events and activities and much more.



I try and do some exercise first thing in the morning, it definitely wakes me up and gets me through the day – I'm 100% more productive for it.



Sam (21)

If any of these apply to you and prevent you from exercising give some time to reflecting on the consequences of allowing these beliefs to keep you inactive. You may find it useful to challenge these beliefs, how true are they? Also you may be allowing an initial anxiety about exercise prevent you from experiencing the more delayed benefits.

Exercise can be about playing sport or doing high level exercise – if you want that. For other people, it is just about being more physically active and sitting around less.

It doesn't have to be hard – but try to do something every day.

Some things are not expensive – walking is free and jogging just needs a pair of trainers (cheap ones are fine). If you have a bike already, try cycling to work (or for any regular journey) – you may even save some money.

But do not overdo it!

If you have not been active for a while, doing too much when you start can make you more tired – particularly if you also have a health problem (including depression) that makes you tired. One day you may have the energy to be really active but feel completely exhausted the next.

Whatever you choose to do, start with something easy – like walking round the block. Build your level up gradually, perhaps by just doing a minute or two more – or a few metres more - each day. Try to do something most days, even if you feel tired.

Start by working out how much you do already – you can use a pedometer to show you how many steps you take every day. Or you could keep a diary for a few days of how long you spend doing active things. Then set yourself some goals. Make sure they are:

S – Specific (clear)

M – Measurable – you will know when you've achieved them

A – Achievable – you can achieve them

R – Relevant – they mean something to you

T - Time-based – you set yourself a time limit to achieve your goals.

They need to be things you can see yourself doing – and take pride in, so you feel good about yourself. You may be able to do it on your own, or with some help from others. For advice and support you can speak to a Gym Assistant, whether you use the gym or not. They are on hand to support you in becoming more physically active in any way they can.

Nobody is perfect. You will have setbacks when you cannot meet a short term goal, or just feel too tired to do anything. Recognise it when it happens, but do not worry about it. Tomorrow is another day and short term setbacks do not matter in the bigger picture of your longer-term goals. And, if you need to, do ask someone else to give you a hand.



I love the feeling after a work-out, I feel like I can do anything and it makes such a positive difference to my mood and confidence.

Alex (21)



REFERRAL FOR EXERCISE THERAPY

Because exercise is so beneficial for our mental health the Counselling & Mental Health Service, the Gym and a Sports Scientist have joined together to provide Exercise Therapy.

You can ask your counsellor to refer you for Exercise therapy. You will be offered an appointment with a member of sports and exercise department who will discuss your needs with you and organise a simple to follow regime. They will arrange a follow up appointment to help make sure you are progressing. You will also be shown around the gym and introduced to a gym assistant who you can meet and who will offer support and encouragement.

In addition if you wish to buddy up with someone following a similar regime at the same level as yourself the Gym Manager will seek to pair you up with another student.

At the start of the programme your wellbeing will be measured and we will then see how it improves. You need to allow at least 6 weeks to feel any benefits. It can be difficult to stick at this when the benefits seem so slow in being felt. But it does work; trust the process.

Your counsellor will also help you with any concerns you may want to explore about the exercise.

REFERENCES

Management of depression in primary and secondary care. National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2004.

Taylor A.H & Faulkner, G (2008). Inaugural Editorial. *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, vol 1, issue 1, pages 1-8. A new academic journal with a specific focus on the relationship between physical activity and mental health. www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/714078/description#description

Thayer RE. *Calm Energy: How people regulate mood with food and exercise*. Oxford University Press, New York 2001.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Mental Health Foundation

A MHF report entitled 'Up and Running' focused on exercise as a way to treat depression. A version is available for both patients and practitioners.

Walking the way to health

Tel: 01242 533337; email: whiinfo@naturalengland.org.uk

A nation-wide scheme of group walks backed by the British Heart Foundation and Natural England. The website offers information and support to all, from complete beginners to health/leisure professionals. The initiative supports over 400 local health walk schemes – find your nearest using the Walk Finder.

The Ramblers Association

Tel: 0207 339 8500; email: ramblers@ramblers.org.uk

Britain's biggest walking charity. Contact them to find out more about where to walk in your area, how to locate your nearest walking group and additional information about how to include children, walk in urban areas and advice for people with disabilities.

Paths for all

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/health-walks>

Covers walking schemes across Scotland. Use the website to find a local health walk in your area. It also offers support and information about resources and grants for setting up your own walking club.

Keep Fit

Tel: 01403 266000; email: kfa@keepfit.org.uk

Find out about keep fit aerobics classes, and search for classes across the UK from 65 nation-wide Local Associations.

Active Places

This website allows you to search for sports facilities anywhere in England. You can browse an interactive map of the country, search for facilities in your local area, or use the name and address of a specific facility to find out more information.

Couch to 5K

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/c25k/Pages/get-running-with-couch-to-5k.aspx>

This is an NHS initiative designed to help beginner runners to run 5 kilometres in just 9 weeks. An exercise programme including downloadable podcasts supports you in building up your fitness level.

Disability Sport England

Tel: 0161 953 2499; email: info@dse.org.uk

Organisation that supports and promotes sport for people with disabilities.

Sustrans

Provide advice on cycling opportunities locally and further afield, including the National Cycle Network.

Dundee Leisure

DUNDEE LEISURE is all about a rewarding exercise experience, while having fun in an accessible centre at a convenient location open every day of each week. <http://www.dundeeleisure.co.uk/>

Stay up to date online at <http://sport.abertay.ac.uk> or find us on Facebook.

Support Scottish Universities Sport - the co-ordinating body for university and college sport and physical activity in Scotland - www.susport.org.uk

SOURCES OF HELP

Your GP

If you are experiencing regular emotional distress talking to your GP is often a good step to take. Your GP should have some understanding of the difficulties you are experiencing and be aware of the various options available to you.

Abertay Counselling & Mental Health Service

Email: counselling@abertay.ac.uk

Our experienced and qualified counsellors and mental health nurse advisors will:

- Listen carefully to what you have to say;
- Help you to explore and understand your difficulties;
- Help you to find ways of managing them more effectively.
- We have a wide range of useful guides to common difficulties.
- We also run workshops for students for example on increasing self confidence, handling stress, dealing with difficult situations.

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Contact:

Student Enquiry Zone (SEZ), Level 1,
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Equality Statement

The University Equality Policy
can be found at:

[http://www.abertay.ac.uk/about/
theuni/diversity/](http://www.abertay.ac.uk/about/theuni/diversity/)