

# Athletics and Mental Health



This resource has been produced by **England Athletics** and mental health charity **Sport in Mind**® (charity reg. no. 1145326) to raise awareness of mental health and to provide guidance and support to athletics clubs, coaches and leaders to help make athletics more open and accessible to people experiencing mental health conditions.

## Contents

	Page
Introduction	2
My Story – Runner and coach Shona Rogers	3
My Story – Olympic hurdler Jack Green	4
Common types of mental health conditions	5
The benefits of sport and physical activity for mental well-being	7
Guidance for leaders, coaches and clubs	9
Case studies	11
Further guidance and support	14



# Introduction

**The term 'mental illness' sounds quite scary to many of us, but the truth is mental illness really is very common with 1 in 4 of us in the UK affected each year– that's approximately 15 million of us!**

Mental health conditions are characterized by alterations in our thinking, mood or behaviour, and include illnesses such as anxiety, depression, addiction, bipolar disorder, personality disorder, schizophrenia or eating disorders.

Despite a huge amount of work being done to raise awareness of mental health conditions there is still a great deal of stigma surrounding mental illness. Speaking about mental health shouldn't be seen as being scary, taboo or something to avoid as the reality is mental health conditions are part and parcel of everyday life. All of us, at some point in our lives, will be touched either directly or indirectly by mental illness so it's important to speak openly about these conditions and help address the stigma.

## The facts

- ◆ Mental illness is the single largest cause of disability in the UK and accounts for one third of all illnesses. It is also the largest cost to the NHS at £10.4 billion (10.8% of the NHS budget).
- ◆ Mental health conditions do not discriminate – they affect people of all ages, genders, sexualities and ethnic groups. They do not care if you are rich, poor, successful, married or single – **they really can affect any one of us.**
- ◆ Some of the most successful sportsmen and women over the past 20 years have spoken about their own mental health conditions, including:
  - ◆ Double Olympic Champion Athlete **Dame Kelly Holmes**
  - ◆ Footballers **David Beckham** and **Paul Gascoigne**
  - ◆ Rugby players **Jonny Wilkinson** and **Jason Robinson**
  - ◆ Cricketers **Marcus Trescothick** and **Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff**
  - ◆ Olympic Champion Cyclist **Victoria Pendleton**
  - ◆ Olympic Champion Swimmers **Rebecca Adlington** and **Ian Thorpe**
  - ◆ Tennis Legend **Serena Williams**
  - ◆ World Champion Boxers **Ricky Hatton** and **Frank Bruno**
- ◆ Mental illness is a rapidly growing problem in UK society and new interventions need to be sought to address this issue. Regular engagement in sport and physical activity is one such intervention and Sport in Mind can testify to its effectiveness in the treatment and prevention of mental illness. For more information see the case studies on pages 8-11.
- ◆ Only 16% of people with mental health conditions take part in sport or physical activity on a regular basis (once a week) compared to 35.7% of non-disabled people. (Active People Survey 7)

## My Story: Shona Rogers

*12 years ago I took up running. If I'm honest, I found it hard initially, but I stuck with it and began to really enjoy myself. I just loved the challenge of running, making friends and encouraging others who were struggling as I had. This led me to train as a running coach, and I have now been coaching for the past seven years.*

*Since adolescence I have suffered periodically from severe depression, but when I started to run regularly it made me feel better mentally than I ever had before. Even my friends and family could see the positive impact running was having on my mental well-being. I quickly began to realise that, when I felt low, running would help lift my mood. Sometimes I found it hard to force myself out of the door and often it felt as though I was running through treacle, but I always came back feeling better than when I went out. Running also taught me to accept my body, to be more confident and comfortable with myself and to focus on the physical effort without any intrusive negative thoughts. In addition to the positive impact running has had on my own mental well-being, I have also seen how running boosts other people's confidence, self-esteem and mood during my years working as a coach. I wholeheartedly recommend running and outdoor exercise to anyone that is experiencing a mental health condition.*



## My Story: Jack Green

*My name is Jack Green and I represented team GB at the London 2012 Olympics. I compete in the 400 metre hurdles and the 400 metre flat. In 2011 I was the European Under-23 champion for the 400 metre hurdles and in 2012 was a member of team GB's 4 x 400 metre relay squad at the London Olympics.*

*In 2013, having competed professionally in track and field for four years, I decided to take a break from elite performance athletics after suffering from depression. I know talking about mental health problems is a difficult subject matter to many people, but I hope me being honest about my illness offers others some support and helps people realise they are not alone.*

*I have made a full recovery now, but felt a break from the pressures of competing professionally was necessary for my mental health. I have recently started running again and am really enjoying myself.*

*Casual running is such great fun and there really is no limit to how much it can help your mental health and confidence!*



# Common Mental Health Conditions in Adults Under 65

Mental health conditions range from the worries we all experience as part of everyday life to serious long-term conditions.

Some of the most common conditions are listed below:

## Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions and are characterised by feelings of unease or fear. There are a wide variety of anxiety disorders and these include:

- ◆ **Phobia** is an irrational fear that triggers your anxiety when in certain situations or around particular objects, even when there is no danger. This condition affects an estimated 10 million people in the UK.
- ◆ **Panic disorder** is characterised by recurring, severe panic attacks, often occurring for no apparent reason. A panic attack is a sudden overwhelming feeling of acute and disabling anxiety. At least 1 in 10 people experience occasional panic attacks.
- ◆ **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)** is a condition that causes you to feel in a constant state of high anxiousness about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than one specific event. This condition affects about 1 in 20 people.
- ◆ **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a condition which may develop following exposure to a frightening, stressful or traumatic event. Sufferers will often experience flashbacks, nightmares and panic attacks. Feelings of isolation, irritability, guilt and difficulty sleeping may also occur.
- ◆ **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** is a condition that causes obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviour. An obsession is an unwanted, unpleasant thought, image or urge that repeatedly enters a person's mind, causing them anxiety. A compulsion is a repetitive behaviour or mental act that someone feels they need to carry out to try to prevent an obsession coming true. For example, compulsively washing one's hands in response to an irrational fear of germs/contamination. OCD affects approximately 12 out of every 1,000 people.

## Depression

Depression is a very common mental health condition that affects people in different ways and can be quite short-lived, or severe and enduring. Common symptoms of depression including feeling low, losing interest in activities you used to enjoy, feeling bad about yourself and lacking in energy. This condition affects approximately 1 in 10 people at some point.

## Bipolar disorder (Manic Depression)

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is a chronic illness with unusual and dramatic shifts in mood, characterised by extreme highs (mania) and lows (depression). This condition affects approximately 1 in every 100 people.

## Borderline personality disorder (BPD)

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a mood disorder. Symptoms include emotional instability, mood swings, feelings you can't cope, distressed and impulsive behaviour. Complications can arise if you have BPD, including problems with substance misuse and self-harm. This condition affects approximately 1 in 100 people.

## Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a chronic mental health condition that affects the way someone thinks. Symptoms associated with schizophrenia include experiencing hallucinations, delusions, changes in behaviour, confused thoughts and becoming withdrawn. **Despite common misconceptions, people suffering from schizophrenia are no more likely to be violent than the general population.** This condition affects approximately 1 in every 100 people.



# Benefits of Regular Participation in Athletics

Regular participation in sport and physical activity has shown to have significant benefits on our health.

## Benefits include:

- ◆ Enhanced mental health and well-being
- ◆ Improved physical health
- ◆ Reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression
- ◆ Improved self-esteem and confidence
- ◆ Reduced risk of developing serious physical health conditions (including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer)
- ◆ Healthy weight loss
- ◆ Provides a positive focus and sense of purpose – a key element in combating depression
- ◆ Encourages social inclusion
- ◆ Reduced feelings of anger and frustration
- ◆ Enhanced concentration and sleeping patterns

## A Case Study

In 2011 Sport in Mind delivered a weekly sports sessions in Berkshire engaging 21 people experiencing mental health conditions:

- ◆ 95% were unemployed and not in training/education
- ◆ 90% had not engaged in sport or physical activity in 2 years
- ◆ 80% felt unable to access mainstream sports provision

In September 2013 when looking at the same 21 people:

- ◆ 80% are now in employment, training or education
- ◆ 90% continue play sport or engage in physical activity on a regular basis (at least once a week)
- ◆ 66% engage in mainstream sports groups

## Participant Feedback:

- ◆ "I didn't have much to look forward to before I joined Sport in Mind, but now I live to play sport. It's changed my life completely. I no longer feel depressed or scared to do things, and I'm back working full-time."
- ◆ "When I was a kid I loved playing sport, but after I became ill I didn't feel like I could join in any more. Sport in Mind gave me the chance to play sport again and regain my confidence. I play sport every week now and don't worry about what people think."

- ◆ “Being given the opportunity to play sport has helped me build confidence and be myself again. I've also made some really good friends.”
- ◆ “Playing sport has given my life focus and helped me get back on track.”
- ◆ “I've been through some hard times with depression, but joining Sport in Mind's groups have made a massive difference to my life and for the first time in years I feel like I'm making huge strides on my road to recovery.”

## Sport and Mental Well-Being Study 2014

In 2014 Sport in Mind conducted a study that examined the impact regular engagement in sport and physical activity has on the lives of people diagnosed with mental health conditions.

The key findings from Sport in Mind's Sport and Mental Well-Being Study are listed below:

Mental Health	Percentage of Participants
Improved feelings of well-being	92%
Reduced levels of stress and anxiety	86%
Reduced symptoms of depression	82%
Improved self-esteem / confidence	91%
Improved concentration and sleeping patterns	61%
Reduced feelings of anger and frustration	65%

Physical Health and Social Inclusion	Percentage of Participants
Enhanced physical health	82%
Healthy weight loss	87%
Encourages social inclusion	77%

Lifestyle Changes	Percentage of Participants
Reduced consumption of alcohol	26%
Reduced consumption of tobacco	21%
Reduced consumption of illegal drugs	22%

## Other research shows:

- ◆ Physical activity in natural environments is associated with a reduction in the risk of poor mental health to a greater extent than physical activity in other environments. (Mitchell. R, 2013)
- ◆ Physical activity is as effective as medication in treating depression. A 16 week study of 202 men and women found that 45% of patients diagnosed with major depression no longer met the criteria for depression after exercising three times a week in a supervised group setting. This is on par with 47% of patients who no longer met the criteria after taking anti-depressants. (Blumenthal et al. 2007).



# Guidance for Coaches, Clubs & Groups

Regular engagement in any form of athletics can have a hugely positive effect on our mental well-being, however, there are certain things leaders, coaches, clubs and groups can do in order to achieve the greatest impact (most of which are things that you will be doing already!):

- ◆ Create a supportive environment where everyone feels welcome. Many people experience anxiety when joining a group so it's vitally important you make participants feel welcome, comfortable and supported at all sessions. When people join a session for the first time you should always introduce yourself and the group.
- ◆ You do not need to have extensive knowledge of mental health to run sessions, but should be supportive of participant's needs and happy to talk openly about mental health conditions if required.
- ◆ As with any impairment make sure you provide an opportunity in advance of the session for someone to tell you they have a mental health condition, perhaps on a PARQ or membership form.
- ◆ Provide a phone and email contact so that participants can contact someone before the session to discuss what will be involved and any support they may require.
- ◆ Speak to participants about what support they might need if they feel unwell during the session and have set procedures in place.
- ◆ Make allowances for participants' conditions and adapt sessions where appropriate.
- ◆ Sessions should be structured, but delivered in a relaxed manner with the emphasis on having fun.
- ◆ Be enthusiastic, encourage, reassure and praise participants' positive performances where appropriate.
- ◆ Create a positive club or group environment and help reduce the stigma associated with mental health.
- ◆ Challenge inappropriate behaviour - remember the way others behave can have a big impact on someone with a mental health condition and can ultimately determine whether they come back the next week.
- ◆ Consult participants and collect feedback about the sessions in order ascertain how they feel they are operating. Offering participants the opportunity to shape the sessions they are attending enhances their effectiveness in meeting the demands of the participant.

**These points are important for people experiencing mental health conditions, but are equally relevant for ensuring other participants have a positive experience too!**

## Organising Specific 'Mental Health' Sessions

People with mental health conditions can, and should, be integrated into existing athletics sessions with other participants. Given the prevalence of mental health conditions it is highly likely there are already people in your club or group who have experienced a mental health condition. You may, however, wish to consider organising specific sessions to attract people with mental health conditions to your club or group in the first instance. When establishing a session specifically designed for people experiencing mental health conditions there are some useful points to remember to maximise its effectiveness:

### What is in a name?

Name your sessions as a '**mental well-being**' session as opposed to a 'mental health session' as the term 'mental health' often creates a negative image in many people's minds and may limit their appeal.

### Consistency

Consistency is a vital component of any successful mental well-being project. Having the **same leader or coach** delivering sessions at the **same location**, at the **same time**, on the **same day** each week is very important as participants often struggle when faced with changes.

### Session times

It is advisable to deliver sessions in the **afternoon or evening** to maximise the number of participants attending as this is generally when people with mental health conditions find sessions most accessible.

### Referrals

To successfully engage enough participants it is highly recommended that all projects link up with your **local NHS trusts** and **mental health day service providers**. No matter where you are based your area will be served by a NHS 'Community Mental Health Team' (CMHT). Day service providers include charities such as Mind, Rethink, Together, etc - see page 12/13 for contacts. Partnership working really is essential to give your session the highest chance of success as well as ensuring you have good links with experts from the mental health sector.



# Case Studies

## Case Study 1

### Personal Testimony – Julia, postnatal depression sufferer

After giving birth to my second child I suffered severe post natal depression. Although I had everything I had ever wanted; a loving husband, two amazing kids and a fantastic home I felt like something had changed inside of me. It's difficult to explain how I felt, but I basically lost interest in everything and no longer wanted to be around people. I felt silly going to the doctor about how I was feeling, but after months of suffering I felt I had no option. When the doctor diagnosed me with having postal natal depression I was really shocked –depression was the type of illness that affected other people – not me! I was referred to numerous self-help groups and these helped slightly, but it was not until I joined Sport in Mind's groups and started exercising regularly that I really saw an improvement in my condition. I had read lots of articles about how sport and exercise can help depression, but if I'm totally honest I never really believed it until it helped me.

Playing sport and exercising hadn't really been a part of my life since my school days and in all honesty I never really liked it that much, but there was something different about joining Sport in Mind's sessions – they were fun, relaxed and it wasn't ever about how good you were. Attending the sessions helped me through some very dark days and enabled me to rediscover the old me, the woman that used to laugh and smile, and enjoy being around people. I don't know where I would be now if I hadn't gone along to their group that sunny, summer day... I guess it's probably not worth thinking about.

## Case Study 2

### Personal Testimony– Andrew, anxiety sufferer

I was always a keen sportsman at school and one of the top students academically for my year. In my A-level exams I was fortunate enough to achieve high enough grades to be accepted into my University of choice. In my gap year, whilst working as an office temp, I suffered my first panic attack, which was terrifying. Over the next 3 months I suffered a number of panic attacks with increasing frequency. It came to the point where I would have an attack every time I left the house... so I decided the best thing to do was not to go out.

For the next 18 months I barely left the house. I still had panic attacks occasionally at home, but they weren't as bad and I could just about cope. Every single day of my life I missed going out, I missed playing sport, being with my friends and doing what everyone else took for granted, but the truth was avoiding the panic attacks was far more important to me than leading a normal life. Eventually my family persuaded me to speak to someone about my condition. It was difficult; I didn't feel at all comfortable doing it, but I wanted to get well. I experienced a number of severe panic attacks whilst attending therapy sessions and decided to stop all therapy – it was much nicer staying at home than having to face my fear!

Soon after making the decision to stop all therapy I learnt about Sport in Mind. The prospect of playing sport in a supported environment with other people who would understand what I was going through was an opportunity I really couldn't pass up. I began to attend the sessions on a regular basis even though leaving the

house was terrifying. I continued to have panic attacks, which were as scary as ever, but because I had the sports sessions to focus upon and look forward to every week I pushed myself to attend.

I never really considered the sessions to be therapy at the time but attending the sessions helped me more than anyone will ever know. If that opportunity to play sport hadn't have been there for me I would just be sat at home now. I combined my cognitive behaviour therapy with playing as much sport as I could with Sport in Mind and over the course of a year my anxiety levels slowly began to reduce, enabling me to start leading a more normal life once more. Last October I finally started University and have now successfully completed my first year – everything is going really well!

### Case study 3

#### **Haringey Mental Health AthleFIT Sessions**

In 2012 Haringey's Athletics Activator made contact with the charity Haringey Mind and asked if their service users would be interested in some athletics fitness sessions (AthleFIT). Haringey Mind were very keen to link up with England Athletics for a taster session as they had been looking to utilise sport and physical activity as a means to help their clients' recovery.

The AthleFIT taster session enabled clients to meet and become comfortable with the leader, learn more about the sessions and gauge interest in the activity. The session was also hosted at Haringey Mind centre as it allowed for familiarity of environment. The taster proved successful and a 10 week course was established a few weeks later.

Participants were asked at registration on the first day their reason for wanting to take part and most said they wanted to lose weight and get fit. Four people came to the first session and were consistent throughout the 10 week block. At the end of the course all participants that took part said they enjoyed the activity and felt they had benefitted from the sessions.

Following the successful completion of the 10 week course a link was established with another AthleFIT session delivered at a local leisure centre to enable ongoing participation. These sessions were also linked with an AthleFIT session run on the acute adult wards at St. Ann's Hospital in Haringey. The hospital sessions were established to provide patients with both physical activity and social interaction as some individuals may spend an extended period of time in the hospital.

The sessions at St Ann's are all delivered at a very low level of impact and fitness as most participants are inactive, on medication and not used to physical activity. AthleFIT is seen as a perfect medium to introduce sedentary people to physical activity as it is sociable and easily adaptable to cater for people of all fitness levels. Numbers for these sessions vary due to the turnover of patients on the wards, however, on average there are 8 patients attending... with medical staff also often joining in.

By using the same AthleFIT leader to deliver the sessions at the hospital and in the community there is a clear pathway of activity with a familiar face to make people feel instantly comfortable. The sessions have proven to be hugely successful in promoting social inclusion and improving participants' mental and physical wellbeing.

## Case study 4

### Up and Running, Sevenoaks

As a coach with a history of depression myself, I have always been very open about my life and willing to share with people the ways that running has helped me. I was chatting to some of my runners about this one day, and afterwards one of them approached me.

She is a clinical psychologist and said that in her clinical practice she felt that there was a need for a group to make running accessible to people with mental health conditions, particularly depression and anxiety, which are the conditions that vigorous exercise is felt to benefit most.



We established our group over four years now, and our 12th group have just completed a 10 week introduction to running. We average 5 or 6 people per group, all of whom either have a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety. Harriet (my psychologist colleague), assesses them using a mental health diagnostic questionnaire at the beginning of the course, and we re-run that at the end of the course, so we can ascertain whether there has been a measurable improvement in their mental health.

20 runners completed feedback forms in April 2012 and 90% said their mental well-being had improved. All of these runners said they felt their general fitness had improved and 90% said they would continue running in the future, with the remaining 10% saying they hoped they would be able to continue running.

The following comments are from some of our runners:

- ◆ I feel my mood has improved as a result of the running – I feel more cheerful and positive.
- ◆ My health has definitely improved mentally, physically and emotionally.
- ◆ I feel stronger and more positive. My family say I am less stressed and I am tackling more things.
- ◆ My increased levels of fitness have made me feel better mentally and I have a sense of pride and achievement about my running. It is also very helpful socially to run with others in a similar position.
- ◆ I have discovered how running outside improves how I feel mentally.
- ◆ My mood is definitely more balanced generally. I find running is a really good way to cope if I feel really stressed or upset. It really has helped me to feel better about myself.

We run the group as a very gentle 10 week beginners course, and ask the participants to meet up to do a 'homework' run in between. This helps them bond with each other, as our aim is to have them stay together and continue to run as a group after the course is over.

We keep in touch with them and give them support and encouragement where necessary, and at the end of each course we hold a 'graduate' run to which we invite all former as well as current participants so that they can get to meet each other, find new running partners, and check in with us so we can see how they are doing.

# Further Guidance and Support

## Useful Organisations

**England Athletics** is the National Governing Body for the sport of athletics in England. Our three main aims are:

- ◆ To increase participation across a wider cross-section of the community.
- ◆ To improve the quality of experience of every participant.
- ◆ To support the development of the next generation of champions.

[www.englandathletics.org/disabilityathletics](http://www.englandathletics.org/disabilityathletics)

**Sport in Mind** is an independent mental health charity and leading UK advisor of mental health sports provision. Our mission is to make sport accessible to anyone experiencing mental health problems and raise awareness of mental illness. We advocate sport and physical activity as a means to promote mental well-being, help aid recovery and enrich the lives of people experiencing mental health problems.

[www.sportinmind.org](http://www.sportinmind.org)

**The NHS website** can provide vital details about mental health:

[www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth)

**Mental Health First Aid England** deliver courses that teach delegates how to recognise the signs and symptoms of common mental health conditions provide help on a first aid basis and signpost towards support services.

[www.mhfaengland.org](http://www.mhfaengland.org)

**The Mental Health Foundation** is a mental health research, policy and service improvement charity. They work to help people to survive, recover from and prevent mental health problems by carrying out research, developing practical solutions for better mental health services, campaigning to reduce stigma and discrimination and promoting better mental health for us all.

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

**Mind** is a national charity who provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. They campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding. They have 160 local groups offer specialised support and care based on the needs of the communities they support.

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**Rethink** is a national charity that provides expert, accredited advice and information to everyone affected by mental health problems. They have over 200 mental health services and 150 support groups across England. From psychological therapies and Crisis and Recovery Houses to peer support groups and housing services, they directly help thousands of people every year across England.

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

**Together** is a national mental health charity working alongside people with mental health issues on their journey towards independent and fulfilling lives. They provide a range of services to meet the different needs of around 4,000 adults each month.

[www.together-uk.org](http://www.together-uk.org)

**Time to Change** is a campaign aimed challenging mental health stigma and discrimination. Time to Change is led by national charities Mind and Rethink.

[www.timetochange.org.uk](http://www.timetochange.org.uk)

## Crisis Contacts

**If you're feeling suicidal and need someone to talk to immediately call:**

**The Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90**

The Samaritans are a confidential emotional support service for anyone in the UK and Ireland. The service is available 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

**NHS Direct: 0845 4647**

NHS Direct is a national helpline providing medical advice and information.

**If you've taken an overdose or you are about to seriously harm or kill yourself:**

- ◆ **Call 999 immediately.** Calls are free and you can ask to stay on the line whilst you wait for help to arrive.
- ◆ Alternatively, go to your nearest accident and emergency department.

**If someone you know is in immediate danger of seriously harming or killing themselves or endangering someone else:**

- ◆ **Call 999 immediately** and ask for assistance. Calls are free

**If you or someone you know is struggling with a mental health problem but are not in immediate danger:**

- ◆ Contact your GP to talk about any mental health problems.
- ◆ Alternatively, if you have a mental health professional that you see regularly, contact them and make them aware of the situation as they may be able to offer you additional support to manage the crisis.