



HEALTHY BODY = HEALTHY MIND?

The links between **exercise**, **mental health** and **fitness** centres in New Zealand.

We know that exercise has positive effects on the brain. Working out triggers endorphins that are chemically similar to morphine. So if working out is so good for mental health, how can we support and welcome those with mental health problems into our industry and into our gyms? Alex Bayes reports.

Mental health is about how people think and feel, their general outlook on life and how well people are able to cope with life's challenges. It is an essential part of health and wellbeing, yet is often overlooked within the health and fitness industry.

One in four people will experience mental health problems at some stage of their life. The most common of these in New Zealand is anxiety and depression. Often, people suffering from these illnesses do not see exercise as a real solution and are intimidated by gyms and fitness centres. The following will look at how exercise helps to alleviate these conditions, and how gyms throughout New Zealand can be more welcoming and supportive for those who suffer from mental health issues to become members and begin their journey to better physical and mental health.

Depression and Anxiety

Staff and decision-makers of gyms throughout the country need to understand what the common mental health

disorders in New Zealand actually are in order to understand what sufferers are going through, and to motivate them to exercise as part of treatment.

Depression and anxiety are very real and common problems. Depression describes a range of low moods and behaviours. People who have depression often lose their appetite and have difficulty sleeping, and feel guilty or worthless. In extreme cases these people may also have thoughts about death or suicide. Depression is commonly known to be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain – low levels of brain chemical serotonin are said to lead to depression. However, new research points to other biological contributors to depression including elevated stress hormones, immune system suppression, nutritional deficiencies and shrinking brain cells.

Anxiety describes a relatively permanent state of worry and nervousness occurring in a variety of mental disorders. It is a state of restlessness and agitation, often accompanied by a distressing sense of oppression or tightness in the

stomach. This unpleasant and overriding inner emotional tension that has no apparent identifiable cause.

Common Treatments

How are these illnesses commonly treated, and why is exercise a better solution? Through understanding common treatments and the reasons why people do not choose exercise, gym staff can begin to look at how to make exercise in gyms more available and attainable to sufferers.

Depression treatments

In cases of depression, doctors commonly prescribe an anti-depressant medication to treat the illness. Anti-depressants can relieve some symptoms, but it doesn't cure the underlying problem and it's not usually a long-term solution. Many who respond to medication slip back into major depression within a short while, despite sticking to treatment. Many people are prescribed and take anti-depressants when exercise and self-help would work just as well or even better – minus the side effects.

Side effects of anti-depressant pills include nausea, insomnia, anxiety, restlessness, fatigue, constipation, headaches, sweating and weight gain or loss.

Depression and exercise

Exercise does not, in most cases, produce any negative side effects. Instead, the effects of exercise on depression have been found to lift mood, decrease anxiety, and improve self-esteem and concentration. The release of endorphins through exercise impacts on mood and can induce a feeling of happiness. Exercise, especially in the social setting of a gym, helps sufferers to get active and meet new people – stopping feelings of isolation. It also gives people new goals and a real sense of purpose, through having something positive to focus on and aim for. Exercise boosts self-esteem, improving the way sufferers' look and feel about themselves.

A survey showed that 85% of people who tried exercise as a way to treat depression found it more helpful than medication. Commonly, those suffering from depression that try exercise as a treatment say it feels like a very 'natural' way to respond to feeling down, and gives them feelings of achievement and control, which help to counter their feelings of hopelessness.

Anxiety treatments

Doctors also prescribe medication as the most common way to treat anxiety. Anti-anxiety drugs are known as tranquillisers, and relieve anxiety by slowing down the central nervous system. The relaxing and calming effects of these drugs make them very popular, but as they reduce brain activity, they often lead to side effects beyond relief.

Sufferers on anti-anxiety medication often feel sleepy, uncoordinated and foggy, which causes problems in day-to-day life. Side effects often include a lack of energy, weight gain, confusion, depression and nausea.

Exercise and anxiety

Medication only provides temporary re-

lief to anxiety. To overcome anxiety for good, sufferers need to make big lifestyle changes – this includes regular exercise and a healthy diet. In the long-term, exercise is a very real treatment for anxiety, and provides a life-long solution. A new study from the University of Missouri-Columbia shows that high-intensity exercise is superior in reducing stress and anxiety, and is especially beneficial to women. Research also shows that sufferers who see the biggest improvements of anxiety with exercise are those who are not already physically active, those who are consistent, and those that do aerobic exercise rather than resistance training.

Physical activity and mental health promotion is a natural partnership, and so is exercise in the treatment of conditions such as depression and anxiety. For sufferers, and especially people who have never exercised before, starting a consistent fitness program can be daunting

“How can we encourage sufferers to work out in a gym?”

and intimidating. Research shows that people with mental health problems often feel unable to attend local exercise facilities. People who have anxiety or depression often don't feel like they have any energy, and feel isolated from people and society.

I met with National clinical support Dr Glen Simblett and National healthy lifestyles coordinator Basil Fernandes who work for Pathways, a community provider of mental across New Zealand, to talk about the barriers sufferers of mental health face when taking up exercise at a gym. We also spoke about how staff of the health and fitness industry can address these barriers and make their facility as welcoming as possible.

Dr Simblett talks about the “nervousness and shyness” people may feel about first approaching a gym – and says these barriers are generally prevalent for all

new exercisers. Having approachable staff on the front desk that welcome all types of people and talk about exercise and how it relates to their unique situation can address initial feelings of intimidation.

Working with local medical practices and creating a partnership between the medical provider and the exercise provider can help to direct people who are having mental health problems to your gym, and can help facilitate the journey between the two providers. Green cards can be offered by medical professionals as a way to direct those in need to their local fitness facility. Green card membership prices must cost substantially less than that of a normal membership. Also, having a trainer or member of staff who is trained in mental health and exercise, and who is aware of how the new member may be feeling, can help to ease them into an exercise program.

Fernandes said that “general questions about mental and physical health should be directed at all new clients – if the member feels comfortable enough, they may feel inclined to share their health history with the trainer”. Having a member of staff go through their initial consultation that is personable and knowledgeable about these issues will help the new member to feel comfortable and share their history. 80% of people experience stigma when they disclose personal information about their mental health history. Educating members of staff about mental health and the way members may be feeling helps to remove any stigmas about the issue, and aids in helping staff to communicate better with those who have mental health issues.

Dr Simblett talked about a “holistic approach to exercise”. This involves helping the member to make the body and mind stronger and healthier – not to hurt it through overuse or exercise obsession. People suffering from mental health problems are already hurting mentally, and are looking to exercise for treatment and to help them feel better.

A trainer monitoring their progress and not pushing too hard too soon will help the new member be consistent with their exercise plan and to slowly incorporate it into their lifestyle.

This “holistic approach” also means recognising everyone is different and responds to exercise differently. Include different types of exercise for members – high energy, fast paced cardio classes might do for some what yoga and Pilates do for others. For people with anxiety disorders, the quiet environment of a yoga and meditation class may get them focused on their breathing and calm their nerves. For those with depression, a high-energy kickboxing class may make them feel alive and healthy again. Make an effort to realise that everyone is different, and likes exercising in different ways.

To create a welcoming environment for all types of members, staff need to be friendly and open to everyone all the time. A smile and a short conversation about how the member is doing goes a long way to address any feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed. It is also

important for those that suffer from mental health to feel included and supported, especially when starting at a new gym. This also links with retention, and creating a personal relationship with the gym staff and all members.

- Incorporating general questions about mental and physical health in each fitness consultation, and having trained staff create personalised fitness programs for mental health sufferers.
- Create a strong relationship with local medical facilities, so members of the public seeking treatment are directed to their local gym with green cards.
- Creating a holistic and balanced approach to exercise – making the body and mind healthier, and not pushing people too soon. Including all types of group fitness classes to suit everybody.
- Training staff on mental health and common mental health issues to help eliminate stigma surrounding these issues.
- Making sure fitness and reception staff are friendly, welcoming and

have open minds with regards to new members. Making sure members are not judged by any mental health illness they may have.

- Creating a personal relationship with all members, helping them feel included and supported on their exercise journey.
- Treat the person as a whole; don't just treat the illness they happen to have.

The main thing Dr Simblett and Mr Fernandes put across about mental health in gyms was to make sure no one is stigmatised because of an illness. Educate staff on what mental health is and how common disorders are. Treat the person as a whole; do not just treat their illness or injury. Give them tools to take up a holistic view of their own health and lifestyle, of which exercise is a consistent part. Living healthily is genuinely good for everyone – including those with mental health problems.

Many GP's are not convinced exercise prescription is an effective treatment response, and do not refer a lot of their mental health patients to this type of treatment – suggesting there is a considerable information and knowledge gap. The main obstacle to the use of exercise therapy as a first-line treatment is the failure of information reaching those who are able to use it. Through changing the attitudes and updating the knowledge of your staff, and through creating a relationship with your local medical centre to emphasize the benefits of exercise and set up an exercise referral scheme, sufferers will be aware of the benefits of physical exercise on their mental health issue and be more inclined to approach your gym for help.

Mental Health issues are common amongst New Zealanders. By taking away barriers to allow sufferers to harness the benefits of exercise, more of these people will feel welcome at gyms and take the first steps to creating a healthy lifestyle for themselves. Be open to all types of people attending your gym, and know the ways exercise can help to address their issues.

In most cases, a healthy body really does equal a healthy mind.

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