



Using exercise to manage PTSD

There is significant evidence around the benefits of exercise for both physical and mental health. As Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is becoming more openly accepted and diagnosed, the positive effect that exercise can have on those with PTSD is also gaining increased recognition.

How exactly can exercise help with my PTSD?

We know that PTSD affects everyone in different ways, and similarly, people respond differently to medications and psychology treatments. When it comes to exercise, exactly what promotes the positive benefits for PTSD can be best described as multi-modal - meaning several positive aspects are likely contributing together. Below is a list of some of the benefits of exercise, that can then positively impact PTSD symptoms;

- ◆ Improve mood in the short and long term
- ◆ Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety
- ◆ Improve sleep quality
- ◆ Maintain routine and structure
- ◆ Reduce alcohol dependence
- ◆ Improve cognitive function
- ◆ Reduce avoidance behaviours
- ◆ Reduce the likelihood of developing secondary physical health conditions
- ◆ Increase community connectedness
- ◆ Improvements in outcomes when couple with other treatments

References:

McKeon G et al (2021). A Mental Health-Informed Physical Activity Intervention for First Responders and Their Partners Delivered Using Facebook: Mixed Methods Pilot Study. *JMIR Form Res*.

Firth, J et al. (2016). Motivating factors and barriers towards exercise in severe mental illness: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological medicine*.

How do you start with exercising?

If we account for the reductions in motivation, increased tendency to self-isolate, and low energy levels that are often experienced with PTSD, exercising can understandably seem like a daunting task. Here are a few pieces of advice that can help to make those first few steps or reps a bit easier.

- ◆ **Try to find a type of physical activity that you enjoy, or used to enjoy.** Lots of research has gone into finding the most effective form of exercise for mental health and pleasingly, by doing this, we now know that something as light as yoga or as intense as running can all result in positive responses.
- ◆ **A little is better than none and more is better than less.** Developing the habit of exercising regularly takes time and while the general guidelines suggest 150 minutes per week, it may take some time to build up to this level. Starting with 10 minutes on every other day is better than nothing and can help get the ball rolling.
- ◆ **Seek assistance from exercise professionals, family and friends.** Research has shown exercise is completed more regularly and is more effective in improving psychological symptoms when a qualified exercise professional is providing support, assisting with setting goals, and delivering supervised exercise programs. Friends and family can also play an important role in increasing motivation and enjoyment with exercise.