

Medical problem? Call 1800 022 222. If you need urgent medical help, call triple zero immediately

healthdirect Australia is a free service where you can talk to a nurse or doctor who can help you know what to do.

Exercise and mental health

7-minute read



 If you need to talk to someone about your mental health, call **Beyond Blue** on [1300 22 4636](tel:1300224636).

Key facts

- Exercise can benefit your mental health as well as your physical health.
- Exercising regularly can help reduce stress, help you sleep better and aid recovery from mental illness.
- If you are new to exercising, start slowly in a setting where you feel comfortable and choose an activity you enjoy.

On this page

↓ [What are the mental health benefits of exercise?](#)

↓ [How does exercise help my mental health?](#)

↓ [How much exercise do I need?](#)

[How do I start exercising?](#)

↓ [How do I overcome obstacles to exercise?](#)

↓ [Resources and support](#)

↓ [Related information on Australian websites](#)

What are the mental health benefits of exercise?

[Exercise has many benefits](#) for your health. This includes physical benefits, such as helping you to:

- manage and prevent illness
- [lose weight](#) if you need to
- build muscle mass and [strength](#)

You can read about the [benefits of physical activity for children](#).

If you exercise often, it can help your mental health by:

- [reducing stress](#)
- improving your concentration and memory
- giving you more energy
- boosting your [self-esteem](#)
- preventing and [reducing symptoms](#) of [mental health](#) conditions, such as [depression](#) and [anxiety](#).
- helping with recovery from [mental health issues](#)

Exercise can also help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. It can create opportunities to get outside, be social and interact with other people.

Exercise can also improve your [sleep](#). A good rest is important in both your physical and mental health.



Daily actions to improve your mental health

Research from MindSpot has shown that regularly performing five simple daily actions can improve your mental health.

How does exercise help my mental health?

Exercise may cause your brain to release 'feel good' chemicals like endorphins and serotonin. Research suggests that these can help improve your mood.

It also improves your fitness, which can help lift your mood.

Doing physical activity can also distract you from and help you manage negative thought patterns.

How much exercise do I need?

[Australian guidelines](#) recommend adults do at least 30 minutes of moderate [physical activity](#) each day.

Combine your exercise routine with a [healthy diet](#) and other healthy [lifestyle](#) habits.

While you exercise, you can also try practicing [mindfulness](#). Mindfulness means deliberately paying attention to whatever you are doing right now. Mindfulness can help you to keep grounded and manage stress.

How do I start exercising?

When [starting to exercise](#), it's important to stay within your limits. Consider ways you can incorporate exercise into your daily routine and lifestyle.

Exercise should not be painful. If you are not usually active, start with simple activities like:

- going to the shops
- gardening
- household chores
- cooking

At your own pace, try to build up to doing 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day, such as:

- bike riding
- walking
- swimming

If you have a pedometer or smart watch, you can also monitor your steps and set walking goals. You can aim to walk more steps each day, which can help improve your quality of life.

You don't need to visit a gym to exercise. You can start exercising in a comfortable environment to build your confidence. You can exercise:

- at home
- outside
- alone, with people you know or with a class or group

When starting exercise, choose something you enjoy. You can use your friends or family as motivators to keep you on track. If you have children or [own a pet](#) such as a dog, you can walk around your local area. This could include visiting the park or the beach if they are nearby. If you enjoy dancing, try a creative dance movement class. If you enjoy art, visit a museum or gallery.

How do I overcome obstacles to exercise?

When starting exercise, you may experience some barriers. Most obstacles can be overcome with patience and commitment to your goals.

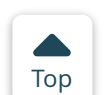
Motivation and energy

Mental health issues can be tiring. You may struggle with motivation for exercise. To overcome this, you can:

- start slowly and [set small goals](#)
- reward yourself for exercising
- try social exercise
- remind yourself that exercise can help you reset and feel better

A mental health professional can work with you to make an exercise plan. This plan can include ways to keep yourself motivated.

Cost



You may think that exercising is too costly. Gym memberships and home exercise equipment can be expensive. There are other, more affordable ways to exercise. You can:

- see if your local community centre has any affordable exercise groups
- see if your community has a free, local running group
- go for a walk around your neighbourhood
- explore online exercise classes and exercise apps

Anxiety or feeling intimidated

You might feel uncomfortable exercising in a public place or joining a group exercise class. This is perfectly normal. To feel more comfortable and build your confidence, you can try:

- taking a friend with you to an exercise class
- exercising in comfortable clothes
- downloading an app to exercise in your own home

Time

If you are short on time, there are things you can try to fit exercise into your routine:

- Break exercise into small chunks — instead of doing 30 minutes in one go, do 3 lots of 10 minutes in a day.
- Try to wake up earlier.
- Try to walk around on your lunch break.

Physical limitations

You may have physical obstacles such as an injury or disability that makes it difficult to exercise.

You may benefit from seeing a health professional such as a [physiotherapist](#) or [exercise physiologist](#). They can suggest exercise options suitable for you, and help you plan activities.

Resources and support

For advice and to get connected to local mental health services, you can call [Medicare Mental Health](#) on [1800 595 212](#). Check the [operating times](#).

The [Black Dog Institute](#) has information on [depression](#) and [benefits of exercise](#).

[Headspace](#) has information and interactive resources to help you [stay active](#).

[Beyond Blue](#) has [tips for getting active](#), as well as a [template](#) to help you plan activities for your wellbeing.

[SANE Australia](#) has information on [ways to look after your physical health](#), including physical activity.

You can also call the healthdirect helpline on [1800 022 222](#) (known as NURSE-ON-CALL in Victoria). A registered nurse is available to speak with you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

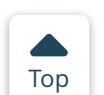
Sources:

Journal of Affective Disorders ([An open trial of the Things You Do Questionnaire: Changes in daily actions during internet-delivered treatment for depressive and anxiety symptoms](#)), RANZCP ([Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists clinical practice guidelines for mood disorders](#)), Department of Health and Aged Care ([Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians](#)), Lancet Public Health ([Daily steps and all-cause mortality: a meta-analysis of 15 international cohorts](#)), The Cureus Journal of Medical Science ([Role of Physical Activity on Mental Health and Well-Being: A Review](#)), Annual Review of Medicine ([The Role of Exercise in Management of Mental Health Disorders: An Integrative Review](#)), Beyond Blue ([Keeping active](#)), Headspace ([A short guide on how to improve your mental health using physical activity and healthy eating](#)).

Learn more here about the [development and quality assurance of healthdirect content](#).

Last reviewed: December 2024

24 hour health advice you can count on ☎ 1800 022 222





We are a government-funded service, providing quality, approved health information and advice



Healthdirect Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners and to Elders both past and present.

© 2026 Healthdirect Australia Limited