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Move body and mind: five exercises to improve mental health, from twists to lunges

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A paradox at the heart of current thinking on health is that we're all aware, perhaps agonisingly so, that exercise is good for us and can be especially beneficial to mental health. As the number of people presenting to their doctors with mood disorders continues to climb, more GPs are urging us to exercise more. It has even been available on the NHS as treatment for mild mental health issues since 2019. But for many people, doing more exercise remains a hard ask.



We all know we should do more exercise and arguments for its benefits hardly need repeating: improved blood pressure, better sleep, strength, mobility, confidence, mood and posture, perhaps even a better reflection when we look in the mirror.

If we are looking at ways to exercise for psychological benefits, we should be honest: exercise hurts, even if you do it regularly. It's boring, repetitive and hard to stick to.

Images of sleek bodies telegraphed by sportswear brands often set unrealistic ideas of what's attainable.

Meanwhile, the over-mirrored gym experience can be alienating – perhaps even anxiety-inducing.

So one of the first switches to make if you're looking for the mental benefits of exercise is the motive for it.

Why are you making yourself do this? And what do you hope to get out of it? That way, hopefully, exercise becomes internal and psychological, instead of external and aesthetic.

Many benefits of exercise have been clinically proven. There's the release of endorphins (the famed "runner's high") and increased circulation of good-mood serotonin. Achieving one or 101 press-ups also delivers a dopamine reward. Then there are myokines or "hope molecules", proteins released in the bloodstream by muscular contractions which improve metabolism, reduce inflammation and improve mood.

All of these may count towards whatever "mental health" might mean to you, but since humans are more than biochemical formulae, it's important for trainers to also offer psychological cues to make these movements into opportunities for reflection.

Fitness culture – the realm of physical health – tends to over-privilege the body, while talking therapy – the realm of mental health – can overemphasise the mind. Today more research shows that what works better is bringing these disciplines together: programming specific exercises that build strength as well as prompt introspection and self-awareness.

After using these techniques, participants often report greater energy, surprise at newfound capabilities, anxiety dissolving into calmness, a keener sense of embodiment, and the motivation for more.

They are robust additions to an idea of mental health, which also includes social health – especially as friendships and training alliances are often formed. The mood improvements that can come with 30-45 minutes of exercise are more attainable than the sixpacks and beach bodies advertised by many gym chains.

Stick with it, and long-term changes in body composition – improved strength and mobility, muscle gain, fat loss – are likely to be byproducts anyway.

This programme which we've developed at our studio The Soma Space covers five basic exercises, using what are known as "atomic movements". In the context of strength training, these are small, consistent

movements that, over time, lead to physical wellbeing. The movements also reflect some of the fundamental ways the human body moves.

These can be done with no or some equipment, in isolation or combined as part of a workout, and we also make suggestions for ways to evolve them, “plus something else”.

As basic ground rules, you should always stretch and warm up before you start exercising, and above all, begin where you're at: if you can only manage one repetition, it's still one rep. Go gently at first.

Use the reflective cues to notice how you respond in the movement: as a counsellor might ask, what do you notice? Struggle and frustration for sure – but what else? Try 10 minutes every day, ideally early on in the day, and do it with others where possible.

Try these movements in their raw state and, if your budget permits, consider investing in a basic set up: some dumbbells, a kettlebell, a slam ball and a resistance band.

All gyms have these and if you're already practising strength training with barbells and heavier loads, try switching the focus from volume and repetitions to interoceptive experience – how they make you feel emotionally as well as physically.

1 Squat: getting comfortable with discomfort

Bodyweight squat: stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, hands together in front of you, bend the knees, push your hips back and sink, keeping the feet flat to the floor. Avoid hunching forward. Push down through the heels to rise back up.

Goblet squat: as above plus holding a kettlebell or dumbbell with both hands at chest height.

The barbell back squat: often perceived as an advanced movement, this is nevertheless achievable by most people with assistance at a gym.

Reflect on: Getting comfortable with discomfort, which is how any exercise habit begins. Do you notice sensations of awkwardness (squatting involves pushing your bum out, after all) strain, or shifting balance, or equally, strength or lightness?

Explore the limits of your mobility as you sink and the feeling of overcoming as you rise. After 10 reps, congratulate yourself: you've started. New neural connections have been made.

Go further: Practise sitting deeper into the squat by holding on to and pulling against something, like a door frame, or adding load. Consider trying a martial arts class, where movements are often performed in a semi-squatted position, or a yoga class.

2 Lunge: overcome stuckness and fear of movement

From a standing position, take a step directly forward with one foot, dropping the back knee towards the floor, then pushing back to standing. Try a shorter range at first, since the return movement can be hard work. Next try side lunges (think of clock hands: 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock), then reverse lunges (6 o'clock), or work all the way round the clock face. Keep the torso raised and add a dumbbell in each hand or deepen the lunge to progress the movement.

Reflect on: breaking out of the stuck state which anxieties and low mood can hold us in – literally and figuratively a lunge is a step forwards, out and beyond. Additionally, observe your grounding (where your feet land) and slow the movement to contemplate your experience of control and balance. Begin with 10 on each side, alternating left and right.

Go further: Walking and running are effectively controlled lunging movements, so consider the couch to 5k challenge.

3 Twist: find fluidity and flow

Learn boxing's first four punches: jab-cross-hook-hook/1-2-3-4. The jab extends the lead arm forwards toward the opponent, the cross extends the rear arm forwards as you turn the torso into the strike, and rotate at the hips and waist for the hooks. Shadowbox the combo for one- to two-minute intervals. Or try tai chi's “swinging arms” exercise: with your feet shoulder-width apart, turn 90 degrees left and right at the waist, allowing your arms to be tensionless, as floppy as noodles. Evolve it by lifting the left heel as you twist rightwards and vice versa, tapping on your lower back with one hand and front shoulder with the

other, for three- to five-minute intervals. Soften the knees and sink while twisting to work the movement further.

Reflect on: finding fluidity and flow in the movement and adapting to changes in balance.

Go further: Try boxercise or a tai chi class for dynamic twisting, or yoga for static/held twists such as the triangle pose/trikonasana. Or ask: when was the last time you went dancing?

4 Hinge: owning your upright self

Hingeing forwards at the hip is the basis of the barbell deadlift – a centrepiece in strength training practice – which can be tricky to learn because in daily life it's a relatively rare movement. We go from gorilla-like posture with the hips pushed backwards, the knees slightly bent and shoulders pulled back, to a full standing position.

Under load, the movement recruits both leg strength and the “posterior chain” (the muscles on the back of the body): try it with a loaded bag or a heavy book first, then a dumbbell in each hand if you have them, or a barbell. Take the opportunity to fully stand up, pulling the shoulders back against the weight of the load.

Reflect on: self-assertion, self-ownership, and relearning to stand straight up like a mountain, plus the opposites: practising against slumping, slouching, self-minimising and other bodily encodings of low self-esteem. Or ask: what do you want to stand up against?

Go further: learn the kettlebell swing, or grasp the mettle and try a strength-training gym session to develop your deadlift.

5 Push and pull

Almost all strength training movements involve pushing or pulling against resistance, so consider doing any of these:

Push: the humble press-up on the floor, or with knees to the ground if you struggle to maintain the position, or against a counter. The yoga downward facing dog pose requires pushing away from the ground through hands and feet. The barbell bench press engages the whole musculature with an emphasis on the upper body. Then there's the mighty slam ball: drive it down to the ground from shoulder height or above the head. Power the movement with your frustration.

Pull: try the supine Superman: lie flat on your front, arms extended in front of you. Lift the chest slightly from the floor and draw the elbows to your sides, making a W shape. Or the upright row: stand tall and using a resistance band hooked under your feet or dumbbells, pull upwards and return.

Reflect on: if things are getting on top of you, what do you need to push away? And when something is missing or lacking, what do you wish to pull closer?

Go further: visit a climbing wall (pulling the body skywards), go swimming (pulling through liquid) or try the rower. In a gym, try the sled push, leg press or chest press machine.

The Soma Space offers an online 12-session course Introduction to Movement for Mental Health which covers basic exercises and ideas that can benefit mental health