

Could participating in physical activity decrease male suicide rates in the UK?

Doing 30 minutes of exercise every day could save your life

Lucy Thomas

Exercise is proving to become popular in the twenty-first century, with more and more people wanting to achieve a healthier body. But there's more to exercise than just staying fit, it's a tool that can be used to battle one of the UK's most increasing and least talked about issues, mental health.

In a 2017 report by The Samaritans, it was found that almost 5,000 men took their own lives in 2015. The NHS estimate that 90% of people who attempt or die by suicide have one or more mental health conditions. These could be severe depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder and anorexia to name a few.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapist Rachel Hudson explains that, "depression is a mood disorder characterised by a loss of pleasure, energy, change in appetite or weight change with sleep disturbances. "Suicide relates to a sense of hopelessness, such that the level of hopelessness is the predictor of suicide rather than the severity of the depression." Hudson believes that men who are isolated or have suffered significant loss through divorce or bereavement, loss of occupation or social network are all vulnerable to developing mental health issues.

59-year-old David Baum came close to suicide after suffering with PTSD from a chain of events which started when he was bullied in school: "From the age of 14 I was kicked and punched every day and I still carry the scars of the attacks.



Men running through the countryside
Photograph: Michael de Groot/Pixabay

1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each and every year

People should do a general 30 minutes of physical activity every day to stay happy and healthy

He says: "I thought that when I left school all of the pain would go away, but it didn't."

After quitting his job in hairdressing, David worked for his family as a sales representative and unfortunately ended up in a series of car crashes: "While the physical scars healed, the mental ones didn't. Then after my wife Melanie and I got married our sons required major surgery and both came close to death. "The final straw for me was when Melanie was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. I was finally ordered to get some help as I wanted to kill myself."

Although male suicide rates are highest in men aged 40 to 44 years old, this doesn't mean that younger generations aren't at risk. 21-year-old Joe Russell is a Rugby Football Union Coach who has recently been diagnosed with depression for the second time.

"When I'm depressed I sleep a lot and I find it difficult to get out of bed. I have no motivation to do anything and I completely lose my appetite." He says: "One of the hardest things I've found is when people ask me 'are you okay?', because I know I'm not okay, but just don't know how to express the way I'm feeling. There are so many elements as to why I feel this way, and I get frustrated and angry at myself for not being able to talk, so in the end I just reply with I'm okay or I'm fine when I knew I wasn't."

"I've been in that state before when I've considered taking my own life and that's when you need help from someone."

So why are men more likely to take their own lives? Mental health stigma is difficult for everyone, but it can be especially challenging for men. Masculinity has been represented as tough and strong through the media for decades, making it even more difficult for the male gender to open up and express emotions.

Homeopathic Therapist Amanda Clifford explains that the stigma is linked to our quality of life: "Men tend to bury their heads and just carry on with life which can spiral off to a really critical stage. If you look at tribes, they help men mature and

move through life together and we as a society aren't doing that." Clifford says that "people can forget who they really are. I've seen men who can be married on the outside, but on the inside they're actually dying."

But there is one way that men of any age can deal with mental health conditions, by participating in physical exercise. Personal Trainer Ricky Juneja explains how engaging in exercise can benefit one's mental wellbeing: "Releasing your energy through exercise is a positive way of destressing and dealing with mental health problems. Sport is where you can channel your aggression, channel all of that energy into bettering yourself."

When a person engages with physical activity, endorphins, adrenaline, serotonin, and dopamine are released which work together to make you feel good. Juneja says that "a person's legs are the biggest part of their body, so if you train your legs it will release the most amount of endorphins that will make you feel happier. Whether that's training your legs by going for a walk or run for 30 minutes, it's just doing something that will make you stay happy."

Both David and Joe have used exercise as a tool to help their mental wellbeing. After receiving counselling when David wanted to take his own life, he took part in last year's 22 x 22 press-up challenge, which highlights the fact that 22 ex-service men and women commit suicide every day. David says: "I then began to think of my experience, of Melanie's trauma

surviving cancer and our sons, and I realised that 100,000's of men, women and children can and are suffering from PTSD, anyone can have it."

This inspired David to create 'The 365 Challenge'. People undertaking the challenge commit to spending one to two minutes a day exercising for 365 days of the year. They film their session and post it on social media to increase the awareness of PTSD and other mental health issues.

He explains: "I'm very proud that the challenge is beginning to have an effect as more people are reaching out for help and contacting counsellors."

Joe also found that focusing on a physical goal helped him come out of a dark place. Him and his father, Terry Russell, both climbed Mount Everest together which gave Joe a purpose as he battles depression: "I had to wake up and go to the gym, I had to train and get fit, I had to eat properly and work at the same time. If I didn't I wouldn't have made it."

Exercise can give a person focus by setting themselves an achievable goal.

"I told myself that pain is temporary, but failure is permanent. I will finish this, I will climb Everest. The whole experience has helped my mind massively, it's just making yourself get out of bed and do it."

These inspiring stories show how participating in exercise can save a person's life. If more men engaged in physical activity like David and Joe, then maybe the UK's male suicide rate would see a decline in the near future.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapist Rachel Hudson concludes that: "Behavioural activation has gained a place in relief of mental health problems. For men especially it is seeking company for a common purpose and provides a sense of belonging and working together to achieve a common goal."

For professional advice on suicide prevention, or if you are concerned about someone who may be suicidal or are at risk yourself, contact **The Samaritans on 08457 909090.**

From right, David Baum does 40 reps for day 269 of The 365 Challenge, Joe Russell and father Terry Russell celebrate on Mount Everest



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