

Q&A

Every issue, we ask our bank of experts to tackle one of your training related questions.

This edition we focus on training a client with mental health issues.

GOT A QUESTION?

Email it to publish@fitpro.com and we may print it next issue.



I have a client who is suffering from depression. They have told me about this and are keen to continue training. Are there any specific issues I should be aware of and techniques that I can use?



That your client feels comfortable to disclose they have depression infers you have established a good rapport, as many people will not disclose mental health issues for fear of being judged.

That they want to continue training is positive: staying active is important.¹ There is significant evidence on the benefits of exercise for mental health, including improved mood, self-esteem and confidence, reduced anxiety, decreased risk of clinically diagnosed depression, increased physical self-worth and improved body image etc.²

Check if your client has visited their GP, as they are best placed to prescribe a treatment plan. If they are taking medication, check the side effects and any implications for exercise.

Working with clients with depression can be challenging to one's own resources

Gather information about depression – there are many books that provide information and most mental health charity websites provide informative fact sheets. It may also be time to update your own qualifications; there are a range of courses that deal with mental health issues.

Your client will have days when they feel low, so keep promoting the benefits of exercise. Remind them that, while sometimes they will not feel in the mood for exercise, it will offer a distraction from negative thoughts as well as many other benefits.^{1,2,4} Some of the physiological

adaptations have a positive effect on psychological well-being.⁵ These include:

- Enhanced neurotransmission of chemicals released by the endocrine system (norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine), which leads to improved mood
- Improved circulation of endorphins
- Increased adrenal activity, which boosts steroid reserves and can potentially increase the ability to cope with stressful situations
- Increased energy expenditure and muscle work, which provides a physical release for any muscular tension and increased glucose in the circulatory system caused by the fight or flight response

If your client is enjoying their programme, stick with it. Reductions in depression have been reported from various modalities, including running, walking, weight training, skipping and sports.^{2,3,5}

Clients with depression can feel tired and de-motivated, so keep the intensity at a moderate level and include any higher intensity activities after the warm-up, so that the latter part of the session can focus on recovery activities (e.g., stretching, relaxation).

You could also encourage experimentation of other types of activity to assist with motivation. For many people, exercising outdoors and being in a natural environment offers a sense of peace and rebalance.⁶ Likewise, some mind and body programmes include components of relaxation and meditation (e.g., t'ai chi, yoga, Pilates, Nia) that are useful skills.

Working with clients with depression can be challenging to one's own resources. It is important to remember that your sessions provide a structure, routine and an opportunity for interaction, all of

which are important as social isolation is common among people with mental health conditions.

Continue to be an empathic exercise professional who mirrors positive regard and keeps the client at the heart of the work. Raise their awareness to various activity options but let them choose what is right for them. You may also find it beneficial to speak with a counsellor to support yourself.

You need to be aware of the risk of suicide. If your client discloses feeling suicidal, then take this seriously. Ensure they speak with their GP and tell them that you will need to contact their named emergency contact. You have a responsibility for your own and your client's safety.

The available evidence provides considerable support for the value of exercise in reducing depressive symptoms, but it must be used alongside pharmacological and behavioural therapy, not as an alternative. ^{fm}

DEBBIE LAWRENCE

Debbie is an exercise professional, trained counsellor and author of numerous books on the benefits of exercise for mental health conditions. She has developed the level 4 training programme, Physical Activity for persons with mental health conditions.

For information on books by Debbie visit acblack.com

To view the references related to this article visit fitpro.com/references

For more Q&As visit ptonthenet.com – the most comprehensive online education resource for fitness professionals.