



Supporting mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic: A guide for clubs and groups

Research shows that around 1 in 4 people will experience mental health problems in any given year.¹

This can range from anxiety or depression to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Like physical health, mental health can be positively or negatively impacted by a range of different factors. Participating in sport and physical activity can help to boost mental wellbeing by contributing to enjoyment, providing social interaction and improving mood through the release of endorphins.

However, factors like lockdowns, local restrictions and the concerns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic can negatively affect mental health. For example:

More than half of adults (**60%**) and two-thirds of young people (**68%**) felt their mental health had got worse during lockdown.²

56% of participants and **68%** of volunteers felt some level of anxiety about returning to a club or group environment.³

In November 2020, more than **40%** of people worried about leaving their home to be active.⁴

Additionally, research from before the pandemic shows that mental health has been worsening in children and young people, with 1 in 6 experiencing mental health problems in 2020, compared to 1 in 9 in 2017.⁵

Feeling Anxious versus Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a word used to describe feelings of worry, unease or fear. Many people will feel anxious in relation to 'everyday' issues such as their job, uncomfortable situations or embarrassing moments.

An anxiety disorder, however, is different. These can cause people to experience anxiety on a more constant basis over a long period of time, result in them avoiding social situations or lead to irrational fears of things that pose little threat to them.

This guide primarily refers to people feeling anxious about the pandemic, but some information will still be relevant to people with anxiety disorders.

1. McManus et al., 2009. Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2007 (England). HSCIC

2. Mind, 2020. The mental health emergency: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health? London: Mind. Available at: www.mind.org.uk

3. Club Matters, 2020. Club Matters Return to Sport and Activity Surveys. Sport England

4. Sport England, 2020. Covid-19 Briefing. Sport England

5. NHS Digital, 2020. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey. NHS

Sport and physical activity clubs and groups are vibrant, people-based environments that take an active interest in the wellbeing of their participants and volunteers.

Identifying anyone from your organisation who might be experiencing feelings of anxiety, acknowledging that it is an issue for them and working with them to address what might affect their return to sport and activity are valuable steps. Identifying and working on these factors can help improve the chances of people returning and staying involved with your organisation, ensuring they feel supported, safe and valued.

Top Tips

Club Matters has teamed up with Mind to develop some top tips to help you support people's mental wellbeing as they return to sport and activity:

1. Reflect on your own mental health and wellbeing and how it's been affected by the pandemic.

Also consider any ways, both in your professional and personal life, you have taken care of your mental health. By being open and willing to share your own experiences, it will help others to open up.

2. Talk to your people about how they're feeling.

The coronavirus pandemic has been causing some people to feel anxious, isolated, stressed, worried and scared. The Club Matters Survey showed that concerns and barriers, such as feelings of anxiety and not trusting others to follow the rules, affect willingness to return to activity in a club/group environment. For volunteers, considerations like the changes to their role and extra responsibilities can also be barriers to return. We recommend reviewing the insight available, including the links in this guide, and taking time to talk to your people about how they feel. This might also include talking to their parents, carers and families where relevant, especially for younger people. Remember to involve the person in any wider discussions, so they continue to have a voice and be fully informed.

Simply asking "How you are feeling?" often doesn't prompt an honest response. [Time to Change's #AskTwice campaign](#) shows that **asking for a second time or asking someone how they "are really feeling?"** can be helpful or using a scale such as 1 – 10 asking people to rate where they are and why.

3. Communicate regularly.

Communicating with people effectively and regularly not only helps to keep them informed about the steps your organisation is taking to improve their experience and safety, but can help ensure they still feel part of your club/group even if they are unable to attend in person. It is important to use the platforms that work best for your people. Focus your messaging on both safety and promoting the positive elements of your sport/activity or volunteering that people might be most looking forward to, to help encourage return.



4. Have a remote offer to keep people engaged.

Not everyone will be able to return to participating or volunteering straightaway; some may have new commitments, whilst others may not be comfortable immediately going back to a club or group environment. If this is the case, it may be valuable for you to keep any online activity sessions and socials going or reimagine your offer to include these. When the time is right, can you create a hybrid offer, with a mix of face-to-face and virtual sessions? Try to apply this to volunteer roles too – by splitting up roles into tasks that can be shared out and done at home.

5. Support people to return.

To help people feel more comfortable about returning, consider what your organisation can do to alleviate any feelings of anxiety ahead of time. For example, you could offer re-introduction sessions (which would ideally be reduced or free of charge) or out-of-hours visits to facilities to demonstrate how they have been adapted for people's safety? Additionally, sharing detailed plans for sessions or descriptions of new processes in advance can help to minimise surprises and encourage return. You could also arrange check-in calls or virtual meetings with volunteers before people are due to come back, to touch base on how they're feeling and discuss anything that's concerning them about their role.

6. Be flexible.

Personal and work situations can change quickly, so try to be as flexible as possible. Consider what you can do to meet people's needs. For participants, this could include adapting session formats or timings to fit in with their other commitments, allowing people to freeze their membership, pay monthly or offering discounted rates if appropriate. For volunteers, try to adapt roles to the individual fulfilling them and their needs where possible, including taking a flexible approach to people carrying out roles remotely.

7. Reduce the risk of volunteer burn-out and fatigue.

The Club Matters Return to Activity Survey identified a risk of volunteers becoming fatigued and potentially dropping out as they work to protect their organisation from the impact of the pandemic. As such, we recommend developing a plan to try and tackle this risk. Actions might include breaking roles down into tasks to share them out more equally, developing a succession plan and recruiting new people to get involved. Encouraging honest conversations to help you monitor how people are feeling might also be part of this plan. It is important to make sure people know it's okay to change or reduce their commitment, or even stop altogether if they need to until they feel more comfortable.



8. Create an adaptive and supportive atmosphere.

Creating a supportive atmosphere, including for your volunteer workforce, can help to ensure people feel more comfortable. It can be beneficial to encourage open dialogue and provide opportunities for volunteers to co-produce any new systems or processes; which will help them feel valued and supported. It can also help to adapt the environment to people's needs. For example, can you set up a 'quiet area' people can go to if they need to? Creating or reviewing your referral pathway, or the process you use to support people to access specialised help, is also positive. If you do have a referral pathway, promote this across so your people know the details. Additionally, you can signpost to relevant support on your website.

9. Promote mental health awareness across your organisation.

Supporting people to have an awareness of their own mental health and that of others can be very positive for the culture of your organisation. This might include encouraging people to educate themselves so they can recognise signs in themselves and others and praising those that talk openly about their experiences. We would also recommend taking time to make it clear that creating a positive environment regarding mental health is important to your organisation. This might include sharing regular communications on the topic or creating forums where people feel able to discuss their mental health and wellbeing. [Click here to view a helpful animation from Mind and UK Coaching for extra insight.](#)



10. Make adjustments for people where appropriate .

We recommend talking to people and identifying any adjustments that could help them feel more comfortable. You might start by setting aside time to discuss this as a group (including virtually or as restrictions permit), or encouraging people to get in touch privately to share their thoughts. These might be on a personal basis, such as introducing goal-setting or allowing people to bring a supporter as part of their return, or they may be linked to the wider experience – such as creating a hybrid approach to volunteering or your activity offer, where things can still be done from home.

11. Regularly monitor how your people are feeling .

Checking in with people on a regular basis can help you to understand any fears, concerns, anxieties or changes in circumstances that might be affecting them. This will enable you to support individuals appropriately, from developing coping mechanisms to guiding them through any referral pathways so they can access professional support. To find out more about the ways you can consult with people, [click here to check out our 'Understanding Your People Guide'](#). We have also included advice on having conversations with your people around mental health in this guide.

Talking to people about mental health and wellbeing

Engaging people in conversations about their mental health and wellbeing, to explore how your organisation might be able to help them, can be really positive. When dealt with sensitively and openly, you can create an environment where people feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings.

The advice below is designed to help you navigate these conversations, to ensure you can provide the appropriate support.

Environment

Due to restrictions, the conversation might happen over the phone or virtually. If this is the case, encourage the other person to choose a place where they are comfortable and unlikely to be disturbed during the call. If it can be done in person, ask if they would like to suggest a place; if not, find a safe and private space to meet and agree it with them in advance.

Listen

It is best to focus on being a friendly ear. Encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings and really listen, rather than trying to focus on next steps or actions.

Language

Throughout your conversation, try and avoid clichés like “pull yourself together”. Instead, try to reflect the language that the other person is using to explain how they are feeling. Also, try not to use closed questions, so you can encourage the person to elaborate on their answers.

Reassure

Often, talking to another person about how they are feeling is a very big step for someone struggling with their mental health, or the impact that certain circumstances are having on them. Try to reassure them that it is very positive they have now taken this step and that your organisation is committed to providing whatever support it can. It can be helpful to remind them that anxiety and mental health problems are very common and not something they should feel ashamed of.

Signpost

Throughout your conversation, or to help bring it to a close, it can be useful to signpost the person to resources or other organisations that might be able to help. We've included some useful links. If your organisation already has a referral pathway or similar process, discuss this and agree together what the next steps could be – even if it's just arranging another conversation in the coming days.

It is not your role to diagnose people or to provide therapy, but rather to listen and support people to find solutions and seek support themselves.

Local support

Local GP: GPs have general knowledge in the area of mental health and are the gateway to specialist mental health services.

The Hub of Hope is a mental health database bringing grassroots and national mental health services together: <https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

Employee Assistance Programme: If the person is employed and the employer has this type of support, such programmes are another route to specialist help.

National support, helplines and listening services

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

InfoLine: 0300 123 3393 **Monday – Friday 9am–6pm (except bank holidays).**

The Mind InfoLine can help you find specialist services in your area.

Side by Side is Mind's online community where you can listen, share and be heard: <https://sidebyside.mind.org.uk/>

Shout: www.giveusashout.org

For immediate support, text SHOUT to 85258 to chat by text to a trained and supervised volunteer.

Free, confidential and available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Mix: www.themix.org.uk

Provides essential support for under 25's including telephone counselling services, 121 chat and crisis messaging services.

Samaritans: www.samaritans.org

24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
Call 116 123 (free from any phone).

Other useful links

There is a lot of information available, particularly through Mind, about mental health problems and how to support people – some of which is specific to sport and physical activity environments. We have included a number of useful links below, to help you find out more.

- [Mind – Physical Activity and Mental Health section](#)
- [Sport and physical activity for people with mental health problems: a toolkit for the sports sector](#)
- ['Return to play' Mental health guidance to support the return of sport & physical activity](#)
- [Difficult feelings about the coronavirus pandemic](#)
- [Mental Wellbeing – Sport England](#)
- [Club Matters Return to Sport and Activity Survey Findings](#)
- [Promoting Good Mental Health through Coaching – Animation – YouTube](#)
- [Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity eLearning training](#)
- [Improving your communications: A guide for clubs and groups](#)



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