

# 6 Best Exercise Classes for Mental Health

How to work out your mind as well as your body.

By Lucy Fry 08/10/2018

Need a mental pick-me-up? Exercise is now widely deemed the not-so-secret recipe for boosting mood and reducing stress and anxiety. One study found that increasing your activity levels from doing nothing, to exercising at least three times a week, reduces the risk of depression by up to 30 per cent.

**1. Running (or walking...)** | If you need motivation to get moving, the 'runner's high' – the clarity and expansion one feels after a jog or sprint session – should do the trick.

'Outdoor exercise or eco-therapy can be particularly beneficial and research suggests it can actually be as effective as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression,' says Mind Information Manager, Rachel Boyd.

Two 2007 studies commissioned by MIND revealed that 94 per cent said outdoor activities including running and walking had benefited their mental health, so for best results avoid the treadmill.

Melanie McKay took up running two years ago to lose weight, but now continues for the mental health benefits, as well as the community she's met through joining a group. 'Running calms me almost instantly. I have a fairly busy mind, but also one prone to some pretty dark thoughts,' says McKay. 'When I'm running I've got time to think things over, analyse, understand, and process. It's amazing to have something so simple to focus on which has such an impact. I'm so much happier as a runner.'

**2. Boxing** | The rumours that hitting a punchbag to release stress and anger is true. Finding an outlet for aggression can be both empowering and healing. Short, sharp 'rounds' of punching, followed by rest, results in an intense interval session, which releases endorphins.

If you 'spar' with another boxer you can achieve 'flow', in which you are focussed solely on the task at hand/present moment; a state that everyone from Buddhist monks to Olympic athletes champion.

Boutique boxing classes are popping up everywhere, but local amateur boxing clubs are also a cost effective way of releasing the rage safely.

**3. Pilates** | The mental health benefits of Pilates often get overlooked because of the traditional focus on Pilates for back health and core strength.

'Joseph Pilates (Pilates' founder), believed so strongly in the connection between physical and mental health, he originally called his system of exercise 'Controlology', ie the control of the body with the mind,' says Karen Laing, a Pilates Instructor who has battled anxiety.

'Learning the skill of Pilates and focusing on technique and how your body feels while in a class is a very mindful activity,' she says. 'Pilates is brilliant for stress reduction and relaxation and great for Alpha types since there's no competitive element! Aside from the feelings of wellbeing from moving and mobilising your body, its focus on breathing and relaxation can help to switch on the body's parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for sleep and relaxation.'

**4. Yoga** | One of the main reasons yoga helps us create better mental health is that it integrates body and mind, although it also works well when incorporated with talking therapy and meditation.

'It's a bit of paradox – yoga looks like it's surface level but works deeply,' says Toni Roberts, a yoga therapist specialising in mental health issues. 'For everyone, particularly people who find it difficult or too scary to sit and look at their own mind, yoga can be a gateway to helping understand what they need physically mentally and emotionally. The continued focus on the breath brings yogis into the present moment and instigates a parasympathetic response from our nervous systems (responsible for 'rest and digest' and helping us calm down).'

These days there are many types of yoga and all contain the fundamental belief that we must balance our yin and yang (our more gentle and forceful energies) and work with our bodies to create holistic health and wellbeing.

**5. Spin classes** | These days, spin studios are more like nightclubs, with strobe lighting, bespoke playlists and sometimes even choreographed routines to make fitness fun, bringing participants into the present moment so they can leave their worries behind while they burn off anxiety via their pedals.

London's Boom Cycle founder Hillary Rowland is keen to ensure members' emotional and mental health improves as much as their physical fitness. She is only too aware of exercise's impact on the brain. 'Regular exercise encourages neurogenesis which is the growing of new brain cells' says Rowland. 'This allows us to focus better and learn quicker - plus exercising gives you an energy boost and the more energy you have the more productive you are!'

**6. Resistance training** | Lifting weights or bodyweight exercises can have a huge impact on how you feel and look; building muscle and self-esteem as well as curbing anxiety. Recent research shows that low-moderate intensity resistance training produces a reliable and robust decreases in anxiety, but there's also evidence to show it helps improve cognition and may improve the functioning of your central nervous system (which has a big impact on mood and fatigue levels).

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