



CONSUMER
ENGAGEMENT

Mental Health in Motion

Consumer Perspectives on Mental Health in
Fitness and Leisure

Special thanks to our partners for supporting this work



"As a company that works in both the leisure and construction sectors, we see firsthand the devastating impact that poor mental health can have on individuals, families and entire communities. With depression and suicide rates in the construction sector tragically higher than the national average, we cannot ignore the urgency of addressing this issue. That's why research like this is so vital. By shining a light on the role that physical activity, supportive environments and accessible facilities can play in improving mental wellbeing, we can begin to break down barriers and build healthier, safer and more resilient workforces. Supporting initiatives like this is not just about data – it's about saving lives."

Sarah Watts, CEO



"Our industry holds a unique responsibility and opportunity: by deeply understanding consumers and engaging them in meaningful ways, we can create inclusive experiences that not only encourage participation but also actively support mental health. When physical activity is shaped around the needs of individuals, it becomes more than exercise—it becomes a pathway to improved wellbeing and a tool to reach and positively impact more lives. Consumer engagement and insight are central to this process, allowing us to see through the lens of those we serve and design experiences that truly resonate and make a difference."

Julie Allen, Business Development Director





Foreword

At Mind, we know just how vital it is to place mental health at the heart of our nation's wellbeing. Today, [one in five people* in England are living with a common mental health condition](#), with 1.7 million people currently on waiting lists for help. Against this backdrop, it has never been more important to understand and champion the role of protective factors, like physical activity, in supporting better mental health alongside traditional treatments such as medication and talking therapy.


Gyms, pools, and leisure centres are more than just places to exercise. They are welcoming community spaces that bring people together, offering opportunities to connect, to build resilience, and to find strength in both body and mind. Increasingly, people are turning to these facilities not only for fitness, but as vital resources for maintaining and improving their mental wellbeing. Encouragingly, ukactive's consumer data shows that supporting mental health is now one of the most common reasons people choose to be members.

To fully unlock this potential, safe and effective practice must underpin delivery. For participants, this means feeling supported to take part in ways that are inclusive and empowering. For professionals, it means having the skills, confidence, and guidance to respond to diverse mental health needs. That's why resources such as our [Safe and Effective Practice guidance](#) are so important, ensuring that good intentions translate into consistent, supportive experiences for everyone.

This report shines a light on the contribution of the health and fitness sector to mental health across the UK. By combining data with the voices of operators, staff, and participants, it highlights how physical activity can be a lifeline for those of us managing a diagnosed mental health condition and for people protecting their wellbeing day to day.

Our shared ambition is clear: to deepen understanding of the sector's role, to celebrate progress, and to uncover new opportunities to support even more people. Through partnership, innovation, and evidence, we can ensure that physical activity remains a cornerstone of the UK's mental health response – helping more of us live healthier, happier, and more connected lives.

Hayley Jarvis, Head of Physical Activity, Mind





Preface

There has never been a better time to talk about our mental health. It is no secret that societal pressures continue to grow and impact our mental and physical wellbeing. This report comes at a critical time for the UK's health, with NHS waiting lists growing, mental health services under strain, and the number of people off work growing. At ukactive, we believe improving the health and wellbeing of our nation requires collective action, vision and commitment.

The physical activity sector is at the forefront of this challenge – providing the facilities and services that support people in all communities not just to live longer lives but happier, healthier lives. Not only is physical activity linked to improving the life and experience of people suffering with mental health conditions, but we know that every day, millions of people turn to our facilities not only to improve their fitness, but to strengthen their mental resilience, find community, and manage the stresses of daily life.

This report, *Mental Health in Motion*, explores the latest consumer attitudes and experiences of mental health in relation to physical activity, helping us to understand more about the unique role our sector is playing – and its potential to go further with its support.

As well as uncovering more detail on the trends in motivation and barriers to physical activity among people of all ages with mental health conditions, our research also reveals significant opportunities to improve workplace health, reduce absenteeism and ultimately boost the economy. Our findings show clear demand from the workforce for the Government and employers to support better access and incentivisation to be active for improved mental health.

It is our hope that our members will use this report and its findings to help determine the next proactive, innovative steps in mental health. It should also inspire opportunities for collaboration between health professionals, employers, policymakers and the wider physical activity sector to create the conditions where more people can access the benefits of movement for their mental wellbeing.

It also has an important message for Government that if it is serious about addressing its impact of mental health on the NHS and worklessness then it must create serious plans for working with the thousands of gyms, pools, and leisure centres it has at its disposal so they can help address our national mental health crisis.

I want to thank all the organisations and experts who have contributed to this work as we continue to support those facing mental health challenges and to ensure that the facilities, services and communities our sector provides remain accessible, welcoming and responsive.


Our mission is simple but vital: to improve the nation's mental and physical health by getting more people more active, more often. This report is an important step in that journey, and I hope it inspires every reader to consider the part they can play in supporting both mind and body through the power of physical activity.

Huw Edwards, CEO, ukactive





Contents

1. Introduction & Background
 2. Methodology
 3. Findings
 - a. Mental Health Among the Population
 - b. Activity Participation
 - c. The Wider Role of our Sector
 4. What we've discovered
 5. Next Steps
- 

1. Introduction & Background

In the summer of 2022, ukactive set out an ambition to guide the future of our sector through a dedicated, consumer-led programme of work. Piloted by data and insight, this programme is designed to truly understand people's needs and remove the barriers that hold them back from being active. At the heart of this vision is our goal for 2030: to see five million more people regularly using gyms, pools, and leisure centres. Achieving this would mean supporting over 20% of the UK population to live healthier, more active lives – a powerful step forward from the 15% we reached before the pandemic.

Realising Vision 2030 will take collective action. By working together – operators, partners, and communities – we can grow our impact, unlock new opportunities, and ensure that physical activity is a cornerstone of a healthier, happier nation.

So where are we now?

The [UK Health and Fitness Market Report 2025](#), which reports quarterly data on recorded customers visits to health and fitness facilities run by public, private and independent operators across the UK, and is based on the sector's most authoritative source of market intelligence, shows the positive growth across the sector. Some of these key numbers are below:

Where does the consumer data fit into this?

Consumer data sits at the heart of this ambition. By understanding people's behaviours, motivations, and needs, we can provide the sector with the insight needed to drive meaningful growth and impact. Nearly three years on, the Consumer Engagement programme continues to offer this deeper understanding, helping us identify where the greatest opportunities lie and where support is most needed. This work began with our [initial report](#), which laid the foundations for this journey and continues to guide our focus today.

What do we mean by consumer data and the Consumer Engagement work?

Consumer Engagement at ukactive refers to our regular, evidence-based interaction with both potential and existing fitness and leisure participants. This approach allows us to observe behaviours, experiences, and perceptions, generating the insights required to proactively improve engagement and accessibility.

Since then, Consumer Engagement has informed ukactive's broader strategic priorities, including equality, diversity, and inclusion; digital transformation; growth through health; campaigns and political advocacy; and operational standards. The insights gained have helped us to test ideas, refine approaches, and ensure sector development remains responsive to the needs of the communities we serve.



11,486,680

Number of gym or leisure facility members

2023: 10,821,402 | +6.1%



16.9%

Total penetration rate

2023: 16.0% | +0.9%



616m

Visits (throughput)

2023: 569m | +8.2%



5,607

Number of clubs

2023: 5,555 | +0.9%

UK Health and Fitness Market Report
2025

Why are we focusing on Mental Health?

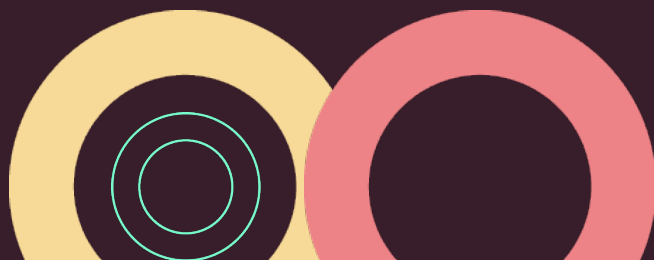
According to NHS England, it has been reported that 1 in 5 people across the UK experience common mental health conditions. We know that regular physical activity is vital in the support and prevention of many non-communicable diseases, including mental health. Gyms, pools and leisure centres play a pivotal role in supporting the population to meet the guidelines for physical activity, with data presented in the recent UK Health and Fitness Market report highlighting that gym members are more likely to meet these guidelines.

From our ongoing data collection, this message has been consistent: physical activity plays a vital role in both the prevention and treatment of mental health conditions. In fact, supporting mental wellbeing remains one of the most frequently cited reasons for membership and participation in our facilities, highlighting how gyms, pools and leisure centres play an important role in supporting people across the UK to manage and support their mental health.

Additionally, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) report found that 22% of the UK's working age population (16-64 years) were not working (economically inactive), with 2.8 million of these individuals (7%) not working due to long-term sickness. One of the most prevalent health conditions reported was mental health conditions (depression, bad nerves or anxiety), accounting for 53% of those economically inactive due to long-term sickness (1.35 million) (ONS, 2023). The cost of mental health is also substantial, at £300 billion a year in England alone (Mind, 2024).

Our sector plays a pivotal role in helping reduce the prevalence of economic inactivity because of its ability to support individuals' health through physical activity participation. This report provides an opportunity to better support consumers with mental health conditions and explore ways to enhance their engagement. However, it is clear that this responsibility cannot rest with our sector alone.

That is why this report also explores the other options available for supporting individuals with mental health conditions, including their perceptions of the role of the employer. We conclude with tangible tips, resources and guidance from experts across the field of mental health as to how we can, as a sector and across individual organisations, increase engagement and best support this group of people when using leisure facilities and gyms.



2. Methodology

ukactive's conducts regular consumer polling four times a year with market research specialists Savanta which surveys a UK nationally representative (based on ages 16-75+, region, gender, and social grade) minimum sample of 2,000 adults per wave. More information on the overall methodology can be seen in the ['On The Road To Vision 2030'](#) report.

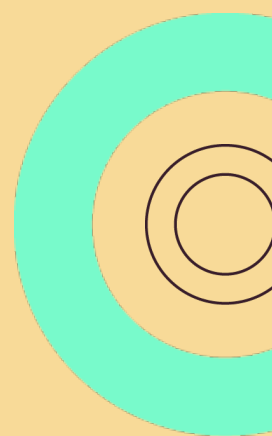
This report presents analysis by the ukactive Research Institute using data collected quarterly from January 2024 - July 2025 (waves 5-11). The questions utilised ask respondents if they have any health conditions (with data used from those who state they have a mental health condition and those who state they have no condition), if they are a gym or leisure facility member, what their motivations are to be a member, what barriers they face if they are not a member, and their perceptions on receiving health support from their employers. This is complemented by demographic data, as well as supplementary questions on support for health conditions. Sample sizes vary based on the question analysed, with samples of up to 14,618 accumulated from waves 5-11. For more detailed segmentation, only those with sample sizes large enough to be robust have been included in the report analysis.

Supporting insights have been provided by Active Insights, captured through its Consumer Insight Panel in September 2025. This has allowed us to explore some of the themes that emerged from the original polling data set in more detail.

New definitions and groupings:

- We have defined respondents who have mental health conditions by those who selected this option when asked if they experience a health condition and compared responses to those who selected no health condition (physical or mental) to the same question. Percentages in these graphs may not add up to 100% because they omit responses to the other health condition answer options, which are not relevant to compare to for this report. The sub-sample of respondents with mental health conditions has then been segmented to provide further detail on nuanced behaviours, preferences and between demographic groups.
- The demographic grouping of 'generational group' is new for this report. These have been created by grouping survey respondents together based on their age at the time of completing the survey to fit into one of six groups: Generation Alpha (2010-2025, currently 0-15 years), Generation Z (1997-2009, currently 16-28 years), Millennials (1981-1996, currently 29-44 years), Generation X (1965-1980, currently 45-60 years), Baby Boomers (1946-1964, currently 61-79 years) and Silent Generation (1928-1945, currently 80-97 years).

3. Findings





3a. Mental health among the population:

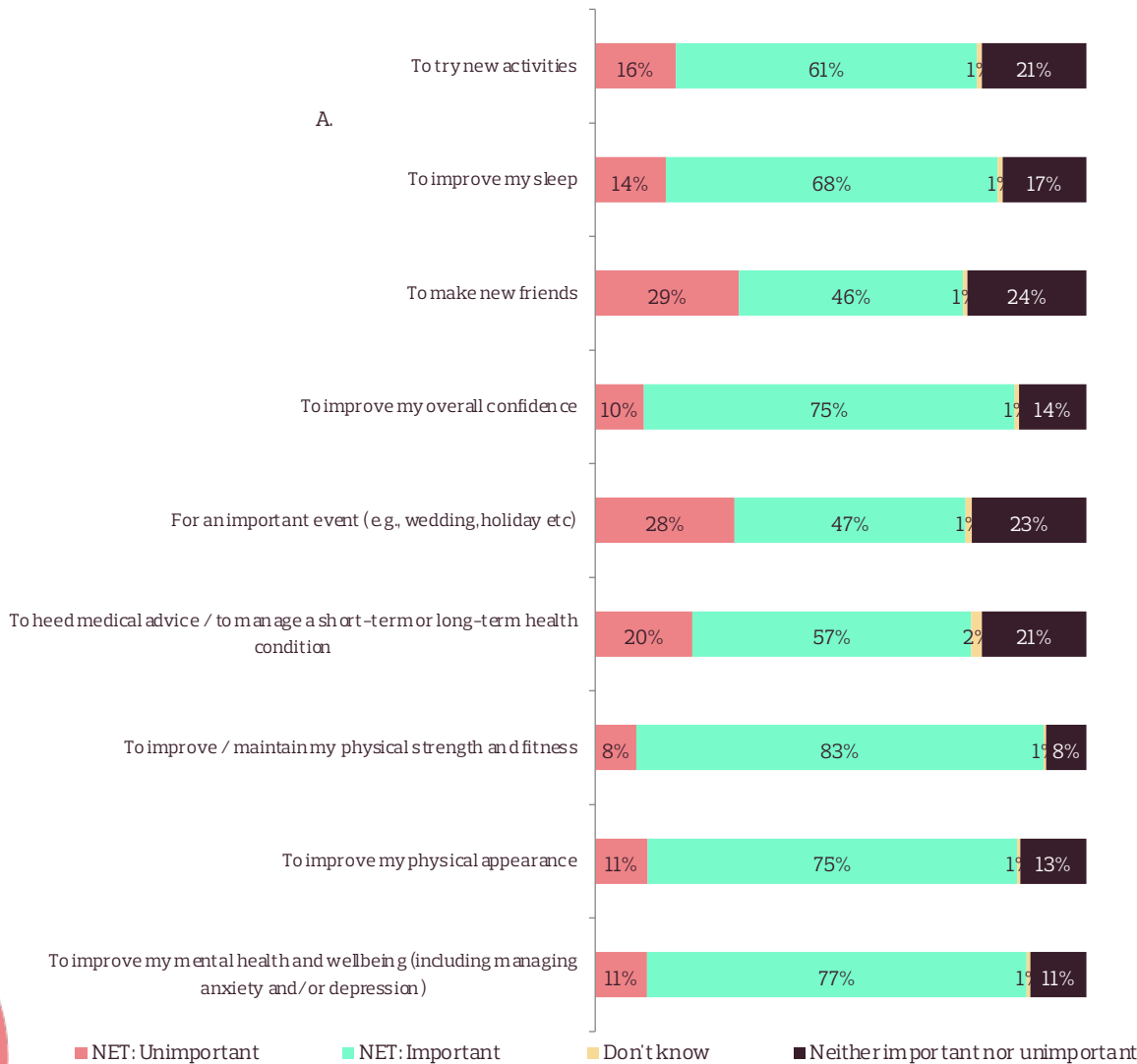
Outlining the prevalence of mental health conditions and what that looks like across the demographics in our survey

Prevalence of Mental Health Conditions

Roughly half (58%) of respondents to the consumer engagement polling stated that they had no health condition (mental or physical), however **close to one in seven (14%) report that they experience mental health conditions – making it the most common condition reported through this polling.** Comparatively, diabetes or kidney-related conditions (1 in 13, 8%), and musculoskeletal and skin diseases (1 in 17, 6%) were the next most common.

Respondents indicated a strong desire to support their mental health. Those that are currently gym or leisure facility members are asked what motivates them to be gym or leisure centre members. **'To improve my mental health and wellbeing (including managing anxiety and/or depression)'** was rated the most important reason for individuals with a mental health condition (85%) and the second most important reason for all respondents, regardless of health condition (physical or mental; 77%).

Fig. 1: motivations for taking out a gym and fitness membership by Mental Health condition



Age

Prevalence varied between generational age groups, with younger age groups, like **Generation Z, most likely to report they had a mental health condition (21%). This was closely followed by Millennials (18%)** and continued to decrease the older the generational group got, with the Silent Generation being the lowest (2%). This trend aligns with data from mental health charity, Mind ([2024](#)), which indicates a strong prevalence of mental health difficulties in young people – a trend that has continued and increased in prevalence since 2016.

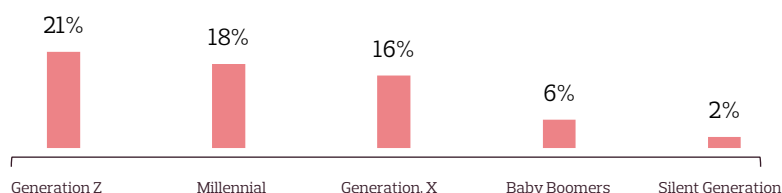


Fig. 2: Demographic breakdown of Mental Health conditions by generational age group

Gender

Mental health conditions were reported significantly more by female respondents (17%) than male respondents (11%), while also reporting no health condition (physical or mental) significantly less than male respondents (Fig.13A). Females (79%) were motivated to be a member of a gym or leisure facility to improve their mental wellbeing more than males (76%) and also reported improving their mental health as unimportant significantly less than males (9% versus 12% respectively; Fig 13B).

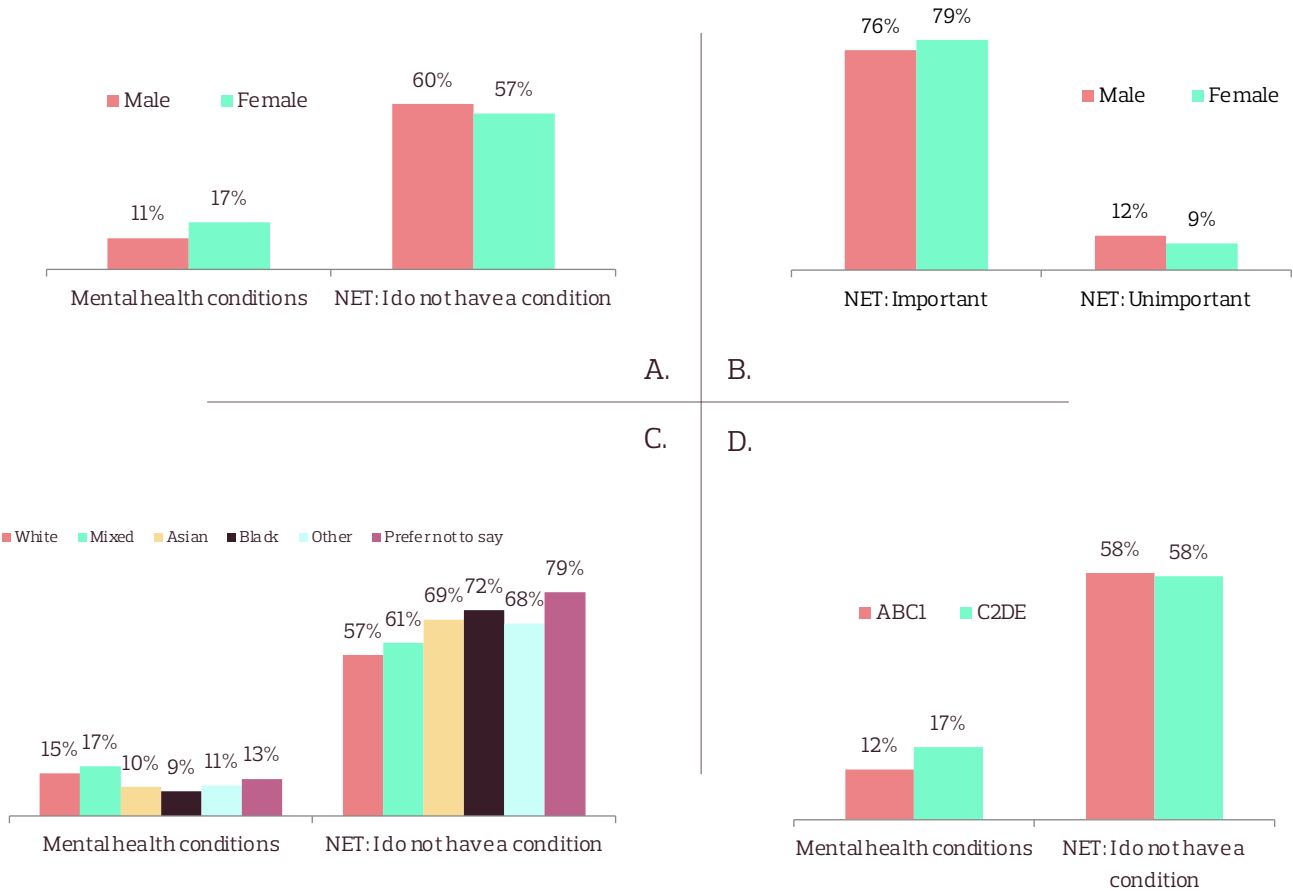
Ethnicity

Mental health conditions were predominantly reported by Mixed (17%) and White (15%) ethnicities (Fig13C). For Asian (10%) and Black (9%) ethnicities, mental health conditions are reported significantly less, and no condition reported significantly more. The latter was also the case for those of 'Other' ethnicity and who 'preferred not to say'. **All ethnicities rated improving mental health as important, with no significant differences seen between ethnic groups.**

Social Grade

By social grade, **respondents in the lower grade (C2DE representing skilled manual and semi-skilled/unskilled manual/unemployed occupations) reported having a mental health condition significantly more than the higher social grade (ABC1) (17% versus 12% respectively; Fig13D).** There was no difference between the groups for no health condition (both 58%), nor were there any significant differences between the social grade groups for motivated to manage mental health, with both groups rating this as important. From Mind's [Exploring our priority audiences through a physical activity lens](#) (2022), we can see that people living in poverty are aware of the benefits and positive impact of physical activity, however, this does not always mean they act upon this. This same report highlights that 82% of people living in poverty who do take part in physical activity do so to improve their mental health.

Fig. 13 Demographic breakdown of Mental Health conditions by gender (A), ethnicity (C), and social grade (D), and to improve mental health and physical wellbeing by gender (B).



Key Learnings

Section takeaway: Women, younger age groups, and those in lower social grades are most likely to report mental health conditions. Although younger age groups are prioritising their facility memberships, women and those in lower social grades are less likely to do so. We explore the barriers later in this report. These demographic groups are opportunities to create and implement specific programmes and/or dedicated communications to target via customised engagement and campaigns to support these groups and drive engagement in gyms, pools and leisure centre memberships, and growth in these areas.

Prevalence of mental health

Mental health conditions were reportedly higher for younger generations, women and those in lower social grades, making these key focus populations for receiving mental health support from our sector. Although comparatively lower than national averages for these population groups, our data does align with national [NHS England](#) data which indicate the same pattern of prevalence. National data show that prevalence of common mental health conditions (CMHC) has increased since 2007 for those aged 16-24 while remaining relatively consistent in those ages 75+. Likewise, women and those in the most deprived areas are roughly 10% more likely to report chronic mental health conditions compared to men and those in the least deprived areas.


What this highlights is that gym and leisure facilities could be the space that provides these groups of individuals with support for their mental health conditions. We already know that there is a growing preference for younger generations to engage in fitness activities and take out gym memberships to support their mental health, as highlighted in ukactive's recent [UK Health and Fitness Market Report](#) (April 2025).

With the growing focus on mental health from younger age groups, there is a growing opportunity within the sector to engage these individuals with co-designing programmes to ensure the spaces they are using are supportive environments for mental health and reflective of the community.

The same could be said for women and those in lower social grades. We are aware that barriers to use facilities exist for both populations. For engaging women, ukactive and Sport England have developed and released practical guides and toolkits within the [Safer Spaces to Move](#) campaign which can be used to support women and girls' mental health within the sector's spaces.

For those from lower social grades, we can see the value that physical activity can have in supporting their mental health, but similarly to women, they face barriers that mean they struggle to engage with our facilities.

Mind provides essential guidance and tools to support and engage people experiencing mental health problems. A comprehensive guide can be found [here](#).



3b. Activity participation:

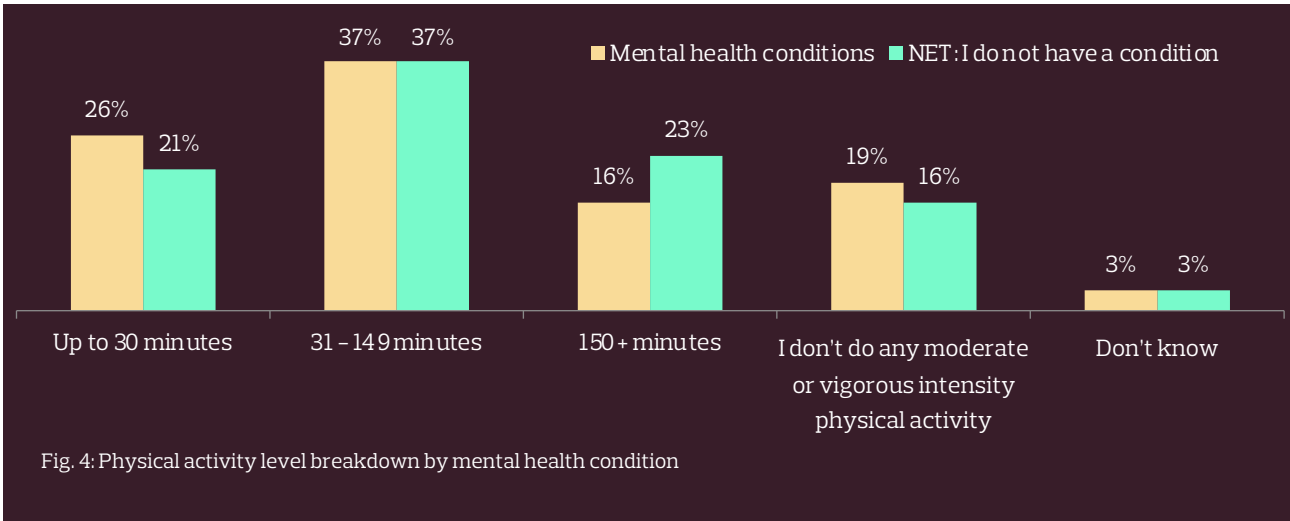
Exploring physical activity levels, use of gym memberships, and barriers and motivators to be active in our sector's spaces

Physical activity levels

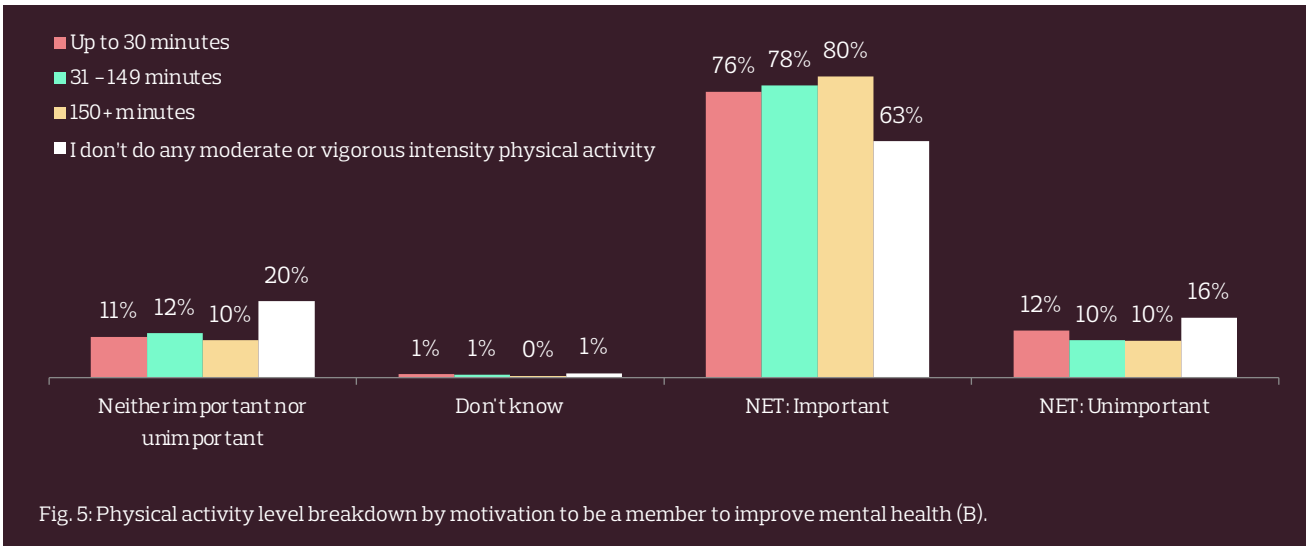
The most recent Sport England [Active Lives report \(Nov 2024\)](#) indicates that active individuals report better mental health outcomes (are happier and more satisfied) than those who are inactive.

Our consumer engagement data, which compared to the Active Lives survey has a lower proportion of active (150+ minutes of physical activity) individuals, indicates that when comparing activity levels of those with mental health conditions to those with no health conditions, **individuals with mental health conditions are less likely to meet the level of physical activity recommended by the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) of 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week (16%) compared to those reporting no health condition (23%).**

Individuals reporting mental health conditions are also more likely to be classified as inactive (taking part in less than 30 minutes, 26%) compared to active (16%), and those with no health condition (physical or mental; 21%). However, the greatest proportion were those in the moderately active category (31-149 minutes) which did not differ between mental health or no condition.



The importance of taking out a membership to improve mental health increases steadily as physical activity levels rise. Importance is significantly higher for 150 minutes (80%) compared to activity across a week of less than 30 minutes (76%).



Gym memberships

Sixteen per cent (16%) of individuals with a mental health condition are currently members of a gym or fitness facility compared with 60% that do not have a condition. (Fig. 7A)

Detail from Active Insights' consumer panel of 100 respondents examined the motivating factors for using gym memberships, focusing on which aspects of mental health were supported by being active in a gym or leisure centre (Fig. 7B).

Half of respondents (50%) said improving mood was a top motivating factor, followed by reducing stress (46%) and clearing my mind (46%). Other reasons centred on improving sleep, increasing energy levels, boosting confidence and reducing loneliness, highlighting the spectrum of reasons why individuals with mental health conditions choose to have a gym membership.

Prevalence of mental health among those who had joined a gym reduced as length of membership increased. For example, those who had held a membership for more than three years (13%) reported a lower prevalence than those who had been a member between three and six months (21%). Mental health prevalence remains steady among those who utilise Pay As You Go memberships, but prevalence of no health condition (physical or mental) increases the more frequent these memberships are used.

The importance for taking out a membership being to manage mental health was only asked to current members. The length of time a membership has been held suggests that this reason is equally important for those who had just joined as well as for those who have been members for more than three years. For example, members who had held a membership between 12 and 18 months rated importance at 79%, while members who had held a membership between 18 and 24 months rated it at 75%.

Fig 7A

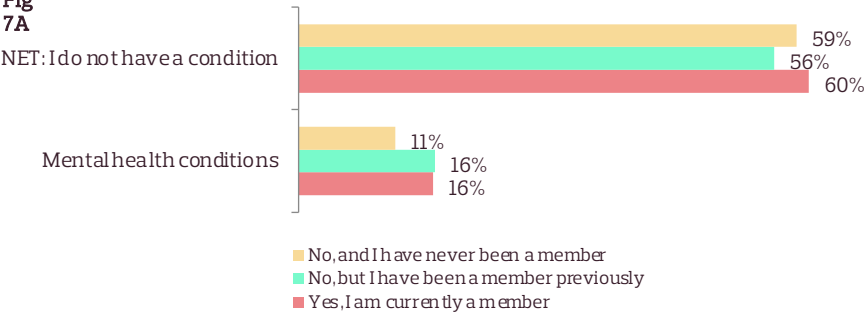
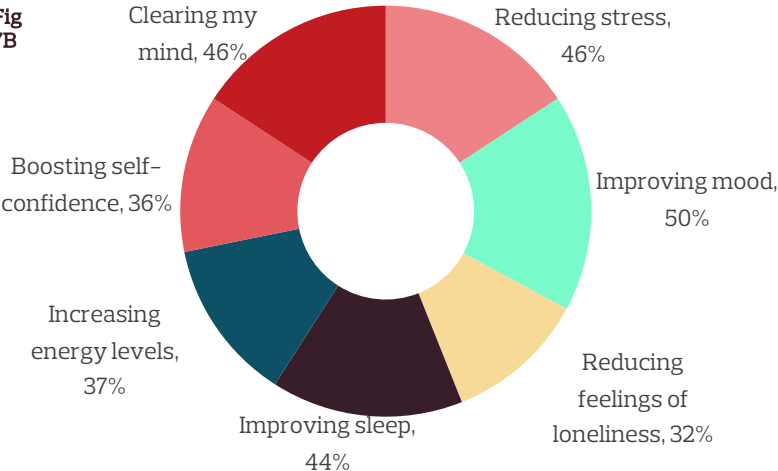


Fig. 7: Gym membership status by mental health condition (A) and which aspects of your mental health could being active at the gym/leisure centre help you with? by mental health condition (Active Insights) (B)

Fig 7B



Physical activity levels and gym memberships: demographic trends and motivating factors

Physical activity levels and gym membership status also vary across demographic groups for those with mental health conditions. Coupled with understanding motivating factors, we can better understand how to engage these three demographic groupings of interest. Further detail from Active Insights Consumer Panel has been provided to explore which aspects of mental health could be supported by being active in a gym or leisure centre to help individuals with mental health conditions.

Gender

In line with prevalence of mental health conditions overall, **females with mental health conditions tend to be less active than males with mental health conditions** – with a significantly greater percentage of males reporting doing 150 minutes or more of activity than females (19% versus 14%). Likewise, more females are classified as inactive (completing less than 30 minutes of activity) than males (28% versus 22%).

Previous research conducted by ukactive and Sport England's This Girl Can has explored barriers women and girls face that stop them from taking part in physical activity. In line with this research, and as might be expected based on the above trend, our consumer polling shows that males are significantly more likely to be members of a gym than females (37% versus 29%). This is a disparity the sector is aware of and continues to work towards reducing. The aforementioned research between ukactive and Sport England supports this, providing practical guidance on how to support women in using our sector's services. These practical steps can be found on the [Safer Spaces to Move Resource Hub](#).

It is still important to recognise that engaging men is equally significant. Men are more likely to experience a greater overall burden of disease, when compared with women. This is largely from health conditions that lead to premature death such as heart disease and cancer, and through unhealthy lifestyles involving substance abuse, self-harm and interpersonal violence ([Movember, 2024](#)). Preventive healthcare is considered vital to mitigating these risks, with sport and physical activity being a key mechanism for supporting men's mental health.

Females and males with mental health conditions felt that taking out a gym membership was important for their mental health to an equal extent (84 versus 83%). Each reported this as the top motivator. For females this was followed by being motivated to improve or maintain their physical strength and fitness (83%), which was slightly lower for males (80%). Both males and females were motivated to the same extent to improve their physical appearance (78% versus 79%), the third motivating factor.

Further detail from Active Insights Consumer panel highlighted that for females, being active in a gym or leisure facility helped improve their mood (48%), increase energy levels (46%), improve sleep (45%) and reduce stress (45%). For males, the top motivators were also to improve mood, energy levels and reduce stress (all 43%), to a slightly lower extent than females.

These insights make it clear that both males and females benefit from being members of a gym or leisure facility with regards to their mental health. The insights speak to the importance of raising awareness of all the ways in which our sector can support individuals – physically and mentally – to view our facilities as a vital support function to individuals' overall wellbeing and consequently encourage and motivate them to engage with facilities.

Demographic breakdowns

Age

When exploring differences by age, individuals with mental health conditions from **older generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X, 18%) were slightly more active (150 minutes+) than those from younger generations (Generation Z, 14%)**. Generation Z was more likely to be moderately active (31-149 minutes, 45%) or inactive (under 30 minutes, 29%) than any other group.

This is at odds with membership status, which highlights that a **greater proportion of younger individuals with mental health conditions are currently members of the gym**. Individuals with mental health conditions from Generation Z were most likely to be members (46%), more so than any other age group. This was followed by Millennials (41%), with Baby Boomers being comparatively low (8%).

To understand this, we explored the reasons why individuals from different ages felt being active in a gym or leisure facility could help their mental health. For Generation Z factors like it helped clear their mind and boost self-confidence (both 46%) were top, while for Millennials being active in a gym helped improve mood (49%) and reduce stress (48%). Comparatively, Boomers said they benefited from increasing energy levels (48%), noted as a top reason.

While [previous research by ukactive](#) has explored how best to engage older adults in our sector, the same does not yet exist for younger adults. Insight in this current report indicates that younger individuals with mental health conditions experience different motivators to being active compared to their older counterparts. This may explain why they choose to be members of a gym but are slightly less active overall.

Herein lies an opportunity to better understand the motivations of younger age groups, to enhance their engagement and activity levels in gym and leisure facility settings.

Social Grade

Individuals with mental health conditions within the lower social grade (C2DE) are generally less active than those within higher social grades (ABC1). They are significantly less likely to be moderately active (31-149 minutes) than those within higher social grades (33% versus 41%).

Similarly, **individuals from lower social grades are also significantly less likely to be gym members compared to those from higher social grades (25% versus 41%)**.

The top motivating factor for taking out a gym membership was to improve mental health and wellbeing, which was rated the same by those from lower (84%) and higher (83%) social grades. Both were also equally motivated to use a gym membership to improve / maintain physical strength (80%, 82%) and improve their physical appearance (78%, 79%).

Participation & Activities: Types and Frequency

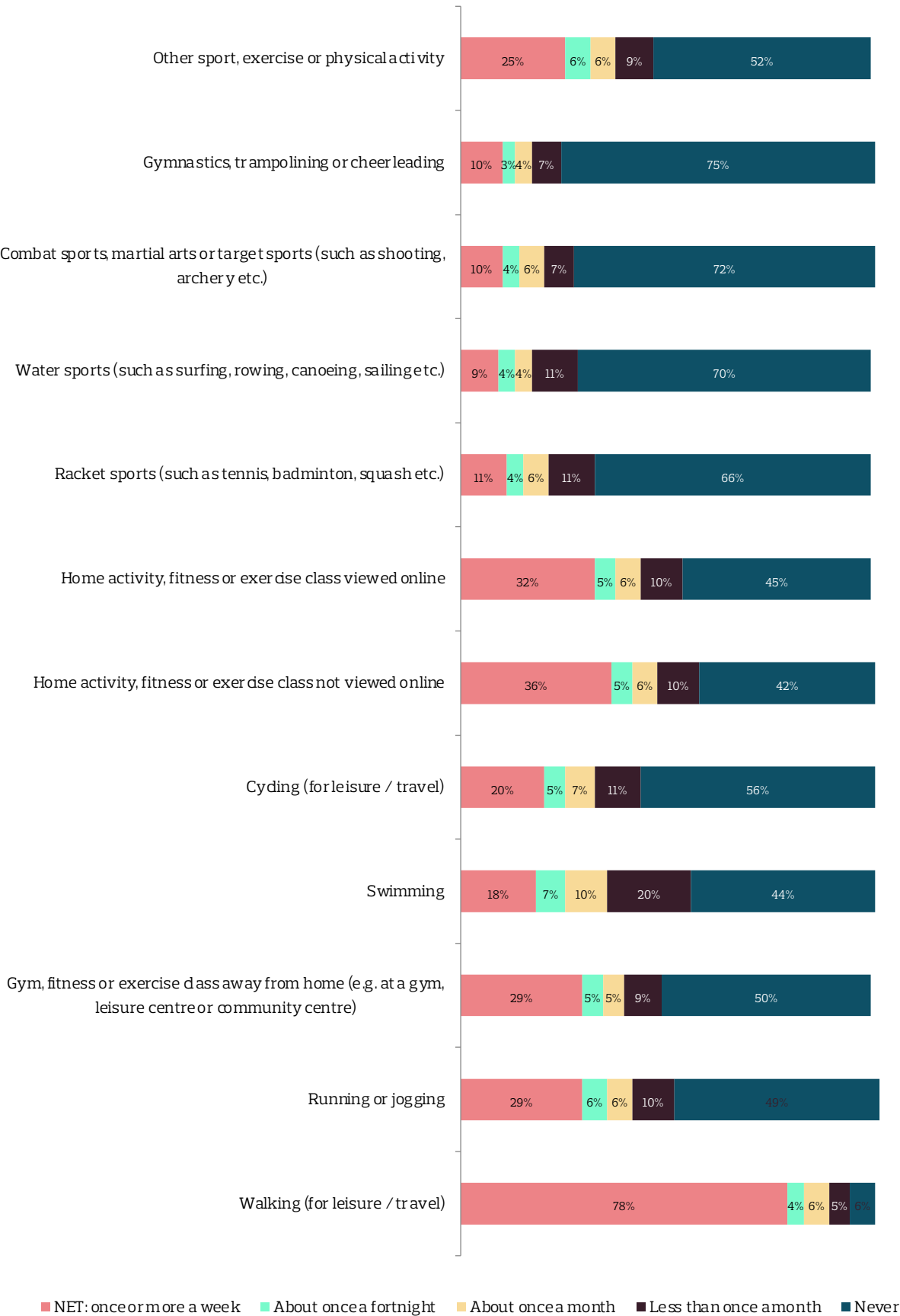


Fig. 8: Breakdown of frequency of activities participated in by those with mental health conditions (A)

Activities participated in

Walking



Those reporting a mental health condition were most likely to take part in walking for leisure or travel at least once a week (78%; Fig 8.). This was lower than those with no condition (83% and 4% respectively), but aligns with the November 2024 Active Lives report, which highlights that for the population, walking is the activity most participated in across 28 days.

In-person and digital exercise workouts



This was followed by home-based exercise and fitness or exercise at a gym or leisure centre (Fig 8.). **Roughly a third of respondents with a mental health condition took part in home activity, fitness or exercise classes not viewed online (36%) and online (32%) once, twice or more per week, on par with those with no health condition (36% and 32%). Just under two thirds (29%) took part in fitness or exercise at a gym or leisure centre, once twice or more per week, levels similar to those with no health condition (31%).**

This pattern might be best explained by the combined use of digital and in-person exercise. **One fifth (19%) of individuals with mental health conditions report doing a mixture of online and in-person workouts, while 27% report they prefer in-person.** The reasons why individuals with mental health conditions chose online activities were both practical and personal. Firstly, digital activities offered them time saving (23%) and flexibility (21%). Secondly, these individuals noted they did not enjoy exercising around others (19%) and did not have anyone to go with (15%).

These reasons were rated lower for individuals with no health condition (physical or mental; 14% and 9% respectively), highlighting that self-confidence to exercise is more prominent for those with mental health conditions.

Nonetheless, in-person exercise plays an important role for those with mental health conditions. Further insights from Active Insights consumer panel highlighted that **a third (32%) of individuals with mental health conditions feel being active in a gym or leisure facility helps reduce feelings of loneliness.**

A lived experience of this can be found in Sam's story – his interview can be found [here](#).

“

So I joined the gym for a wee while, and then I joined the classes. I was nervous... so I speak to people and they're always asking me 'how you doing'?

”

Sam, ANGUSalive

Collectively, these results highlights that both home and in-person based exercises play a joint role in supporting activity levels for those with mental health conditions, and that individuals enjoy a broad range of options. Home-based exercise may provide a stepping stone for individuals struggling with self-confidence due to their mental health to in-person gym usage.

An ongoing opportunity exists for our sector to grow its hybrid offers to support this need, recognising that individuals may be in different phases of their fitness journey (as well as their mental health journey) and have other competing priorities that can make only in-person exercise difficult.

Swimming




Other activities, like swimming, were participated in most frequently between two weeks to once a month (17%) for those with mental health conditions, compared to 15% who had no condition. Nearly one quarter (20%) with a mental health condition took part in swimming less than once a month, which was also similar for those with no condition (21%). Compared to the overall public, this participation frequency is higher than Active Lives data, where 8.9% took part in swimming at least twice in 28 days.



Barriers to having memberships and facility usage

Of those who reported having mental health conditions, 27% did not currently have a gym membership. Individuals who are not currently members were also asked what barriers prevent them from being so. **For those with mental health conditions who are not members the cost (70%), lack of confidence (59%) and feeling uncomfortable (58%) were the top three barriers** for why they feel they cannot join a gym or leisure facility. From Mind's ['Big Mental Health Report \(2024\)'](#), we know that money and mental health are connected. Individuals with a mental health condition earn on average £8,400 less per year than individuals without one, indicating that cost may be a greater barrier for these individuals. However, we also know that physical activity can be a preventative mechanism to support and reduce symptoms related to mental health, indicating that there is clear value for individuals investing in facility memberships. This highlights the opportunity that exists for the sector to ensure its spaces are accessible, welcoming and there to support people's overall health and wellbeing. In particular, it showcases our sector's existing, and ever-increasing value, in supporting mental health.

Conversely, factors like location, lack of awareness of local facilities, and feeling unsafe were the least perceived barriers. In comparison these three barriers were rated lower by those with no conditions (64%, 40% and 43% respectively) indicating they are more important for those with mental health conditions. Instead, for those with no condition, cost (64%), not needing to join a gym (49%) and not being interested (46%) were the main barriers.



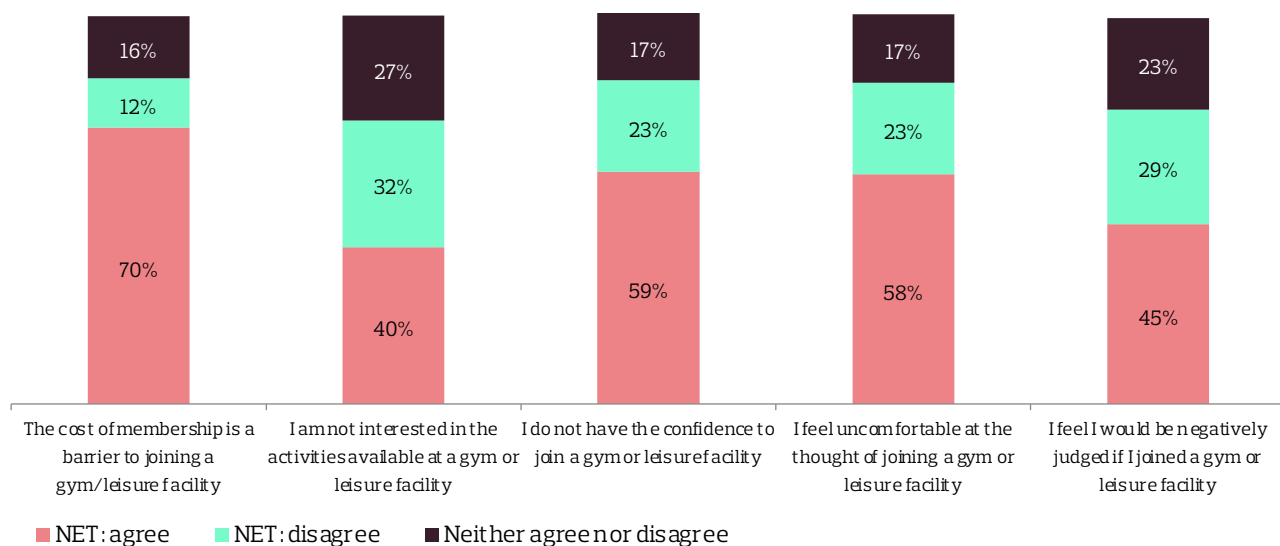


Fig. 9. Top five barriers for not taking out a gym or leisure centre membership by those with mental health conditions

Supplementary data on barriers captured from Active Insights through its consumer insight panel of 92 respondents, provides a snapshot of detail on the barriers that individuals with mental health conditions experience which makes it difficult for them to join or use a leisure facility.

In line with the consumer engagement data, cost (50%) and lack of confidence (37%) are the top two barriers. This is then followed by feeling judged by others (36%) and feeling anxious in crowded environments (34%). This further indicates that many of the barriers faced by individuals with mental health conditions are psychological and revolve around feeling comfortable in the physical space of a gym or leisure facility. This makes the customer experience, right from the start of their journey, an important aspect for both encouraging people to enquire and join our facilities as well as their retention.

Barriers by demographic groups

Barriers by demographic groups

To understand why those in different demographic groups are not currently gym members we explored the top barriers for each of them. These were experienced differently across the three demographic groups. Overall, females, younger age groups and those from lower social grades experienced greater barriers than men, older age groups and those who are more affluent.

Gender

For gender, females were more likely than males to report barriers in cost, confidence and feeling uncomfortable. While cost was highest (F: 52%; M: 40%), close to half of females reported having a lack of confidence and feeling uncomfortable in equal measures (44%), which was 12 percentage points higher than for males (32%).

Active Insights consumer panel results also indicated that females were more likely than males to report barriers to using a facility to be because they lacked confidence (33% versus 24%), felt judged by others (30% versus 25%), and felt anxious in a crowded environment (24% versus 19%). As mentioned previously, this aligns with other research conducted in this area, but significant steps to reduce these barriers are underway with the Safer Spaces to Move work.

Age

As we know from previous consumer data, cost was the greatest barrier reported by all age groups. It is considered a greater barrier to taking out a gym membership by older age groups – namely Generation X (71%) – compared to younger generations like Generation Z (61%). This might reflect the younger generation's preference for being members of a gym because it supports a healthy lifestyle, and therefore cost is considered less of an issue. This preference for Generation Z to prioritise a healthy lifestyle, which includes taking out gym memberships, has been shown in previous research ([The Gym Group, 2025](#)).

Younger age groups were more likely than older age groups to report a lack of confidence as a barrier, with half of Generation Z respondents reporting this (51%) compared to two fifths (41%) of Baby Boomers. This was not the case for feeling uncomfortable, which did not differ between generational groups.

Active Insights' consumer panel results indicate a similar pattern. Younger age groups, those in Generation Z and Millennials (those aged 25–34) were the most likely out of all age groups to say that a lack of confidence and feeling judged by others were barriers to them using gym or leisure facilities.

While important for individuals of all ages, this does indicate how atmosphere and experience is particularly important for younger individuals, who might experience more reservations about using a gym or leisure facility if they do not feel they belong there.

Social Grade

Greater differences were seen for the other barriers, with those from lower social grades (C2DE, representing skilled manual and semi-skilled/unskilled manual/unemployed occupations) reporting that lack of confidence (45%) and feeling uncomfortable (44%) were more significant barriers than those reported from higher social grades (ABC1; 34% for both).

Reasons for ending memberships

In line with the barriers to taking out a gym or leisure facility membership, **the main reasons individuals with mental health conditions decided to end their memberships was centred on cost and affordability**, while those with no health condition were significantly less likely to pick these reasons.

The top two factors for those with mental health conditions were that memberships were considered too expensive (51%) and that individuals could not afford it due to rising cost of living (38%). Expense was also rated as the main factor for those with no health conditions ending their memberships, followed by not using it enough (32%).

This was followed by psychological factors such as individuals feeling a loss in motivation to attend (32%), which was less likely for those without a condition, and those who were not using the membership enough (30%).

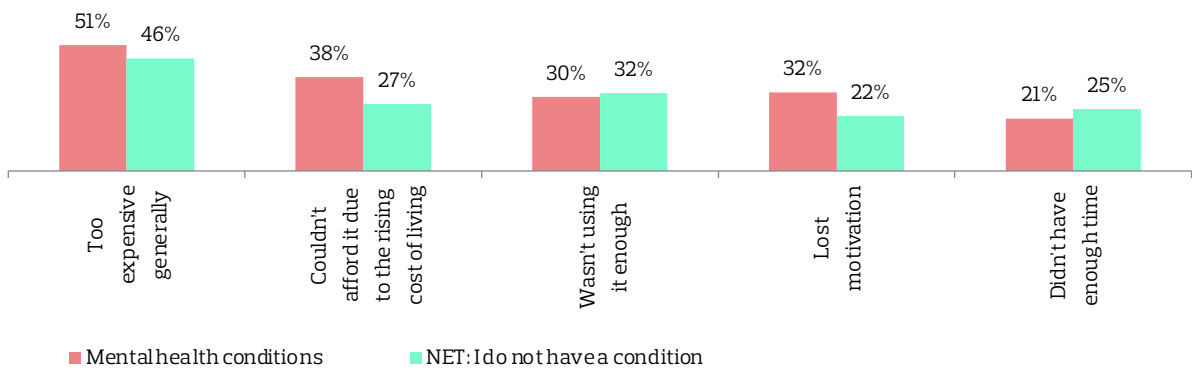


Fig 10, main reasons for ending gym or leisure facility memberships by those with mental health conditions and no condition

Findings from qualitative research undertaken by Active Insight and Alliance Leisure found that to address barriers to participation, it is essential to focus on encouraging return visits through positive behavioural change—a process that every team member can influence, from front-of-house staff to duty managers. Meeting individuals where they are, and engaging with them in a proactive and supportive manner, helps to build confidence, create a sense of comfort, and enable people to integrate physical activity into their daily lives.

Here is an extract from the research: 'As the saying goes, people may not remember the specific words or actions, but they will always remember how they were made to feel. This principle is especially relevant for individuals such as John, a retired military veteran I met during a recent focus group with non-users of a local leisure centre. John once described himself as fit and confident, but over time his health declined having a direct impact on his mental health.

'During the discussion, he shared feelings of loneliness and expressed a strong desire to be active, yet lacked the confidence to walk into his local centre. His story reflected the experiences of others in the group, who similarly identified the initial step of entering the centre as the greatest challenge. The participants agreed that a warm, welcoming environment—where they felt acknowledged and socially supported—would make them more likely to engage with the centre. In turn, this could not only promote physical activity but also reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are critical aspects of mental health and wellbeing.'

Key Learnings

Section takeaways:

- Females with mental health conditions are less likely to be active and members of a gym than men with mental health conditions.
- Younger age groups with mental health conditions are more likely to be members of a gym than older age groups with mental health conditions, but less active than them.
- Individuals with mental health conditions from lower social grades are less active and less likely to be members of a gym than those from higher social grades.
- For many people with mental health conditions, the biggest barriers to joining a gym are low confidence and feeling uncomfortable. These challenges affect everyone, though they are felt more strongly by women. With the right steps, facilities can help break down these barriers and create more welcoming, inclusive spaces. [The Safer Spaces to Move resource hub](#) offers practical guidance on how to do this.
- More awareness of how the sector's existing services already support those with mental health conditions may help support engagement across all demographic groupings, given the top motivators reported by all.

Activity levels, gym and facility use, and mental health

Overall, individuals with a mental health condition report being less active than those with no health condition. We cannot determine if these individuals are less active because of the mental health symptoms they experience, or due to external barriers to engaging in physical activity.

What we can determine is that barriers do exist for individuals with mental health conditions to take out gym memberships. The top two barriers, following cost, centred around lack of confidence and feeling uncomfortable. Interestingly, however, for those with gym memberships, prevalence of mental health conditions decreased as length of gym membership increased. This suggests that longevity in using a gym or leisure facility might support those with a condition.

Understanding what the top barriers are also allows us to know where to focus efforts of engaging this population of people to use facilities. Lack of confidence and feelings of discomfort are not uncommon barriers to our sector but are areas that our sector can break down. Research has indicated that confidence and comfort can be built by utilising appropriate marketing, customer service and information sharing ahead and during visits.

For guidance on creating inclusive environments for people with mental health conditions, see Mind's 'Safe and effective practice' support pack, available [here](#).

Case study

Read Beth's Mind blog to discover how her yoga teacher transformed her confidence and supported her mental health.

“

Trying to find a yoga class that suited both my physical health abilities and was trauma-informed seemed impossible. I was lucky to find a gentle class that was specifically for individuals with health conditions, but that was only half of the problem. I had a choice to make when I nervously went along to my first class: should I trust Sophie, the yoga teacher, and share how my mental health may impact my practice? It takes me a long time to build up trust in someone and to feel able to confide in them, so I didn't say anything to her and just hoped for the best.

It was pretty obvious to Sophie from the first class that all was not well. Despite my attempts to appear 'normal', doing movements that reminded me of past trauma was extremely intense and felt unsafe. My mind did what it was used to doing to try to protect me and dissociated.

In the context of an overwhelming traumatic event, dissociation is not a problem. In fact, it can be a life-saving coping mechanism. But if, like me, you had to dissociate on a regular basis or for a long period of time during childhood, then dissociation can still occur even when the danger has passed. It becomes the brain's 'go-to' coping strategy.

"I was worried that she wouldn't want me in the class that she might find me 'too much' or disruptive."

Before my next class Sophie took me to one side where we could have a private conversation and checked in to see how I'd found the first session. I realised that if I was to keep going along to the class then I would have to be honest with her. To begin with, I didn't tell her much, just that I was on a healing journey from childhood trauma and sometimes dissociated. I was worried that she wouldn't want me in the class; that she might find me 'too much' or disruptive.

Sophie was so supportive

There was no need to have worried. From the start, Sophie was incredible and has been so supportive. She wanted to know how she could best help me during class, what to look out for that might indicate I had dissociated, and how to 'bring me back' if I did. It felt so encouraging that basically a stranger was willing to do what she could to help me access yoga as safely as possible. I was able to discuss all of Sophie's questions with my therapist and then let Sophie know how we might manage in a class setting (I would advise anyone who starts yoga that has experienced complex trauma to be working with a therapist).

To begin with during yoga classes, so many things would cause me to dissociate – a movement or pose that my brain would link to the trauma I'd experienced; someone walking into the room by mistake; a loud noise from outside; being next to someone in class who I wasn't normally; watching others in the class do a move I would find triggering (even if I wasn't doing it myself)... the list was endless. For the first few years I would often dissociate multiple times during the session. Not only was this distressing for me, but it also meant I took Sophie's focus away from everyone else in the class whilst she supported me.

Despite the level of support that I've needed, I've never felt like a burden or that I'm not welcome in the class. In fact I feel part of a community of lovely individuals and look forward to going along each week, even if I know the actual class may be challenging. When I have needed assistance in class, Sophie has always given this in a discreet way so that the attention of other class members is not drawn to me.

"When I'd had a particularly tricky time, we might be in touch afterwards so that Sophie could check I was okay."

I know that she is always keeping an eye on me throughout the class and if she notices me struggling, she will come to stand near me. She makes sure to give me a private space beforehand to have a chat if I need one, and support after the class if needed. Especially during my first few years of attending class, I would often need time afterwards to ground myself and make sure I was ready to drive home. When I'd had a particularly tricky time, we might be in touch afterwards on email or WhatsApp so that Sophie could check I was okay.

Yoga helped my mental health generally

For a couple of years Sophie and I also had 1-2-1 sessions outside of class which really sped up my progress. They also helped Sophie get to know me better, which in turn assisted her in supporting me during class yoga. They gave me the confidence more recently to try 1-2-1 sessions with different practitioners which have further assisted my healing journey. Having yoga as a practice to use in day-to-day life has helped my mental health generally. I can use movements I feel comfortable and safe with, as well as breathwork outside of class to support me.

I have now been going to Sophie's class for over six years, and I am a very different person to the one who walked nervously through the doors all those years ago! It is now a rarity if I fully dissociate during class. I am able to do many movements that before would have been too triggering. I can use my breath to keep me grounded and have multiple coping mechanisms to help when I'm struggling. Sophie's support, intuition, kindness, patience and unwavering faith in me has helped me to make so many steps forward and grow as a person. I wouldn't be where I am today without her.

”

The background image shows an indoor basketball court. In the foreground, a person is seated in a wheelchair, looking towards the right. Another person is visible in the background, also looking in the same direction. A basketball hoop and backboard are visible in the upper left corner. The image has a warm, orange-yellow tint. A large, semi-transparent teal circle is overlaid on the right side of the image, partially obscuring the person in the wheelchair.

3c. The wider role of our sector:

How our sector supports people with mental health conditions and other forms of support

Mental health support

For those with mental health conditions, health is most likely thought of as being primarily centered on wellbeing (44%) and about being physically fit or well (40%). Juxtaposed to this, **nearly two-thirds of respondents with a mental health condition agree that their condition reduces their intention to be physically active (64%)**. However, **two thirds (66%) rated that taking out a gym membership was an important factor to heed medical advice or help them manage their short or long-term health condition**. The value and role that our facilities play in managing short or long-term health conditions, both physically and mentally, can be found through [Rick's story](#).

“

It's not just the physical aspect of coming to the gym, it's the mental health aspect

”

Rick, ANGUSalive

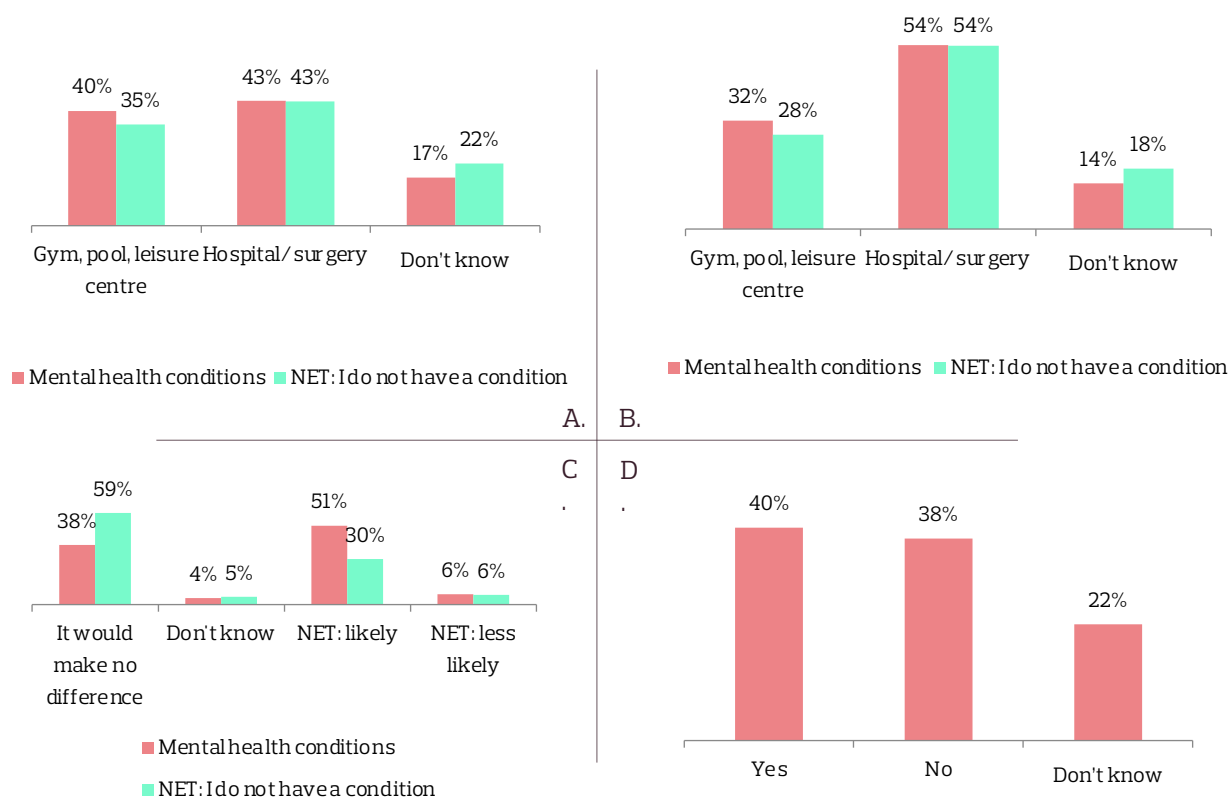
Support for mental health conditions

Since October 2024 (Wave 8) respondents have been asked if they would prefer to receive treatment for a long or short-term health condition in either a gym, pool, leisure centre or hospital / surgery.

For short-term conditions, those with mental health conditions (40%) were more likely than those with no condition (35%) to prefer treatment in their gym, pool and leisure centre, compared to 43% (both) who preferred a hospital or surgery setting (Fig11A). However, individuals with mental health conditions would prefer their long-term health condition to be treated in a hospital setting (54%; Fig11B). This suggests that our sector can maximise on the opportunity of being the space to support short-term health conditions as a preventive mechanism before long-term conditions arise.

Despite this, **51% of respondents with a mental health condition said they would be likely to join a gym or leisure facility if it offered bespoke support for health conditions**, compared to 30% of those without a condition (Fig11C). Two in five would also be willing to pay for a programme to support their mental health condition at a local gym or leisure centre (40%; Fig 11D).

Fig. 11. Preferred location for short-term health conditions (A) and long-term health conditions (B), Likelihood of joining a gym/facility by bespoke support for health condition (C), Willingness to pay for a programmes to support a mental health condition at a local gym or leisure centre (D).



Bespoke Support in Facilities:

Awareness however, of existing supportive gym or leisure centre programmes for mental health conditions is very low, with 63% of those mental health conditions saying they are not aware of such offerings compared to 43% who were.

To address this, the following support could be considered.

A new standard has been developed by the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity in partnership with health professionals and industry experts. It is intended for training providers, coaches, and leisure sector staff and support: ['Working with People with Mental Health Conditions'](#).

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Mind has developed new guidance to strengthen the link between physical activity and mental health support. [The Safe and effective practice support package](#) offers checklists, resources, tools, and case studies to help facilities create inclusive environments, whether the sessions are open to all or specifically designed for people with mental health conditions. This guidance is designed to support facilities in delivering safe, effective sessions that benefit both participants and staff.

“ Working in mental health and trying to help people every day can be pressurised. And sometimes you just need to get some support for yourself.

- Physical activity deliverer

The role of the workplace

Data has also been captured to understand the kind of support individuals with mental health conditions would like for their health condition and where they feel it should come from.

Support for / in the workplace

Close to three quarters (72%) of respondents with a mental health condition believed that **being physically active helped them avoid sickness and absence from work**, which is slightly lower than those with no condition (80%). This implies that there is a role that employers can play in providing these individuals with support for their mental health.

In fact, **over half (52%) felt that their employers should provide access to fitness facilities**, compared to a quarter (25%) who said no. This was **higher than those who reported having no condition**, who were likely to say they thought their employer should provide access (43%) and more likely to say they should not (35%).

A higher percentage of respondents (61%) with mental health conditions also stated they would be likely to join and attend a gym if it was offered as a benefit or at a discounted rate through their employer. This is higher than those with no condition (53%), who were more likely to say it wouldn't make a difference (34%) compared to those with mental health conditions (26%).

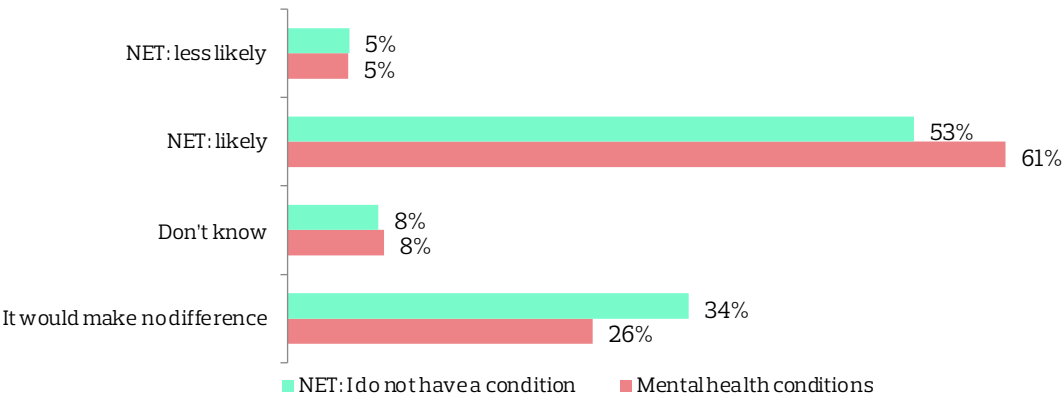


Fig. 1: decision to attend a gym if it was offered as a workplace benefit or at a discounted rate through an employer by mental health condition and no condition

Key Learnings

Section takeaways:

- Individuals with mental health conditions feel their condition prevents them from being as active but consider a gym membership as an important factor to help support their condition.
- Individuals with a mental health condition would be likely to join a gym or leisure facility if it offered bespoke support for health conditions, but awareness of existing programmes is low.
- Individuals with mental health conditions would be likely to join and attend a gym if it was offered as a benefit or at a discounted rate through their employer.

Bespoke services for mental health

When asked where they would like to receive support for their condition, individuals with a mental health condition were more likely to choose a gym or leisure facility for a short-term over a long-term condition. Roughly two fifths of individuals (40%) reportedly chose a gym or leisure facility for a short-term condition, and just under a third (32%) chose a hospital setting for a long-term condition.

Alongside this, over half of these respondents also said that they would be likely to join a gym or leisure facility if it offered bespoke support for health conditions.

This indicates clear perceived value in using facilities as a supportive service for mental health conditions. However, 63% of the same respondents were not aware of existing supportive gym or leisure centre programmes for mental health conditions. This indicates that awareness may be a potential barrier to engagement here.

Through continued promotion of the wider support that exists in our sectors services – from opportunities to socialise and engage with the community to bespoke support available – we can increase this awareness and work towards improved engagement.

Employers' role

Gym and leisure facilities are perceived by individuals with mental health conditions to play an important role in supporting them to manage their condition. Almost three quarters of respondents (72%) believed being physically active helped them also avoid sickness and absence from work. This highlights that consumers believe that the sector can support them to remain in work and economically active.

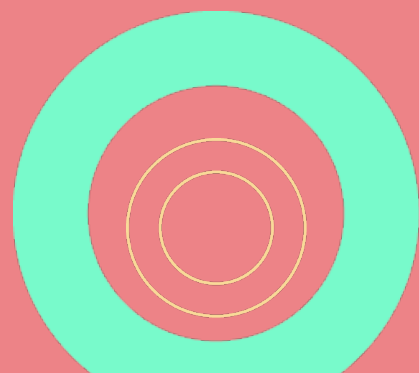
The joint role of the sector and employers

Gym and leisure facilities are perceived by individuals with mental health conditions to play an important role in supporting them to manage their condition. Almost three quarters of respondents believed being physically active helped them also avoid sickness and absence from work. This highlights that consumers believe that the sector can support them to remain in work and economically active.

However, there is indeed a role for employers to play. Respondents with mental health conditions were more likely than those with no condition to say that their employers should provide access to fitness facilities. Additionally, a majority (61%) of these individuals also noted that if their employer offered a discounted rate they would be likely to join and attend a gym or leisure facility.

This data indicates that individuals with mental health conditions want to use our sector's facilities, but barriers such as cost – which remains the number one reported barrier to taking out a gym membership – exist and are more prevalent for these individuals than those without a health condition. Mental health charity, Mind ([2024](#)), report that in England alone, people with a mental health problem earn nearly £10,000 less a year than someone without one.

Barriers of cost could be reduced by engaging these individuals through their employers and the sector can do this by continuing to build relationships with local businesses and wellbeing benefit providers who can help offer discounts to employees. [The Active Workforce](#), research conducted by ukactive in 2022, explores the dynamics of building these relationships, and offers a range of recommendations to the sector.





4. What we've discovered

An outline of the key themes and learnings

Key learnings

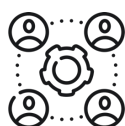
This report presents an initial exploration of the specific nuances surrounding mental health, drawing on data from ukactive's Consumer Engagement polling. The insights have been distilled into key takeaways and are paired with practical guidance, resources, and recommendations to support continued development and growth in this area.

Collaboration has been central to shaping these findings. In particular, ukactive has worked alongside Mind and Active Insight to align research with evidence-based practice, while real-life examples from Alliance Leisure illustrate how sector partners are already embedding effective approaches into their programmes and facilities.



Mental Health Among the Population

Women, younger age groups, and those in lower social grades are most likely to report mental health conditions. Although younger age groups are prioritising their facility memberships, women and those in lower social grades are less likely to due to the barriers of cost, lack of confidence and feeling uncomfortable, as identified in this report. These demographic groups show opportunities to tailor programmes and communications to target dedicated engagement and campaigns to support these groups and drive engagement and growth in these areas.



The Role of our Sector

- Individuals with mental health conditions feel their condition prevents them from being as active but consider a gym membership as an important factor to help support their condition.
- Individuals with a mental health condition would be likely to join a gym or leisure facility if it offered bespoke support for health conditions, but awareness of existing programmes is low.
- Individuals with mental health conditions would be likely to join and attend a gym if it was offered as a benefit or at a discounted rate through their employer.



Activity Participation

- Females with mental health conditions are less likely to be active and members of a gym than males with mental health conditions.
- Younger age groups with mental health conditions are more likely to be members of a gym than older age groups with mental health conditions.
- Individuals with mental health conditions from lower social grades are less active and less likely to be members of a gym than those from higher social grades.
- For many people with mental health conditions, the biggest barriers to joining a gym are low confidence and feeling uncomfortable. These challenges affect everyone, though they are felt more strongly by women. With the right steps, facilities can help break down these barriers and create more welcoming, inclusive spaces. The [Safer Spaces to Move Resource Hub](#) offers practical guidance on how to do this.
- More awareness of how the sector's existing services already mental health conditions may help support engagement across all demographic groupings, given the top motivators reported by all.

Practical Resources:

Throughout this report, we have identified useful guides and resources. These can be found below.

[Mind's Mental health and physical activity toolkit](#)

[Safer Spaces to Move Resource Hub](#)

[CIMSPA Professional standard: Working inclusively – working with People with Mental Health Conditions](#)

What is next?

This report represents the first stage of focused insight into consumer perspectives. Focusing on mental health – a wider societal issue – shows the true value of our sector and the influence it can have on the nation's health.

Ultimately, mental health is a fundamental and critical component in achieving Vision 2030 and in shaping the continued growth and resilience of our sector.

We will continue to develop further focused reports to provide deeper exploration into our consumer data and highlight and build further evidence and actionable recommendations based on key topics identified by the consumer.

For further information on our consumer engagement work, or to discuss the findings in more detail, please contact georgiepoole@ukactive.org.uk.



Mental Health in Motion Report Partners

