

## Summary

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### **Empowering people with enduring mental health problems' participation in physical exercise**

#### About the DRILL Programme

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DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning) was an innovative 5 year, UK wide programme led by disabled people, for disabled people and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Launched in 2015, the programme was managed by a partnership of Disability Action Northern Ireland, Disability Rights UK, Disability Wales and Inclusion Scotland.

The aim of the programme was to build better evidence about approaches which enable disabled people to achieve independent living. The findings from the projects it funded can be used to inform future provision across a wide range of policy areas, and give a greater voice to disabled people in decisions which affect them.

This is one of a series of summaries of the project supported by DRILL. Final reports, toolkits and summaries of all the projects are available from the DRILL website at [www.drilluk.org.uk](http://www.drilluk.org.uk).

#### **Overview of the project**

This project explored the mortality gap and increased risk of illness experienced by people with mental health problems, and the benefits of physical activity for them.

## Approach

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The project used both qualitative and quantitative research. Participants received a Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke (NICHHS) Well Check, designed to detect early warning signs associated with developing chest, heart and stroke conditions.

Six focus groups were conducted consisting of twenty service users, three personal trainers, three peer researchers and two Praxis Care staff members.

## Findings

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Participants described physical activity as lifting their mood. They talked about feeling happier or getting a high. This, in turn, contributed to them looking forward to aspects of their daily lives.

Being active led to improvements in day-to-day living. Participants described having a clear head and feeling more alert.

Physical activity improved decision-making.

Participants established new routines based around their activity sessions. A number said they felt more energised and were capable of doing more throughout the day.

Feeling less stressed was a benefit for those with experience of anxiety or depression.

Trainers and participants identified the importance of the social element of physical activity. It strengthened the dynamic of the group, which created a sense of belonging and connectedness. This especially helped those who may have been socially isolated.

Heavy medication had an impact on physical reactions including extended fatigue, excessive perspiration, poor levels of concentration and increased appetite.

Some participants discussed the impact of a mental health crisis, or the slow onset of their condition, marking a deterioration in their physical health.

## Findings (continued)

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Low levels of self-esteem were identified as a barrier to engaging in any type of activity.

Getting GP approval to undertake low level physical activity was sometimes difficult and time consuming.

There is a need for easier-paced group exercise classes, with a wide appeal to those who want to undertake physical activity in a setting which isn't intimidating.

## Recommendations

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The project outlined many recommendations, some of which are listed here. All recommendations are included in the full report, which is linked below.

- Use physical activity (when appropriate) as a tool to support those who have experience of serious and enduring mental health problems
- Establish a register of mental health trained health and fitness professionals
- Work on a 'GP exclusion' basis, where a GP is sent a letter informing them of a participant's inclusion in a programme. GPs can then contact the provider should they believe it should not be undertaken
- Provide for individuals who do not want to leave their home by providing physical activity in a household setting
- Social aspects of physical activity should be promoted when developing and planning programmes
- Equal priority must be placed on the physical health needs of those using mental health services
- Physical health should be recognised as a core responsibility of health and social care bodies and community-based provision of health and leisure facilities.

## Final report

### Empowering people with psychosocial disabilities' participation in physical exercise

Please click on report name to read full report.

## Project partners

### Mental Health Foundation



### South Eastern Recovery College



### Northern Recovery College



### Western Recovery College



### Praxis Care



### Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke



### Queens University Belfast



### Platinum Training Institute

