

# From performance to well-being: The expanding role of exercise in mental health

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Sports medicine, Mental health, Exercise therapy, WHO 2025 framework, Integrated care

## From Performance to Well-being: The Expanding Role of Exercise in Mental Health

In sports and exercise medicine, the conversation around performance has matured. Once defined almost exclusively by physiological metrics—speed, endurance, strength—the field now acknowledges a broader truth: athletic excellence and mental well-being are inseparable. The same principles that optimize performance can also sustain psychological resilience and emotional stability. The challenge for clinicians and researchers is no longer to prove this connection but to operationalize it.

## Beyond the Physical: A Paradigm Shift in Sports Medicine

For decades, the prevailing narrative in sports science was mechanistic—train the body, condition the system, prevent injury. Yet recent years have seen an undeniable convergence between physical and mental health. Athletes and active individuals are now viewed through a biopsychosocial lens, where psychological readiness, motivation, and emotional regulation are as vital as biomechanical precision.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reinforced this integrated approach in its 2025 Guidance on Mental Health Policy and Strategic Action Plans (Module 3), highlighting the need to expand the mental health workforce to include physical activity trainers and sports coaches [1]. This recognition positions the sports and exercise sector not just as a site for performance optimization, but as a legitimate domain for mental health promotion and early intervention.

## Exercise as a Neurobiological and Psychosocial Intervention

The neurobiological evidence is compelling. Exercise modulates neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, enhances neuroplasticity through brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and reduces systemic inflammation—all mechanisms associated with improved mood and cognition. From a clinical perspective, these findings translate into tangible outcomes: lower depression scores, improved sleep, and greater stress resilience.

However, the story goes beyond biochemistry. Sports environments, by design, cultivate belonging, discipline, and purpose—psychosocial determinants that directly buffer against psychological distress. The WHO's "Promoting Health Through Sports: A Guide for Clubs and

Communities” (2025) calls on sports organizations to capitalize on these dynamics by embedding mental health promotion into their structures and culture [2]. This means transforming sports clubs, community programs, and rehabilitation centers into spaces where physical performance and mental recovery coexist.

### Mental Health as a Core Competency in Sports Medicine

The integration of mental health into sports and exercise medicine must be both strategic and structural. It begins with education. Sports physicians, physiotherapists, and coaches should be trained to recognize early signs of mental strain, understand stress–injury cycles, and promote psychological safety within athletic settings.

Elite sports have recently exposed a hidden epidemic—burnout, anxiety, and depression masked by performance pressure. Addressing these issues requires more than reactive counseling; it demands preventive, movement-based frameworks rooted in daily practice. Structured exercise programs that combine physical activation with mindful engagement, social connection, and recovery-oriented principles can serve as evidence-based interventions for both athletes and the general population.

Moreover, physiotherapists working in neurorehabilitation, pain management, or wellness promotion can translate lessons from sports science into therapeutic settings, fostering mental health through movement. The boundaries between sport, rehabilitation, and public health are becoming fluid—and that is where the discipline must evolve.

### Translating Evidence into Systems

The current gap is not conceptual but operational. Despite abundant research, implementation remains inconsistent. Exercise-based mental health interventions are still fragmented, often depending on individual champions rather than institutional frameworks.

To advance, sports and exercise medicine must align with international policy. The WHO’s 2025 frameworks emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration, structured referral systems, and measurable outcomes. Imagine a care pathway where sports physicians, physiotherapists, psychologists, and coaches communicate within a shared mental health protocol—screening for distress, prescribing movement, and tracking psychological as well as physical recovery.

Such models would not only improve mental health outcomes but also enhance athletic performance by addressing the psychological dimensions of injury, motivation, and adherence.

### Rethinking Professional Identity and Education

This shift challenges our professional identity. The sports medicine clinician of the future must blend scientific rigor with emotional literacy, adopting a preventive stance that sees every training session as an opportunity for mental health promotion.

Academic curricula should therefore evolve. Teaching stress physiology alongside biomechanics, or motivational interviewing alongside injury prevention, will prepare a new generation of practitioners fluent in both the physical and psychological languages of human performance.

This is not mission drift—it is mission completion. To treat athletes as whole individuals, we must recognize that mental health is performance health.

### The Road Ahead: Integrating Performance, Recovery, and Well-being

The future of sports and exercise medicine lies in convergence. It is where physiology meets psychology, and prevention meets participation. The WHO’s 2025 agenda reframes movement as a public health right and mental well-being as a shared professional responsibility. For clinicians and researchers, this calls for a new kind of literacy—one that unites metrics of performance with markers of mental resilience.

Policymakers must also play their part by funding interdisciplinary programs, supporting community-level sport initiatives, and embedding mental health indicators within physical activity promotion schemes.

As physiotherapists and sports medicine professionals, we are uniquely positioned to lead this transformation. Whether working with elite athletes or individuals recovering from illness, our mission remains constant: to harness movement not merely for achievement, but for human connection and balance.

In the end, exercise is not just a path to better performance—it is a pathway to well-being. Every stride, stretch, or breath becomes an act of healing, where body and mind move forward together.

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