



Optimising Wellbeing Study – Impact of Self Isolation on Physical and Mental Health

Introduction

Both Closing the Gap and Equally Well UK focus on the inequality in physical health experienced by people with a diagnosis of severe mental illness.

Closing the Gap have once again teamed up with Equally Well UK to work on this resource based on key tips and suggestions shared by their Expert by Experience members on topics from the Closing the Gap's OWLS Study. The Closing the Gap network, set up a study called OWLS (Optimising Wellbeing during Self Isolation) to see if the physical health gap had widened as a result of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed on us all.

367 people contributed to the study and the results were discussed with a number of people living with a diagnosis of severe mental illness and their carers. [The results of the study can be found here.](#)

Using points from both Expert by Experience groups we have shared some of their key tips and suggestions for positive change for both people living with severe mental illness as well as for those responsible for providing and making decisions about services.

We hope you find it useful.

Healthy weight management

The OWLS study showed that since March 2020 people are doing less physical exercise and eating less healthy food

Tips from Expert by Experience members to increase physical activity, reduce weight or maintain a healthy weight:

- Activity or walking groups can be a good way to meet people in your community
- Find someone (friend/family) who is interested in trying a similar activity (e.g. cycling)
- Plan where to exercise – *"are there locations to run or walk where you will feel less observed/judged or self-conscious?"*

- *"You don't need to make a huge immediate change. Get into fitness gradually. Start by doing one (small) thing every day."*
- *"Start by sitting down exercises then gradually start exercising standing up".*
- *"Focus on taking part in fun activities – don't just do it for weight loss"*
- *"Try out new activities – you never know what you might enjoy – even dancing".*
- Look for free healthy recipes at supermarkets or in magazines or online.
- Plan strategies to reduce boredom that could lead to unhealthy eating, if you tend to snack on an evening watching TV, try snacking on popcorn, fruit or nuts instead of unhealthy snacks.
- You might wish to buy fewer unhealthy 'snacky' foods, so they are not available at moments where your willpower is lower

Resources

- [Equally Well's guide](#) for people living with severe mental illness and looking after physical health during Covid-19
- [Rethink's mental illness and being active guide](#)
- [British Heart Foundation guide to eating well on a budget](#)
- [NHS guidance on eating well](#)
- To find out what support is available in your local area to increase your physical exercise, you could:
 - Speak to your [GP](#)
 - Look at your [local council website](#)
 - Go to your [local library](#)
 - Ask local mental health charities
- Finding it a challenge? You're not alone. [Equally Well UK have produced a resource on common challenges faced and ways to overcome them.](#)

Tips for service providers from Expert by Experience members

- **Councils** to offer incentives, such as free gym membership, personal health budgets, social prescribing and advertise them.
- Offer peer worker-led physical activity sessions.
- **GPs, doctors and nurses** to provide early intervention for healthy weight management for instance when someone is first referred to mental health services or is first prescribed certain medications
- **Local Authorities** to offer/advertise a list of different activities in the area i.e. ramblers/cycling/ games groups and advertise them.

- **Local Authorities** – to share and offer what social prescribing is available which might include various initial 1 to 1 fitness sessions to help find the right activities and settings.
- *“Provide gentle motivational support to increase activity. Don’t blame – encourage.”*
- Encourage positive society attitudes towards getting fit. *“Don’t be hard on people”*
- *“Don’t offer a one-size-fits-all solution”* Make a variety of options available and gentle introduction to start with.
- Offer low-intensity sports tailored to severe mental illness and those with mobility issues, e.g. walking football, netball and chair exercises.
- **GPs, doctors and nurses** Diabetes screening – offer preventative support to people who don’t meet the criteria for specific services
- Make referrals to food banks which include more healthy food and offer recipe options.
- Have a list of local resources available to offer suggestions for weight management and eating a healthy diet.

Tobacco smoking

The OWLS study found that over half of respondents who smoke reported smoking more during the pandemic so far (55%)

Tips from Expert by Experience members to help people to reduce and quit smoking:

- Giving up smoking can mean that your sense of taste and smell can improve, you can save money and in some circumstances, you can reduce the medication you take.
- When you decide to give up smoking it is helpful to find alternative healthy behaviours so that smoking isn't a stress management tool. Consider a hobby involving your hands, for example crosswords or knitting or alternatively plan to go out for a walk whenever you feel a craving.
- It's useful to find ways to mitigate boredom, plan strategies in advance and think about any trigger points and how to manage them
- Talk to your health worker / GP about support options – from smoking cessation programmes to Nicotine Replacement Therapies. These can have pros and cons, so it is important to talk to a clinician to find the right option for you.
- Why not ask a friend who is an ex-smoker to help you?
- Acknowledge that quitting can be a long journey and takes time, there can be pitfalls but just because you might not succeed the first time doesn't mean you won't succeed the second or third time

Tips for service providers and decision makers from Expert by Experience members:

People with mental illness can find it difficult to access general smoking cessation services. We think these points raised by the Expert by Experience groups and our research would help:

- **Local Authorities**
Smoking cessation services specifically for people living with severe mental illness should be made available.
- **Local Authorities and NHS teams**
Train ex-smoker peer workers to deliver interventions
- *"Smoke services should listen to ex-smokers' experiences and learn from them"*
- Offer daily or regular support to maintain motivation e.g. by text
- If vapes are offered as an alternative to smoking, then vape cessation support should be provided.
- Joined up care between inpatient and community is needed
"People who have been unable to smoke in hospital should be offered continued intensive support to maintain this after discharge"
- *"Don't push too much, don't nag, just encourage people"*

Loneliness

The OWL study's results showed that during the pandemic, living alone and being younger were associated with being lonely among people with serious mental illness

Tips to help with loneliness from the Expert by Experience groups and our research:

- Exercising can be a good way to meet people in the local community.
- Find out about [volunteering in your area](#), [the library](#) or [council website](#) may have a list of activities - *"You feel like you belong to something bigger than you."*
- Even if you live with others (even a partner or family) – you could also benefit from other types of social interactions outside of the home.
- Think about joining a group such as [ramblers](#), [Pilates](#), [dance](#), [cycling](#), or other activities you may enjoy. This could increase your fitness as well as make new friends.
- Everyone is unique *"Try to be open-minded and willing to accept people"*
- You could offer to support others if you are a peer with experience of loneliness, for example volunteering.

- Consider taking the first step to reach out to people, what could the first step be? For example, later today I will speak to a friend by phone / walk to the shop and say hello to the neighbour.

Tips for service providers and decision makers from Expert by Experience members:

- **Local Authorities**
For shared housing there should be choice in who to live with. It can worsen things if you are with the wrong people.
- Offer targeted support and positive role models to target groups potentially more vulnerable to loneliness such as those from racialised or LGBTQ+ communities
- Help to advertise paid for and volunteering opportunities that might help people to connect with others as well as social groups
- Increase public messaging to dispel myths and stereotypes about serious mental illness to reduce stigma: <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

Access to healthcare services for both physical and mental health problems

The majority of people reported that they had been able to access both physical and mental health services when they needed them. However, face-to-face meetings increased the likelihood that people felt their needs had been met.

Almost a third of people who weren't currently receiving support from mental health services thought that they would need support in the next year.

Of those currently receiving support, about a quarter thought they would need additional support in the next year.

Tips for accessing physical and mental health services:

- Try to write down what you want to speak to your GP or health care professional about, that way, you're less likely to forget. You are also allowed to bring an advocate or friend/relative with you to an appointment, if needed.
- Ask your GP or healthcare professional if they have any leaflets or suggestions available
- There may be accessible resources on the internet that can help people to support themselves. Look at the NHS website or your local council website
- *"Libraries are always a good source of local information. If you can't see what you are looking for - ask"*

Tips for service providers and decision makers from Expert by Experience members:

- The mode of professional support i.e., online, telephone or face to face, should be offered based on individual preferences not economic issues.
- When care isn't delivered face-to-face symptoms may be missed
- For some people there isn't privacy in their own home for remote meetings.
- Both screen and face-to-face meetings are needed. For both the benefit of patients and doctors.
- Pay close attention to those with minimal social support networks.

We hope that you have found this information helpful. We would like to thank all of the OWLS participants, the Equally Well UK Expert by Experience group, the NHS staff involved, and everyone else who has supported us with our work to improve physical health of people with a severe mental illness.

For further information on the work that we do please visit:

Closing the Gap <https://www.york.ac.uk/healthsciences/closing-the-gap/>

Equally Well UK <https://equallywell.co.uk/>