

AN EXERCISE IN MENTAL HEALTH

by Karlie Intlekofer, Ph.D.

You might assume that the people who frequent your fitness facility are there to improve their physical health and refine the reflection they see in the mirror, but their true motivations are often far beyond skin-deep. In fact, the average fitness enthusiast is more likely to associate health club visits with mental health benefits than ever before. Understanding the role of exercise in stress management can help you promote mental health benefits in ways that will help you connect with all the people you serve.

What is Mental Health?

When you think of mental health, what comes to mind? You might assume it means the absence of mental illness. According to the World Health Organization, mental health is much more than that. They describe it as a state of wellbeing that allows each of us to cope with life's challenges and contribute meaningfully to our communities. One of the most important aspects of this state of wellbeing is the ability to adapt. Furthermore, we can bolster our adaptability by making healthy choices that improve mental and physical resilience.

The Exercise Effect

The decision to exercise is one of many healthy lifestyle choices that can improve mental health. Recent studies have shown that as we gain fitness, stress perception is often reduced. In light of this, it's all too obvious how regular health club visits can serve as a buffer for dealing with daily challenges.



In fact, surveys reveal that health club members are expanding their understanding of workout benefits. The results of club member interviews suggest that they "associate their club workout with amplified emotional resilience." Clearly, today's club members are motivated by more than what they see in the mirror.

Mental Health & Your Facility

Fitness professionals who understand these changing motivations can highlight mental health benefits to gain,



engage and keep members. When potential members learn about exercise benefits in ways that align with their needs and desires, it can spur them to take action and join a fitness facility. Linking health club visits to mental health benefits also helps members view workouts as a self-care method. Perhaps most importantly, research suggests that as members gain stress-relieving benefits, their risk of terminating their membership declines significantly.

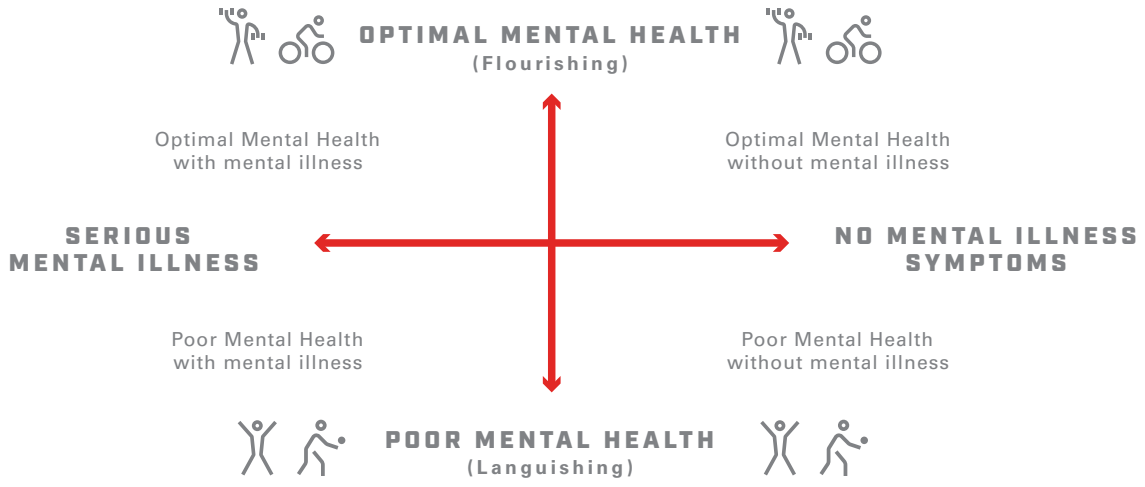
Mental Health vs. Mental Illness

A misconception about mental illness is that it describes a binary condition; you either have it or you don't. Yet everyone experiences mental illness symptoms at some point in their lives. As demonstrated by the dual-continua model, mental illness and mental health are related but distinct dimensions. Broadly, mental illness ranges from no symptoms to severe symptoms, and involves conditions such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating, bipolar disorder and more. Mental health, on the other hand, ranges from languishing to flourishing, and describes wellbeing factors such as how we relate to ourselves and others. These include our sense of purpose, autonomy, self-acceptance, and insight into our potential for self-improvement.

This model creates a framework that helps fitness professionals understand the distinct needs for managing mental illness as they continue to encourage the healthy habits that help their people thrive.

Fostering Mental Health for All

Whether you're working with people who are managing their mental illness or exercise enthusiast striving to bolster their mental health, your fitness facility can be a powerful resource to help them on their journey. Health clubs and other fitness facilities offer a unique environment that can inspire and unite members. Remind your people that every workout is like a deposit made in the service of their wellbeing. In times of stress and difficulty, they will be able to tap into those deposits to cope, affirming their decision to stay active and engaged.





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Dr. Karlie Intlekofer is a neuroscientist who focuses on the benefits of exercise for brain health and well-being. She has a background in research and teaching at the university level and focuses on exercise motivation and brain areas involved in stress, learning and memory. Her passion in this field is bolstered by experience working with a wide range of ages and abilities as a personal trainer and group exercise instructor. As the Global Wellness Researcher at Matrix Fitness, Karlie integrates evidence-based practices into exercise programming and develops initiatives that support an enduring habit of physical activity.

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