

# The role of active travel in improving health

## Part 3: The role of active travel in improving mental health

### Active Travel Toolkit Slide Pack

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The Role of Active Travel in Improving Health Toolkit Part 3: The role of active travel in improving mental health. Part of the Active Travel Toolbox, written by Sustrans with support from Dr Adrian Davis, Living Streets and The TAS Partnership Limited.

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# What is this slide pack for?

This slide pack provides a summary of the toolkit: The role of active travel in improving mental health.

The Active Travel Toolbox slide packs are designed to demonstrate the benefits of sustainable transport and help LEPs and local delivery partners strategically invest in walking and cycling schemes.

This slide pack includes:

- Key messages
- Statistics and evidence
- Signposting to tools and case studies

# Contents

This slide pack includes:

- The financial and personal costs of poor mental health
- The benefits of physical activity for mental health
- The benefits of active travel for mental health through the commute
- Improving links between transport health and wellbeing

# Key messages

- Poor mental health is a significant and often poorly understood issue in the UK and one in six workers will be experiencing depression, anxiety or problems relating to stress at any one time.
- Many benefits to mental health have been proven to be associated with physical activity including:
  - reducing the risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimer's,
  - improving self-perception and self-esteem including a sense of purpose and value, mood and sleep quality, and
  - reducing levels of anxiety and fatigue
- Evidence suggests walking and cycling (often alongside public transport) can contribute positively towards mental health both through physical activity and other factors in comparison to commuting by car.
- More needs to be done to improve links between transport, health and wellbeing nationally and locally, including how we account for mental health outcomes in transport planning.

# The financial and personal costs of poor mental health

Incidences of mental ill health are not uncommon in the workplace (Centre for Mental Health, 2016)

- One in six workers will be experiencing depression, anxiety or problems relating to stress at any one time in the UK.
- Coupled with this 91 million working days are lost each year due to mental health problems.
- The total cost to employers is estimated at nearly £26 billion each year. That is equivalent to £1,035 for every employee in the UK workforce.
- There is also the cost of £2.4 billion a year in replacing staff who leave their jobs because of mental ill health.

Research has also shown a direct correlation between psychological wellbeing and performance.

- For example, a study on a sample of 750 employees in the North West of England showed that an increase of one point on a psychological wellbeing scale of 1 to 5 points is associated with an increase in productivity of 8% (Robertson and Cooper, 2011).

# The benefits of physical activity for mental health

## Depression and anxiety

- The link between physical activity and depression is well established. Research has found that people who are inactive have three times the rate of moderate to severe depression as active people (Weyerer et al 2002).
- Moderate regular physical activity should, therefore, be considered as a valuable means of treating depression and anxiety, and of improving mental wellbeing in the population.
- There is unequivocal evidence that physical activity has positive effects on anxiety, and specifically that short bursts of physical activity appear to be sufficient. Physically active people report fewer symptoms of anxiety or emotional distress than those who are inactive. Moderate intensity activity can reduce short-term psychological reactions to psychological stress and can help people recover more quickly.

## Personal wellbeing and self-esteem

- There is strong evidence to show that physical activity makes people feel better about themselves. Activity provides benefits for wellbeing, for example improved mood, a sense of achievement, relaxation or release from daily stress (Dept. of Health, 2011).
- Becoming physically active also causes positive changes in overall physical self-worth as well as specific aspects of physical self-perception such as body image, perceived fitness and strength (Scully et al, 1998).
- In particular, physical activity can bring more generalised beneficial changes in self-esteem for those who have initial low self-esteem.

# The benefits of active travel for mental health through the commute

## Commuting by private motor vehicle

- Many car commuters find their journey more stressful than other mode users. The main sources of this stress appear to be delays and other road users.
- Car commuting stress has been found to be associated with increased negative moods on arrival at work and the home, lower tolerance threshold, cognitive impairment, greater illness and work absenteeism, job instability and a negative effect on overall life satisfaction (Rissel et al, 2014).

## Active travel

- As walking and cycling contribute towards physical activity both modes are good for our mental health. Public transport journeys typically feature physical activity when accessing bus stops or railway stations and therefore also benefit mental health.
- Most studies of the commute and stress find that active travel, followed by public transport use are the least stressful modes and that active travel is often reported as a positive experience in terms of stress management (Paez and Whalen, 2010).
- Walking and cycling journeys are the most relaxing and exciting and therefore seem the most optimum form of travel from a wellbeing perspective. The evidence indicates that 30 minutes or more round trip commuting either on foot or by bicycle has a significant positive effect on mental health, most notably for men (Ohta, 2007).
- Research to understand switching to walking or cycling from car use is associated with an increase in subjective wellbeing.

# Improving links between transport health and wellbeing

There is some evidence of the financial value of health and wellbeing benefits resulting from investment in transport schemes, most notably for walking and cycling schemes (DfT, 2014).

As the Chartered Institute for Highways and Transportation has stated, there are opportunities to improve links between transport, health and wellbeing, but progress is being hampered by a lack of strategic integration nationally and joint working locally.

## **Case study: Adults' commute travel behaviour over time and wellbeing**

In a longitudinal survey of the British Household Panel Survey (1991/2–2008/9), researchers found associations between wellbeing and:

- travel mode choice
- changes in time spent commuting by specific travel modes
- switching to more active travel modes.

A positive association was found between active commuting and wellbeing, for example

- there was a positive relationship between time spent walking and wellbeing
- with regards to public transport there was a positive association observed between wellbeing and public transport when compared to car travel

These results appear to suggest that avoiding car driving may be beneficial to wellbeing.