



MindFit Group: Pilot phase report

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Executive summary

This report outlines the preliminary findings from the pilot phase of MindFit, a pioneering 8-week program that integrates physical activity with mental health support to improve outcomes for individuals experiencing depression and anxiety. Developed by Ollie Stringer and his team at OJ Gyms in East Devon, MindFit provides a holistic approach, combining personal training with guidance from a registered Mental Health Nurse specialising in Single Session Therapy. This initiative aligns with national guidelines and recommendations, including those from NICE (2022) and Sport England (2022), which emphasise the role of physical activity in improving mental health.

Key findings:

1. Quantitative outcomes

- The average improvement in BMI across clients was 2.2, with the greatest changes observed in those with severe obesity.
- Flourishing Scale scores, which assess self-perceived well-being, improved by an average of 28.8%, reflecting enhanced self-esteem, purpose, and optimism.

2. Qualitative insights

- Clients reported improved confidence, long-term lifestyle changes, and significant mental health benefits.
- 75% of participants continued their gym memberships post-program, indicating sustained engagement.

3. Professional feedback

- MindFit Trainers (MFTs) valued the opportunity to broaden their skillsets and observed positive transformations in clients' physical and mental health.

Recommendations

- Strengthen partnerships with local NHS services, Active Partnerships, and Sport England to secure funding and referrals.
- Refine operational processes, including GP referral systems, client assessments, and MFT training to adhere to NICE guidelines and ensure trauma-informed practices.
- Introduce standardised tools like PHQ-9 and GAD-7 to better monitor depression and anxiety symptoms.

MindFit demonstrates significant potential as a cost-effective, early-intervention program to reduce the burden on NHS services while empowering individuals to improve their physical and mental well-being in a supportive environment. Further investment and collaboration could position MindFit as a model for integrating physical activity into mental health care.

Ollie Stringer, Steve West, Henry Sanford

MindFit Group

MindFit pilot – preliminary findings:

Situation:

The links between mental and physical health are established (NCMMH, 2024), with recognition of the important role of physical activity in improving outcomes for those with common mental health conditions (NHS Talking Therapies Manual; NCMMH, 2024).

There is a good evidence base for physical health-based interventions improving symptoms of depression and anxiety in adults (Schuch et al., 2016, Wegner et al., 2014) and adolescents (Wegner et al., 2020), with results comparable to CBT and pharmacological treatment.

More specifically, research has found the specific benefits of supervised and group physical activity with moderate intensity and aerobic physical activity regimes for depression (Heissel et al., 2023). This has been recognised in healthcare settings, with recent recommendations by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2022) including physical interventions for treating depression. More specifically, the NHS Talking Therapies Manual recommends embedding a greater focus on physical activity, coming away from the common association of physical activity as ‘exercise’ (NCMMH, 2024). This should consider enjoyable activities, being built-up slowly and making the most of the good days (NCMMH, 2024). The manual also recommends Active Partnerships are well placed to connect NHS Talking Therapies services with suitable local physical activity provision (NCMMH, 2024).

The NCMMH (2024) also recommend offering a range of physical activities, and ensuring activities are appropriate and accessible. Services should support uptake and engagement with physical activity, including considering the environment, identifying solutions to overcome barriers, encouraging people to embed socialising within physical activity, and creating opportunities to be active in groups.

However, engaging with physical health interventions such as gyms can be intimidating, especially with mental health difficulties. Mental health difficulties can be a barrier to engaging with healthy lifestyle changes. However, it is likely that preventative and early interventions are likely to be beneficial for individuals, and will also contribute to relieving some pressure on other areas of the NHS, for example departments that support lifestyle related physical illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, as well as specialist mental health services who are required for those who are not able to have their needs met in a primary care setting.

This paper will present findings from the MindFit Group, an organisation designed to provide a tailored physical activity programme for those presenting with depression and anxiety symptoms, to provide specialised, structured and evidence-based support to benefit patients, and provide an additional referral pathway for GP services needing to reduce burden on their health services.

Background:

MindFit was established in June 2024, by a small team lead by Ollie Stringer, who owns 'OJ Gyms', a group of gyms located in East Devon. Ollie has identified in his own practice as a gym owner and personal trainer (PT), a need for a service that provides both the benefits of strengthening mental health and physical health. OJ Gyms pride themselves on providing a safe, friendly and inclusive environment for everyone that would like to get mentally and physically active. All new members are supported with a free induction and a workout programme and have the option to attend the gym's classes too. Many members also choose to partake in personal training, which offers a more personable one-to-one experience with a Level 3 qualified Personal Trainer. It was during these sessions, that the idea of MindFit was formulated. If PTs were given specialist training around mental health, and thus targeted both physical and mental health needs, what positive impacts could this have on clients?

Therefore, Ollie and his team have developed 'MindFit' a unique 8-week program that combines personal training with mental health support, directly supervised by a registered Mental Health Nurse specialising in Single Session Therapy (Dryden, 2019, Talmon, 1990). This approach allows clients to address both their physical and mental wellbeing in collaboration, offering for the first time a holistic solution that addresses both fitness and mental health challenges in a supportive and inclusive gym environment.

MindFit was developed in-line with a robust and growing evidence-base and is delivered in alignment with recommendations by NICE (2022) and Sport England (2022) by integrating a holistic approach to health that address both the physical and mental health well-being. NICE guidelines emphasise the importance of physical activities for improving mental health, particularly for managing depression and anxiety, and endorse combining lifestyle changes with psychological interventions. MindFit provides this by offering structured mental health support, using the principles of Single-Session Therapy (Dryden, 2019, Talmon, 1990) in a gym environment.

In addition, MindFit and the OJ Gym's mission statement aligns with the values and principles of Sport England (2022), who advocate sports and fitness being accessible and inclusive to all. It has the potential to benefit large numbers of patients struggling with engaging with physical activity and their mental wellbeing, thus reducing burden on NHS services and reducing further deterioration.

Below is a brief overview of the MindFit programme:

MindFit programme		
Week 1	2 to 7 weeks	Week 8
Meet Mindfit Trainer (Level 3)	Bespoke mental and physical training sessions	Review metrics and plans for continuing their mental and physical life resilience
Gym familiarisation	6 x 60 mins sessions	

It also begins to address thematic findings from the NCMMH around increasing physical activity in psychological treatment (2024) and has great potential to be delivered in conjunction with NHS Talking Therapies services, either as a referral option, or delivered at the same time as psychological therapies. Below outlines how MindFit meets the recommendations contained within key national guidance referenced throughout this report.

MindFit provides an enabling factor that facilitates engagement with physical activity.

- **Routines and sustaining physical activity.** A consistent routine is crucial for both physical and mental health improvements. Regularly scheduled sessions with a MindFit trainer build accountability and make it easier for clients to incorporate physical activity and a mental health toolbox into their lives over the long term.
- **Cognitive changes around physical activity.** Clients often face mental barriers to engaging in regular physical activity, such as fear of failure or lack of motivation. MindFit provides a combination of mental health support and personal training which works to specifically acknowledge and challenges these cognitive patterns, and to help reframe physical activity as a positive manageable part of their life.
- **Social factors:** The gym environment at OJ gyms, as part of the MindFit program, fosters a sense of community and social interaction, which is critical for mental well-being. Clients will meet both trainers and general users of the gym. Isolation, a common feature of depression and anxiety will be addressed via the MindFit program and clients will be encouraged to join classes and promote use of the gym independently, even once their MindFit program is completed. Social support from the MindFit trainers helps reinforce positive behavioural changes and improves adherence to the program.
- **Condition related factors:** clients are currently referred via their GP, who have identified a common mental health difficulty. The MindFit team are skilled and experienced with also supporting clients with a range of physical health needs and can adapt the program to ensure individual needs are met.

A training package for the MindFit Trainer's (MFT) was developed by Steve West, MindFit's Mental Health advisor, on how to effectively support clients on the MindFit program who are struggling with symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. It is not designed to be a therapy or counselling session, nor replace psychological support. Included in their training, MFTs are taught about boundaries and how to ensure their role stays within the outlined boundaries. This meant training included being able to have conversations where they don't know the answers and how to manage this, such as seeking supervision and ensuring signposting options are available, including notifying the GP if there are any risk concerns. Key objectives of the training package can be found in Appendix 1.

Assessment:

The pilot commenced in July 2024, with eight clients, six female and two males. All eight clients completed the 8-week course. We had an additional ninth client that did not attend the course regularly and they have not been included in our results.

Quantitative data:

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a commonly used tool by healthcare providers to estimate the amount of body fat by using height and weight measurements. The client data relating to physical health is captured below in Table 1.

Table 1:

Client ID	Gender	BMI at start	BMI at finish	Improvement
01	Female	19.9	18.7	1.2
02	Female	60.5	59.5	1.0
03	Female	27.3	24.9	2.4
04	Male	30.6	30.7	-0.1
05	Female	24.9	24.9	0
06	Female	36.9	36.0	0
07	Female	38.8	37.5	1.3
08	Male	42.5	40.0	2.5

Overall, BMI improvement was variable, with most improvement noted from those in the severely obese category. Those in low obesity ranges observed varied improvements, with the overall average BMI improvement being 2.2.

The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2009) was used at the start and end of the MindFit programme. It consists of eight questions to assess self-perceived success in important areas of life such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose and optimism. It provides a single score and can be used to provide useful feedback for how to improve one's life (Diener et al., 2009). Results from the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2009) is captured in Table 2.

Table 2:

Client ID	Gender	Flourishing Scale Score at start	Flourishing Scale Score at finish	Improvement (%)
01	Female	33	45	21.4
02	Female	34	49	26.8
03	Female	18	53	62.5
04	Male	23	31	14.3
05	Female	41	50	16.1
06	Female	31	54	41.1
07	Female	30	47	30.4
08	Male	20	30	17.9

Flourishing Scale improvement ranged from 41.1% to 14.3%, with the average improvement being 28.8%.

Qualitative data:

Clients were asked for feedback from their time on the programme, their full responses are included in Appendix 2. Identified themes included the following:

- Clients enjoyed their time on MindFit and found the experience positive, and sometimes life-changing, and built self-confidence.
- Clients reported it was good to get into exercise and found ways to lead healthily lifestyles that they want to continue in the long-term.
- Clients found their MFTs very supportive, non-judgemental and encouraging, and were helped to push themselves in a way that felt challenging without being overwhelming
- Clients valued having their programs tailored to their needs.
- Clients reported positive health outcomes, like weight loss, improved physical symptoms, getting fit and improving mental health
- 6 out of the 8 (75%) clients went onto join the gym and continue to be members currently.

MFTs were also asked for feedback on the program, their full responses are included in Appendix 3. Identified themes included the following:

- MFTs enjoyed taking part in MindFit and enjoyed being a part of the client's journey and witnessing their improvement.
- MFTs enjoyed being able to provide structured, supportive direction for their clients to help achieve their goals.
- MFTs felt it was a great way to increase their own skillset and apply these to different clients, and build confidence for people with different needs, while building on their existing knowledge.
- MFTs felt this was a helpful addition to supporting mental health and wellbeing and could be used alongside psychological therapy.
- MFTs enjoyed continuing to see MindFit clients at the gym and in their regular classes.

Recommendations:

This paper has outlined the initial findings from the first phase pilot of MindFit. Though sample sizes are small and warrant further research to gather larger numbers, the qualitative and quantitative data suggests improvements in key health measurements, and crucially, clients on the MindFit program had positive experiences of the program, it changed their relationship with physical activity, and implemented lifestyle changes that would continue long-term. The program has great potential to offer a cost-effective, early-intervention option for the residents of East-Devon to improve their mental and physical wellbeing and provide an evidence-based option for referrals to contribute to reducing burden and avoidable costs on NHS services.

- Expand the pilot to gather more data and train more MFTs.
- Explore different funding opportunities to be able to expand the next phase of the pilot to East Devon and benefit more clients. This includes liaising with Sport England, Active Partnerships Devon the East Devon GP network and East Devon PCNs.
- Continue building positive connections with the NHS to spread awareness of MindFit and identify potential referral sources. This can include making links with TALKWORKS, and the East Devon PCNs.
- Make improvements in the MindFit referral and administrative process, including exclusion and inclusion criteria for referrers, signposting packs and handouts for clients, and improvements in software so clients can access support between sessions if needed.
- For the MFTs to have a clear process to be able to raise concerns to the client's GP, and signpost to TALKWORKS, and out of hours support as appropriate.
- Improvements in the referral system for GPs (outline in full in Appendix 4).
- Improvements in the training provided to MFTs to enable more defined support at each session with clients, such as a template to cover discussion topics, ensuring the training is in-line with NICE guidelines and promotes trauma-informed practice to ensure clients are signposted to additional support as required.
- To begin using the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 to ensure specific depression and anxiety symptoms are captured, and data gathered is in-line with Talking Therapies services. MFTs will be provided training to be able to administer the questionnaire, including identifying and acting appropriately on identified risk.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1, Key objectives of the training package for personal trainers:

- Solution-focused (de Shazer & Dolan, 2007), strengths-based (Saleebey, 2012) approaches, to build on their current skillset and previous training.
- MFTs were taught to identify themes that the client talked about and support an independent problem-solving approach.
- The limbic system (MacLean), and its impact on the decisions we make.
- The bell curve around anxiety (Yerkes-Dodson law) and its impact on how we feel in relation to the amount of stress we are experiencing.
- 'Habit Stacking' (Clear, 2018), a strategy that takes advantage of the areas of our lives that are already automatic and reliable. It's a technique where you attach a new habit to one you already engage in consistently.
- '10 a day', a strategy commonly used in mental health services which provides 10 things you can do to promote good mental health and wellbeing, including: talking about your feelings; doing something you enjoy and you are good at; keeping hydrated; eating well; keeping active in mind and body; taking a break; staying connected to those you care about; asking for help; being proud of your very being; actively caring for others

Appendix 2 – Client testimonials:

“I had a fantastic experience and time participating with MindFit. I was given a MindFit Trainer (Charlie) for the duration. The MindFit Trainer was friendly, supportive and funny too. I was shown how to do each exercise and was encouraged to push myself. I was fortunate to be given a personalised workout and advice on weight, nutrition and fitness and well-being. I lost the weight I wanted to , got fit and improved my mental health 100%. The experience was positive and life changing. I loved it!”

“MindFit was a great experience and gave me the opportunity to get into exercise, the journey was fun and motivating. Now I live a much healthier lifestyle I am aiming to keep that going. Would recommend this way to get into exercise no matter how unfit or bad you think you maybe you'll become healthier and improve physical and mental health.”

“The MindFit scheme has improved my self-confidence. It has taught me self-care. I am more organised; I have some structure in my day-to-day life. I am still visiting the gym and doing so in a way that allows me to do other things I care about. I feel stronger since starting MindFit and my strengthening exercises that I've been given are improving my posture and relieving stiffness which I didn't think was possible.”

“A nurse put me onto this new pilot scheme and being overweight and suffering with joint pain I was immediately interested. I initially spoke with Steve on the phone who talked me through it then met Jem my allocated MindFit Trainer. I found Jem really warm and supportive. She helped me feel less self-conscious and gently encouraged me to progress. We talked a lot whilst training which was really helpful because I felt she care and never judged. She gave me advice on nutrition and what the exercise and weight training do for your body and mind. My only complaint would be that just as I felt like I was getting into a routine it came to an end!. All in all, a great scheme, especially for people like myself who find going to a gym slightly intimidating. I have since lost 2.5 stone in weight and I strongly believe getting on this scheme and meeting the lovely Jem is what started my journey to do so. Thank you Steve and Jem.”

Appendix 3 – MindFit Trainer testimonials:

- “I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in MindFit, it’s an absolute joy seeing people’s health and wellbeing improving, and improving health conditions both physically and mentally, and also steering clients in the right direction. No matter how low on confidence they feel or whether a health condition is holding them back from getting active and healthier, we can help that and start the journey. The results tell this itself!”
- “I loved the process and felt it challenged my skill set and was enjoyable. It has 100% given me more confidence with training people with certain needs. I had to dig deeper into my physical knowledge, and newfound mental health knowledge, for these particular clients a few times, but again I enjoyed that and want to do it again!”
- “I found MindFit interesting, challenging and rewarding... and a great sense of achievement. How can I get this client from here to here mentally. Using my skills as a MindFit personal trainer taking charge, being an assertive leader and my skills as a MindFit trainer go very well ... and works well with the clients. I found the learning material a great little refresher from previous courses and past work environments, nice to tap back into that health social care world. Life has thrown a few curve balls I have had an experienced life. I find it easy to connect and help others ... I am very good at reading and sensing people thoughts, feelings and movements. It’s nice to be able to use these skills and pick up on things in the MindFit program and make a difference. I believe talking therapy is good, however talking therapy and exercise is ten times better. You’re getting endorphins which counteracts the sad feelings when you are talking about difficult subjects ... which you just cannot do in the doctor’s office ... this is where MindFit at the gym comes in. I firmly believe this is the way forward for mental health and wellbeing.”

Appendix 4 – GP referral process:

1. Client goes to GP with some early mental health issues (mild depression and/or anxiety symptoms) such as lack of motivation or worry.
2. GP ‘prescribes’ the client MindFit program. The GP provides the access email to the patient, and they are able to book their initial phone call meeting with the MindFit Trainer, who will then arrange their in-person consultation.
3. The client meets their MindFit Trainer at their nearest OJ gym’s location. They can meet at an alternative location if the client feels particularly anxious about attending, but, MindFit Trainers will support them to get into the gym as soon as possible and enter a friendly social environment.
4. In this meeting the MindFit Trainer will introduce themselves, show them around the gym, and spend time making sure the client feels comfortable, and gives them an overview of the MindFit programme. The trainer takes several measurements from the client including (BMI, Waist, HIP, and the mental health questionnaires PHQ-9 and GAD-7) to establish a baseline of where the client is coming from physically and mentally. These measurements will be shared with our Mental Health supervisor, Steve.
5. The MindFit Trainer then arranges the first session with the client, about a week later.
6. The client completes six full weeks of one-to-one sessions with the MindFit Trainer, including both physical and mental health elements.
7. Week 8 the MindFit Trainer meets with the client and takes measurements again and shares this with the client and our Mental Health supervisor, Steve
8. The client is discharged from the MindFit program but is encouraged to remain a member of their local gym.

The logo for Mindfit, featuring the word "mindfit" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The "mind" is in white and the "fit" is in a light green color. The background is a solid dark blue with a large, light green abstract shape on the right side.

mindfit