

#BEACTIVE DAY
2026

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING GUIDE

For the fitness and physical activity sector

Supporting safer, more
inclusive, and more positive
fitness environments



Co-funded by
the European Union

#BEACTIVE
EUROPEAN WEEK OF SPORT

europeactive
MORE PEOPLE | MORE ACTIVE | MORE OFTEN

EUROSPORT

PREFACE



*Alex Corretja, Eurosport tennis expert,
former World number two and Grand
Slam finalist*

In sport - and in life - we often focus on what we can see: the player, the athlete, the performance. We admire the strength, the skill, the results. But we do not always see what is behind that. We do not always see the mind, the emotions, or the challenges that come with those moments. And yet, this is a fundamental part of being human.

For many years, we have worked extremely hard on improving our skills and our fitness, but we have sometimes forgotten about the mind. We forget to ask: how do we control our emotions? How do we breathe in the important moments? How do we deal with pressure? These are essential parts of both performance and wellbeing.

There is also a common misunderstanding that success protects people from mental health challenges. It does not. Every individual faces different kinds of problems. In sport, there is attention, expectation, and pressure, often from a very young age. Learning how to manage this while still growing as a person is not easy, and it deserves understanding.

Mental strength is something that develops over time. It comes through experience, through hard work, and through going through difficult moments. Sometimes you realise you are not ready - and that is part of the process. Things do not happen from one day to another. They require patience and perseverance.

Today, mental health is being taken more seriously, which is a positive step. But we also live in a fast-paced world where everything can feel immediate. Sport, however, has its own rhythm. Everyone has their own process, and it cannot be compared to someone else's.

Speaking openly about mental health is essential. It creates empathy and helps people feel less alone. When others share their experiences, it reminds us that these challenges are part of life.

Physical activity also plays a key role. When you feel good physically, your mind often feels better too. Even 20 or 30 minutes a day can make a difference - it is about creating the habit.

Above all, accept yourself. Accept the nerves and the pressure. Focus on your own path and trust your process. Because taking care of your mind is not separate from performance or from life - it is a fundamental part of both.

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#BEACTIVE DAY
2026

01

ABOUT THE **#BEACTIVE DAY** 2026 PROJECT

The **#BEACTIVE DAY** campaign is a not-for-profit European sports event that materialises the vision of getting more people across Europe more active, and is designed to tackle the issue of inactivity through the core message of **#BEACTIVE DAY**. Funded by the European Union, the 2026 **#BEACTIVE DAY** project is led by EuropeActive and implemented in partnership with its National Fitness Associations from Belgium, Greece, Latvia, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain and Sweden.

Promoting greater participation in physical activity events on and around September 23rd, the **#BEACTIVE DAY** campaign contributes directly to the continent's largest campaign promoting sport and physical activity- the European Commission's annual European Week of Sport (EWoS), further enhancing the fitness sector's ever-growing contribution to Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA). In 2026, the campaign places a specific **focus on mental health within the fitness and physical activity community**, recognising both the **proven benefits of physical activity for mental wellbeing** and the **sector's responsibility to proactively support the mental health of its users**, particularly younger generations seeking social connection.

#BEACTIVE DAY continues to play a central role in mobilising the fitness and physical activity sector, inspiring people across Europe to embrace an active lifestyle. The campaign includes thousands of free events and activities taking place across fitness and sport centres, parks, schools, universities, and workplaces, inviting everyone to experience the joy and benefits of being physically active.

We extend our sincere appreciation to **Prof. Dr Richard Peter Bailey**, **Dr Ra'ed Ali Mohammed Al-Khamaiseh**, and **Dr Nadia Samsudin from UCSI University**, who developed the content of this **#BEACTIVE DAY** 2026 Mental Health & Wellbeing Guide, and to **Dr. Karlie Intlekofer** (Matrix Fitness), global research scientist and certified personal trainer, for her contributions to the "Expert Insight" sections.

Learn more about the 2026 **#BEACTIVE DAY** project activities:

<https://www.europeactive.eu/projects/beactiveday2026>

and about the broader **#BEACTIVE DAY** campaign:

www.beactiveday.eu



'A special thank you to the National Associations that translated the Guide despite not being part of the initial project consortium'





02 INTRODUCTION

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Guide has been developed as part of the #BEACTIVE DAY 2026 project.

It has been designed for practical use across the fitness and physical activity sector: its purpose is to help gym owners, managers, trainers, instructors, and other stakeholders recognise the importance of mental wellbeing in everyday fitness provision and translate this understanding into action.

The Guide is intended to be used as a working resource. Providers may use it to review current practice, support staff development, strengthen safeguarding and signposting procedures, and improve the overall participant experience. In that sense, it is both a standalone resource and part of a broader programme of sector support.

Mental health is an essential part of overall health and wellbeing. It influences how people think, feel, relate to others, and manage the

demands of everyday life. This Guide presents mental health and wellbeing as a central concern for the fitness and physical activity sector and **provides evidence-informed, practice-oriented guidance for creating supportive and psychologically safe environments.**

Physical activity has an important place in this context. It is relevant not only to physical health, but also to wellbeing, social connection, confidence, and participation. This broader perspective matters **because mental wellbeing is shaped not only by movement itself, but also by the setting in which movement takes place.**

The fitness and physical activity sector is well placed to make a positive contribution. Gyms, fitness clubs, studios, leisure centres, and community-based providers create regular

opportunities for movement, routine, support, and contact with others. They also reach people across different ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience.

The effects of fitness participation, however, are not automatically positive. **Exercise can support mood, energy, self-efficacy, and social connection, but fitness settings can also generate pressure, comparison, exclusion, and anxiety. The quality of the environment therefore matters greatly for mental wellbeing.**

For some people, fitness spaces provide structure, encouragement, and a sense of progress. For others, they may feel intimidating, overly appearance-focused, or shaped by narrow assumptions about performance, body image, and success. Organisational culture, staff behaviour, communication, and programme design all influence whether participation feels safe, respectful, and supportive.

This Guide has been developed in response to these realities. It draws on current evidence relating to physical activity, mental wellbeing, fitness environments, safeguarding, and inclusive practice, while remaining focused on practical application in everyday fitness settings. **The aim is not to offer clinical mental health guidance, but to help fitness providers understand how their settings and practices can support wellbeing and reduce avoidable harms.**

The Guide explores three broad areas. First, it examines how **fitness environments**, organisational culture, and everyday practices shape mental wellbeing. Second, it considers **individual experiences of physical activity**, including both potential benefits and possible risks linked to exercise and fitness culture. Third, it gives special attention to **children, adolescents, and young people**. Early experiences of physical activity can influence confidence, wellbeing, and attitudes towards movement across the life course. A separate focus on younger populations is therefore justified both by developmental considerations and by safeguarding responsibilities.



The overall purpose of this Guide is to support the fitness and physical activity sector in creating environments that are safer, more inclusive, and more responsive to mental health and wellbeing.

Fitness and physical activity professionals are not expected to diagnose or treat mental illness, but they do have an important role in shaping everyday experiences of activity, recognising concerns, and responding appropriately within their professional scope. Working definitions of key terms used in this Guide are provided in Appendix A to support consistent interpretation across the fitness sector.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR:

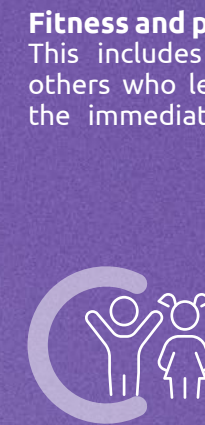
The Guide is not written as a clinical manual for mental health professionals.

It is written for the fitness and physical activity sector and focuses on what providers can do within their own professional scope. Its aim is to help readers understand the relevance of mental health and wellbeing to fitness practice and to support safer and more inclusive delivery across a range of settings.



Gym owners, operators, and managers

These groups influence organisational culture, staffing, policies, communication, and the overall design of fitness environments. Their decisions affect whether settings feel safe, inclusive, welcoming, and supportive for different participants.



Fitness and physical activity professionals working directly with participants.

This includes personal trainers, fitness instructors, coaches, studio staff, and others who lead or supervise exercise sessions. These professionals often shape the immediate experience of participation through their language, behaviour, expectations, and responses to individual needs.



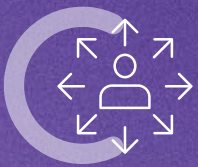
Providers working with children, adolescents, and young people.

This includes youth fitness staff, coaches, instructors, and organisations offering exercise opportunities for younger age groups. In these settings, questions of confidence, development, supervision, boundaries, and safeguarding require particular attention.



Sector bodies, training providers, and education providers.

These groups influence standards, qualifications, continuing professional development, and wider expectations of good practice. Their role is important in supporting consistent and evidence-informed approaches across the sector.



Policymakers, public health organisations, and community stakeholders

may also find the Guide useful. Fitness settings are part of a wider ecosystem of health promotion, wellbeing support, and community participation. For that reason, the Guide may help inform partnerships, strategy development, and local or national initiatives linked to physical activity and mental wellbeing.

03 MENTAL HEALTH, WELLBEING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity can make an important contribution to mental health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity can support mood, reduce stress, improve energy, and strengthen overall wellbeing.

For the fitness and physical activity sector, this matters because many of the benefits people value most are not limited to physical outcomes.

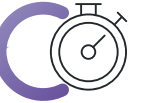
Physical activity can support confidence, coping, routine, and social connection. This makes it highly relevant to everyday fitness practice. It also means that the value of exercise should not be discussed only in terms of weight, appearance, or performance.

3.1 | Physical activity and positive wellbeing

Mental wellbeing includes positive states such as feeling energetic, capable, connected, and able to manage daily life well. Research shows that regular exercise can help people feel less tired, more energetic, and better able to function well in everyday life.

These outcomes are highly relevant for fitness settings. Many people join gyms or activity programmes because they want to feel better, have more energy, sleep better, and cope more effectively with daily demands. A broad understanding of wellbeing is therefore more useful than a narrow focus on body shape or physical appearance.

Table 1. Positive wellbeing benefits linked to regular physical activity

Benefit	What the evidence shows	What this means in practice
 Reduced fatigue	 Regular exercise can help people feel less tired	 Participants may feel more able to manage daily demands
 Increased energy	 Exercise can improve feelings of energy	 Messaging can focus on feeling more active and alert
 Greater vitality	 Exercise can support a stronger sense of wellbeing and liveliness	 Fitness programmes can be promoted as a way to support everyday wellbeing
 Better day-to-day functioning	 Regular movement can support coping and daily functioning	 Providers can frame exercise as part of a healthy routine

3.2 | Physical activity, stress, and emotional balance

Physical activity may also help people manage stress more effectively. Some forms of structured activity appear especially helpful for this purpose, including mind-body activities and light to moderate programmes that suit the needs of participants.

The evidence in this area is not identical across all exercise types. Even so, the overall message is useful for practice. Structured and **appropriate forms of activity can support emotional balance and coping**, especially when the activity matches the participants involved.

Table 2. Forms of activity linked to stress reduction

Type of activity	What the evidence shows	Practical implication for providers
 Qigong	 Promising support for stress reduction in older adults	 Gentle, low-pressure classes may be helpful for some groups
 Yoga	 Consistent support across several reviews	 Mind-body activities may be useful for participants seeking stress relief
 Combined exercise programmes	 Some positive findings when aerobic and other forms of exercise are combined	 Mixed programmes may work well when adapted to participant needs
 Light to moderate exercise	 Often appears suitable for stress management	 Exercise for wellbeing does not always need to be intense

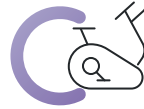
3.3 | Physical activity and common mental health symptoms

Research also shows that physical activity can help reduce common mental health symptoms.

Across a wide range of adult groups, including healthy adults and people with existing health conditions, regular physical activity has been linked to improvements in depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.

For this Guide, the main point is straightforward. Physical activity should be understood as a credible and well-supported way of promoting mental wellbeing and helping to reduce some common forms of emotional difficulty. In fitness settings, that means exercise can be promoted as part of a broader wellbeing culture, while avoiding exaggerated or clinical claims.

Table 3. Common mental health symptoms and the role of physical activity

Area	What the evidence shows	What this means for the fitness sector
 Depression	 Physical activity can help reduce symptoms	 Exercise can be part of a supportive wellbeing environment
 Anxiety	 Physical activity can help reduce symptoms	 Programmes should be welcoming and manageable, especially for new participants
 Psychological distress	 Physical activity can improve general emotional wellbeing	 Fitness settings can support people under everyday emotional pressure

3.4 | Supportive role, professional boundaries

The positive effects of physical activity are substantial, but they should be interpreted responsibly.

Physical activity can support mental wellbeing and reduce some common symptoms, but it does not replace counselling, psychotherapy, medication, or other forms of qualified care when these are needed.

For the fitness and physical activity sector, this is an important boundary. **Fitness and physical activity providers can create supportive environments**, encourage participation, reduce avoidable harms, and signpost people towards appropriate help. **They should not present exercise as a universal solution** or as a substitute for professional mental health care.

Table 4. Professional boundaries in fitness settings

Fitness and PA providers can do	Fitness providers should approach with caution	Referral is needed
 Encourage regular activity	 Discuss emotional concerns in a supportive but limited way	 Severe distress
 Create welcoming environments	 Respond to disclosures without acting as a therapist	 Risk of harm
 Use positive wellbeing language	 Use positive wellbeing language	 Suspected mental illness beyond professional scope
 Notice warning signs	 Avoid making clinical claims	 Safeguarding concerns or urgent mental health needs

”

Key message

Physical activity can support mental wellbeing, but it does not replace qualified mental health care.

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1 Present physical activity as a positive support for mood, energy, stress management, and overall wellbeing.
- 2 Use language that reflects a broad range of benefits, including confidence, coping, vitality, and daily functioning, not only weight or appearance.
- 3 Offer a range of activity types, since different participants may respond better to different forms of exercise.
- 4 Avoid clinical promises or claims that go beyond the provider's competence.
- 5 Support regular participation through welcoming, manageable, and psychologically safe experiences.
- 6 Use referral or signposting routes where participants disclose serious distress or mental health concerns beyond the scope of fitness practice.



Why this improves practice

A broader understanding of physical activity and mental wellbeing improves the quality of fitness provision.

It helps providers speak more accurately about benefits, design programmes around what matters to participants, and create environments that support health in a fuller sense. It also encourages a shift away from narrow fitness messages towards a more inclusive and sustainable view of participation.



Good practice example

A useful model would be for a fitness centre to introduce a wellbeing-focused participation pathway for new members. This could include beginner-friendly sessions, staff language that emphasises mood, energy, confidence, and routine, and a simple signposting process for participants who disclose distress. This kind of approach can make the environment more supportive without asking staff to act outside their professional role.

PART I – FITNESS ENVIRONMENTS AND MENTAL WELLBEING



04

HOW FITNESS ENVIRONMENTS SHAPE MENTAL WELLBEING

Mental wellbeing is influenced not only by physical activity itself, but also by the environment in which that activity takes place.

Fitness settings can shape how people feel before, during, and after participation. They can encourage confidence, belonging, and motivation, or they can create discomfort, pressure, and self-consciousness.

For many people, the fitness environment is part of the overall experience of exercise. The layout of the space, the behaviour of staff, the tone of communication, and the atmosphere created by other users all affect whether participation feels positive and sustainable. This makes the quality of the environment a central concern for the fitness and physical activity sector.

4.1 | Fitness settings as social and emotional spaces

Gyms and fitness centres are not only places where people exercise.

They are also social environments in which people are seen, evaluated, supported, ignored, encouraged, or compared. These experiences can have a strong effect on confidence, motivation, and willingness to return.

A positive environment can help people feel that they belong. It can support routine, enjoyment, and trust in the setting. Over time, this can strengthen participation and make physical activity feel like a normal and valued part of daily life.

Table 5. How fitness settings can influence mental wellbeing

Environmental feature	Positive effect	Possible negative effect
 Friendly atmosphere	 Encourages confidence and return visits	 A cold atmosphere may discourage participation
 Staff support	 Helps people feel safe and guided	 Poor staff behaviour may increase discomfort
 Sense of belonging	 Supports motivation and connection	 Feeling out of place may increase anxiety
 Respectful culture	 Reduces pressure and self-consciousness	 Judgemental culture may reduce engagement

4.2 | First impressions and psychological comfort

Many decisions about whether to stay in a gym or return after a first visit are shaped by early impressions.

People often notice whether the space feels welcoming, whether staff are approachable, and whether it seems possible to take part without embarrassment. These early signals can be especially important for beginners, older adults, people returning after a long break, and those who already feel uncertain.

Psychological comfort is therefore a practical issue, not an abstract one. A setting that feels manageable and respectful is more likely to support regular participation. A setting that feels intimidating may lead people to withdraw before the potential benefits of activity can be experienced.

Table 6. Factors shaping first impressions in fitness settings

Factor	Why it matters
 Greeting and staff welcome	Helps people feel noticed and accepted
 Clear information	Reduces uncertainty and confusion
 Beginner-friendly atmosphere	Makes participation feel possible
 Visibility of inclusive messages	Signals that different people are welcome
 Easy-to-understand routines	Lowers pressure during early visits

4.3 | Staff behaviour and everyday communication

Staff play a major role in shaping the emotional tone of a fitness setting.

The way people are greeted, corrected, encouraged, and spoken to affects whether they feel respected and supported. Even small interactions can influence confidence and willingness to take part.

Communication matters in both formal and informal ways. Instructions, feedback, promotional messages, and everyday comments can either reinforce belonging or increase pressure. Respectful, encouraging, and non-judgemental communication is therefore a key part of good practice.

Table 7. Communication and mental wellbeing in fitness settings

Type of communication	Supportive approach	Unhelpful approach
 Feedback during exercise	 Clear, calm, respectful	 Shaming or mocking
 Motivation	 Encouraging and realistic	 Pressuring or aggressive
 Goal-setting	 Focused on wellbeing and progress	 Focused only on appearance
 General interaction	 Friendly and approachable	 Distant or dismissive

Key message

How staff speak can shape how people feel about exercise, about the setting, and about themselves.

4.4 | Organisational culture and everyday practice

Mental wellbeing in fitness settings is shaped by more than individual staff members.

It is also shaped by the wider culture of the organisation. This includes what is rewarded, what is normalised, how success is defined, and what kinds of bodies, goals, and behaviours are treated as desirable.

A culture centred only on appearance, intensity, or performance may alienate many users. A culture that values inclusion, enjoyment, progress, safety, and respect is more likely to support a wider range of participants. This is especially important in settings that aim to attract new or underrepresented groups.

Table 8. Organisational culture and likely effects

Cultural emphasis	Likely effect on participation
 Inclusion and respect	 Supports belonging and return
 Enjoyment and progress	 Encourages sustainable participation
 Safety and support	 Builds trust in the setting
 Appearance and perfection	 May increase pressure and self-consciousness
 Extreme performance focus	 May discourage beginners and less confident users

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1 Treat the environment as part of the service, not just the background to exercise.
- 2 Review signs, posters, social media, and promotional messages to ensure they support inclusion and wellbeing.
- 3 Make first visits easier through warm welcomes, clear information, and beginner-friendly routines.
- 4 Reduce signals that make people feel watched, judged, or out of place.
- 5 Train staff to use respectful, encouraging, and non-judgemental language.
- 6 Build a culture that values enjoyment, progress, safety, and respect, not only appearance or performance.

Why this improves practice

A supportive fitness environment makes it easier for people to begin, continue, and benefit from physical activity.

It improves the quality of the participant experience and helps providers reach a wider range of people. It also strengthens trust in the setting and supports a more inclusive and sustainable model of fitness provision.

”

Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness centre to review the full experience of a new member, from arrival to first session. This could include staff welcome scripts, clearer introductory information, beginner-friendly induction sessions, and a review of the language used in posters and social media. Small changes of this kind can make the setting feel more supportive and can improve both participation and retention.





05 RISKS IN FITNESS SETTINGS

Fitness settings can support mental wellbeing, but they can also create pressures that discourage participation or make people feel uncomfortable.

These pressures are not always obvious. They often arise through everyday features of the environment, such as the way bodies are displayed, the tone of communication, or the social expectations attached to exercise.

Understanding these risks is important for good practice. A setting can be physically safe and still feel psychologically difficult to enter or remain in. If providers want to support wellbeing, they need to recognise not only the benefits of exercise, but also the risks that some participants experience in fitness spaces.

5.1 | Intimidation and fear of judgement

Many people find gyms intimidating, especially when they are new, returning after a long break, or unsure about what to do.

They may worry about being watched, judged, corrected in public, or compared with others. This fear of judgement can reduce confidence before participation even begins.

Intimidation is often shaped by the overall atmosphere of the setting. Loud spaces, highly confident regular users, unfamiliar equipment, or a culture of constant performance can all make participation feel less manageable. For some people, the main barrier is not motivation, but discomfort.

Table 9. Sources of intimidation in fitness settings

Source of intimidation	Possible effect on participants
 Fear of being watched	Increased self-consciousness
 Unfamiliar equipment	Anxiety about doing something wrong
 Highly confident gym culture	Feeling out of place
 Public correction or criticism	Embarrassment and withdrawal
 Lack of guidance	Reduced willingness to try

5.2 | Appearance pressure and body image concerns

Fitness settings often place strong emphasis on appearance. Mirrors, posters, promotional images, and social media content may suggest that success is linked to a particular body type or visual outcome.

This can create pressure for people who already feel uncertain about their bodies or who do not identify with the images presented.

Body image concerns can affect both men and women, as well as young people and older adults. For some participants, the issue is not exercise itself, but the feeling that their body is being judged against an unrealistic standard. When this happens, the environment may become a source of stress rather than support.

Table 10. Appearance-related pressures in fitness settings

Source of pressure	Why it matters
 Mirrors	May increase self-monitoring and discomfort
 Idealised body images	May narrow ideas of who belongs
 Appearance-based messaging	May shift focus away from wellbeing
 Transformation culture	May promote unrealistic expectations

5.3 | Social comparison and performance culture

Exercise often takes place in shared spaces, which makes social comparison difficult to avoid.

People may compare their bodies, fitness levels, strength, skill, or progress with those of others. In some settings, this comparison is reinforced by visible performance data, competition, or informal status hierarchies among users.

Comparison is not always harmful, but it becomes a problem when it leads to shame, discouragement, or a sense of failure. This is especially likely when the setting rewards intensity, speed, or visible achievement more than personal progress. A strong performance culture may motivate some people while discouraging many others.

Table 11. Social comparison risks in fitness settings

Feature	Why it matters
 Visible performance displays	Pressure to keep up
 Competitive atmosphere	Fear of not measuring up
 Informal status hierarchies	Feeling less competent or less welcome
 Constant benchmarking	Reduced enjoyment and confidence

Key message

Not every participant wants to compete, compare, or perform in public.

5.4 | Exclusion and lack of belonging

Some risks arise when people do not feel that the setting is meant for them.

This may affect beginners, older adults, disabled people, people in larger bodies, women in male-dominated spaces, or anyone who feels socially or culturally different from the dominant group. Even when exclusion is not deliberate, it can still be powerful.

Lack of belonging often develops through small signals. These may include the absence of relatable images, assumptions about prior knowledge, staff who focus only on confident users, or routines that seem designed for a narrow type of participant. Over time, these signals can reduce participation and trust.

Table 12. Signals that may reduce belonging

Signal	Possible effect
 Narrow images of who exercises	People may feel the setting is not for them
 Assumptions about knowledge	Beginners may feel inadequate
 Limited attention from staff	Less confident users may feel ignored
 One-size-fits-all programming	Some participants may feel excluded

5.5 | Mixed-age settings and safeguarding concerns

Some fitness environments bring together adults, teenagers, and younger users in the same space.

This can create useful opportunities, but it can also raise safeguarding and wellbeing concerns if boundaries, supervision, and expectations are unclear. Young people may be exposed to adult training cultures, body ideals, or behaviour patterns that are not appropriate for their age or stage of development.

Safeguarding is not only about serious harm. It is also about creating conditions in which younger users feel safe, respected, supervised, and protected from pressures that they are not ready to manage. Where mixed-age settings exist, these issues need careful attention.

Table 13. Risks in mixed-age fitness settings

Issue	Why it matters
 Exposure to adult fitness culture	May normalise unrealistic goals or behaviours
 Limited supervision	May increase risk and uncertainty
 Unclear boundaries	May undermine safety and trust
 Age-inappropriate expectations	May create pressure or confusion

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1

Identify aspects of the environment that may make people feel watched, judged, or out of place.
- 2

Reduce unnecessary appearance pressure in posters, messaging, and social media content.
- 3

Avoid creating a culture where comparison and public performance feel unavoidable.
- 4

Make sure beginners and less confident users receive visible support and guidance.
- 5

Review whether different groups can see themselves reflected in the setting and its communication.
- 6

Put clear safeguarding procedures in place where children, adolescents, and adults share fitness spaces.

Why this improves practice

Recognising risks in fitness settings helps providers create environments that are more welcoming and more sustainable for a wider range of participants.

It can reduce dropout, improve trust, and support a better overall experience of exercise. It also shows that mental wellbeing is shaped not only by the activity itself, but by the conditions in which that activity is delivered.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness centre to carry out a simple risk review of the participant experience. This could include walking through the space from the point of view of a beginner, reviewing posters and digital content for appearance pressure, and checking whether staff routines give enough support to quieter or less confident users. A short review of this kind can help identify barriers that are easy to miss from a management perspective.



06

PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND GOOD PRACTICE IN FITNESS SETTINGS

Risks in fitness settings can be reduced through thoughtful design, good leadership, and everyday practice. Protective factors are the features of an environment that help people feel safe, respected, supported, and able to take part.

In fitness settings, these factors can improve both mental wellbeing and the overall quality of participation.

Good practice does not depend on a single programme or policy. It grows from the combined effect of staff behaviour, organisational culture, communication, layout, routines, and expectations. When these elements work together, the setting is more likely to feel welcoming and sustainable for a wider range of users.

6.1 | Psychological safety

Psychological safety means that people feel able to take part without fear of humiliation, ridicule, or unnecessary judgement.

In fitness settings, this includes being able to ask questions, make mistakes, go at a manageable pace, and seek help when needed. It is especially important for beginners, less confident users, and people returning after a difficult period.

A psychologically safe environment supports learning and participation. It helps people focus on the activity itself rather than on protecting themselves from embarrassment. This can make exercise feel more manageable and more rewarding.

Table 14. Features of psychological safety in fitness settings

Feature		What it looks like in practice
 Respectful interaction		Staff and users speak to each other with courtesy
 Low fear of embarrassment		People can ask for help without feeling exposed
 Permission to progress gradually		Beginners are not pressured to keep up
 Supportive response to mistakes		Errors are treated as normal parts of learning

6.2 | Inclusive and respectful communication

Communication is one of the strongest protective factors in any fitness setting.

The words used by staff, the tone of promotional materials, and the messages displayed in the environment all help shape how people feel. Inclusive and respectful communication can reduce anxiety, strengthen trust, and make participation feel more possible.

Good communication avoids shaming, stereotyping, and narrow ideas of success. It focuses on health, wellbeing, progress, enjoyment, and individual needs. This makes the setting more supportive for a wider range of participants.

Table 15. Communication practices that support mental wellbeing

Practice	Likely benefit
 Using welcoming language	 Reduces uncertainty and tension
 Focusing on progress, not perfection	 Supports confidence and persistence
 Avoiding appearance-based pressure	 Reduces body-related discomfort
 Giving clear and calm instructions	 Helps people feel more secure



Key message
People are more likely to return when communication helps them feel respected, capable, and welcome.

6.3 | Beginner-friendly design and routines

Many protective factors are practical and visible.

Clear signage, understandable routines, easy entry points, and support during first visits can reduce uncertainty and make a setting feel more manageable. These features are especially important for people who are new to exercise or unfamiliar with gym culture.

A beginner-friendly environment does not mean lowering standards. It means removing unnecessary barriers that make participation harder than it needs to be. This improves access without reducing quality.

Table 16. Beginner-friendly features in fitness settings

Feature	Why it helps
 Clear directions and signage	 Reduces confusion in unfamiliar spaces
 Introductory information	 Helps people know what to expect
 Simple induction processes	 Makes first visits more manageable
 Visible staff support	 Encourages questions and reassurance

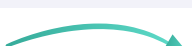
6.4 | Supportive staff practice and organisational culture

Protective environments depend on staff and leadership.

Staff need to know how to welcome different users, respond appropriately to concerns, and maintain a respectful and supportive tone. Leaders need to make sure that policies, expectations, and messages support inclusion and wellbeing rather than pressure and exclusion.

Culture matters because it shapes what feels normal in the setting. If care, safety, encouragement, and respect are treated as normal, participants are more likely to feel supported. If pressure, ridicule, or narrow ideals are tolerated, the setting becomes less protective.

Table 17. Organisational practices that strengthen protection

Practice	Likely effect
 Staff training on communication and inclusion	 More consistent participant experience
 Clear standards of conduct	 Stronger sense of safety and respect
 Visible support for different user groups	 Greater sense of belonging
 Leadership emphasis on wellbeing and inclusion	 More positive organisational culture

6.5 | Clear procedures for support, concerns, and reporting

Protective settings do not rely only on goodwill. They also need clear procedures for what to do when concerns arise.

This includes knowing how to respond to distress, inappropriate behaviour, safeguarding issues, or disclosures that require support beyond normal fitness practice.

Clear procedures help staff act with confidence and consistency. They also help participants trust that the setting takes wellbeing seriously. Without clear procedures, even well-intentioned staff may feel uncertain about how to respond.

Table 18. Core procedures that support safer fitness settings

Procedure			
			
Clear reporting routes	Referral or signposting guidance	Safeguarding procedures	Behaviour standards and consequences
Why it matters			
			
Helps staff and users raise concerns safely	Supports appropriate responses to distress	Protects children, young people, and vulnerable adults	Clarifies what is and is not acceptable

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1

Build psychological safety into everyday practice, especially for beginners and less confident users.
- 2

Provide staff with training on inclusion, communication, boundaries, and appropriate responses to concern.
- 3

Use communication that is respectful, encouraging, and focused on wellbeing rather than shame or appearance.
- 4

Make expectations for behaviour clear to staff and participants.
- 5

Review the setting from the point of view of a first-time participant and remove avoidable barriers.
- 6

Put simple and visible procedures in place for reporting concerns, safeguarding, and signposting to further help.

Why this improves practice

Protective factors help create environments in which more people can take part with confidence.

They improve the participant experience, support retention, and reduce avoidable harm. They also strengthen the credibility of the fitness and physical activity sector by showing that good provision includes not only physical safety, but also psychological and social care.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to introduce a short “welcome and support” standard across all staff roles. This could include agreed ways of greeting new users, offering help, explaining routines, responding to uncertainty, and raising concerns. A simple shared standard of this kind can make the setting feel more consistent, more supportive, and easier to navigate.



EXPERT INSIGHT:



Dr. Karlie Intlekofer,

Global Research Scientist & Personal Trainer, Matrix Fitness

Q: From your experience, how can gym owners create a more welcoming environment from the start?

A: First impressions matter a lot. The way a gym is organised, its layout, signage, and reception area, can immediately influence whether someone feels comfortable or out of place. Clear navigation, visible entry points, and a friendly first contact can make a big difference, especially for new or less confident members.

Q: What practical changes can gym owners make to improve the overall environment?

A: Small, intentional choices go a long way. For example, creating clearly defined areas for beginners, using simple and visible wayfinding, and ensuring the space feels easy to understand. It's about reducing uncertainty and helping people feel confident in how to start.

Q: How important is the messaging within the gym space?

A: It's essential. What you display, on walls, screens, or social media, shapes how people think about exercise. Shifting the focus from appearance to health, enjoyment, and long-term wellbeing helps create a more positive environment. It's also important to reflect diversity in imagery so more people feel represented.

Q: Is anything often overlooked?

A: Yes: the culture you communicate visually. Highlighting member stories, recognising consistency and effort, and providing access to support resources all contribute to making the space feel inclusive and supportive.

PART II – INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



07

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS A RESOURCE FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

Physical activity can be a valuable resource for mental wellbeing in everyday life. It can support mood, reduce stress, improve energy, and help people feel more capable and more in control.

For many participants, these benefits are part of the reason they choose to be active in the first place. In fitness settings, this means that exercise should be understood in broader terms than physical change alone. It can support how people feel, how they cope, and how they function from day to day. This gives the fitness and physical activity sector an important role in supporting wellbeing through regular, positive, and manageable participation.

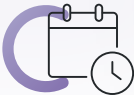
7.1 | Physical activity as part of everyday coping

Many people use physical activity as a way of coping with the demands of everyday life.

Activity can provide structure, routine, distraction from stress, and a sense of movement out of mental or emotional stagnation. It can also create protected time in the day that is focused on self-care and personal recovery.

This coping role can be especially important during periods of pressure, uncertainty, or change. Exercise may help people feel calmer, clearer, or more settled afterwards. For some, it becomes an important part of maintaining balance across work, family, and other responsibilities.

Table 19. How physical activity can support everyday coping

Function	What it can offer
Routine 	 A regular point of structure in the week
Stress release 	 A way to reduce tension and mental overload
Personal time 	 Space focused on self-care and recovery
Emotional reset 	 A change of state after a difficult day

7.2 | Confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of progress

Physical activity can also support wellbeing by helping people feel capable.

When participants learn new skills, complete a session, or notice improvement over time, they may gain confidence in what they can do. This can strengthen motivation and make future participation feel more achievable.

A sense of progress matters even when changes are small. For some participants, simply turning up regularly, feeling more comfortable in the setting, or managing an activity that once felt difficult can be important signs of growth. These experiences can support mental wellbeing because they reinforce competence and personal agency.

Table 20. How exercise can build confidence

Experience	Possible wellbeing effect
Completing a session 	 Greater sense of achievement
Learning a new movement 	 Increased confidence
Noticing progress 	 Stronger motivation and self-belief
Feeling more capable 	 Better sense of control

7.3 | Enjoyment, meaning, and positive engagement

People are more likely to continue being active when participation feels enjoyable or meaningful.

Enjoyment can come from movement itself, from the social environment, from the satisfaction of effort, or from the feeling of doing something worthwhile. These positive experiences are part of what makes physical activity beneficial for mental wellbeing.

Meaning also matters. Some people value exercise because it helps them care for their health, reconnect with themselves, support recovery, or feel part of a group. When activity aligns with personal values or goals, it is more likely to become a stable and positive part of life.

Table 21. Sources of positive engagement in physical activity

Source	Why it matters
Enjoyment 	 Supports regular participation
Social connection 	 Makes activity feel shared and supportive
Personal meaning 	 Strengthens commitment
Satisfaction from effort 	 Builds positive engagement



Key message

People are more likely to continue being active when exercise feels rewarding, meaningful, and manageable.

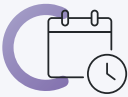
7.4 | Social connection and belonging

Physical activity often takes place with others, and this can be an important part of its value.

Group classes, shared training spaces, walking groups, and informal routines can all create opportunities for connection. Even brief positive contact can make participation feel less isolating and more encouraging.

Belonging is particularly important for people who feel disconnected, uncertain, or new to exercise. A setting that offers social support without pressure can strengthen both participation and wellbeing. For some people, the relationship with staff or other participants is part of what keeps them coming back.

Table 22. Social aspects of physical activity and wellbeing

Social feature	Possible benefit
Shared activity 	 Reduced sense of isolation
Friendly staff contact 	 Greater comfort and trust
Group participation 	 Stronger motivation and belonging
Regular social routine 	 Support for continued engagement

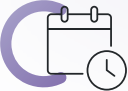
7.5 | Wellbeing support within professional boundaries

Physical activity can be a strong resource for mental wellbeing, but it should still be presented responsibly.

Fitness professionals can support participation, encourage positive experiences, and recognise that exercise matters for more than physical outcomes. At the same time, they must remain within their professional role.

This means supporting wellbeing without acting as a therapist or making clinical promises. The aim is to create conditions in which participants can benefit from activity, while also recognising when additional support or referral may be needed. Responsible practice strengthens trust and protects both staff and participants.

Table 23. Supporting wellbeing within scope

Appropriate role for fitness providers	Outside normal fitness scope
 Encouraging regular participation	 Diagnosing mental health conditions
 Supporting confidence and routine	 Offering therapy or treatment
 Creating positive environments	 Making clinical promises
 Signposting where needed	 Managing complex mental health cases alone

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 

Talk about exercise in ways that include coping, confidence, enjoyment, and connection, not only physical change.
- 

Help participants notice progress, including small and meaningful forms of achievement.
- 

Offer activity options that feel manageable and rewarding for different people.
- 

Recognise that social connection can be part of the value of participation.
- 

Support wellbeing through encouragement, structure, and good communication.
- 

Stay within professional boundaries and use referral or signposting routes when concerns go beyond normal fitness practice.

Why this improves practice

Understanding physical activity as a resource for mental wellbeing broadens the quality of fitness provision.

It helps providers respond to what many participants actually want from exercise, including feeling better, coping better, and functioning better in daily life. It also supports a more human and more sustainable approach to participation.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to ask new participants about their wider reasons for taking part, not only their physical goals. This could include questions about energy, stress, confidence, routine, or enjoyment. Framing participation in this broader way can help staff give more relevant support and make the experience feel more personal and meaningful.



08

PERSONAL RISKS LINKED TO EXERCISE AND FITNESS CULTURE

Physical activity can support mental wellbeing, but participation is not always experienced in positive ways.

Some risks arise from the culture that surrounds exercise, including pressure to look a certain way, train in extreme ways, or measure self-worth through performance. These risks can affect how people feel about activity, about their bodies, and about themselves.

For the fitness and physical activity sector, this means that exercise should not be treated as automatically beneficial in every form and in every context. The quality of the experience matters. Good practice requires attention not only to the benefits of activity, but also to the personal risks that may arise when exercise becomes stressful, compulsive, or closely tied to appearance and self-judgement.

8.1 | Compulsive exercise and loss of balance

For some people, exercise can shift from being a healthy part of life to becoming rigid, excessive, or difficult to control.

Participation may continue even when the person is exhausted, injured, unwell, or distressed. What appears to be dedication from the outside may sometimes reflect a loss of balance rather than healthy commitment.

This matters because exercise is beneficial partly when it supports life, rather than dominates it. When participation becomes compulsive, it may no longer support wellbeing in the way intended. It can also make rest, flexibility, and self-care feel like failure.

Table 24. Signs that exercise may be becoming unhealthy

Possible sign	Why it may matter
Distress when unable to exercise	May suggest overdependence on exercise
Training through illness or injury	May show difficulty stepping back when needed
Rigid routines with no flexibility	May reflect loss of balance
Guilt linked to missed sessions	May indicate unhealthy pressure

8.2 | Body image concerns and self-worth

Exercise can help people feel better in their bodies, but fitness culture can also intensify body image concerns.

When the environment gives strong signals that value depends on looking a certain way, some participants may become more self-critical rather than more confident. This risk is especially important in settings where appearance-based messages are highly visible.

Body image concerns are not limited to one group. They can affect women, men, adolescents, older adults, and people of many different body types. In these cases, exercise may become tied to dissatisfaction, shame, or the feeling of never being good enough.

Table 25. Body image risks linked to fitness culture

Risk factor	Possible effect
Idealised body standards	Increased dissatisfaction
Appearance-based goals only	Narrow view of success
Constant self-monitoring	Reduced comfort and enjoyment
Linking worth to visible change	Greater pressure and self-criticism

8.3 | Social physique anxiety and fear of exposure

Some people feel uncomfortable exercising because they are worried about how their body is being seen by others.

This can be especially strong in settings where clothing is revealing, mirrors are prominent, or the environment feels highly appearance-focused. As a result, the person may avoid certain spaces, activities, or times of day.

This kind of anxiety can reduce participation even when the person wants to be active. It may also lead people to choose activities based on hiding or coping rather than on enjoyment or health. A supportive environment can reduce this pressure, but an unsympathetic one can make it worse.

Table 26. Situations that may increase physique-related anxiety

Situation	Possible effect on participation
Highly exposed exercise spaces	Greater self-consciousness
Prominent mirrors	Increased body monitoring
Crowded or performance-focused areas	Fear of being judged
Lack of privacy options	Reduced willingness to take part

Key message

Some participants are not avoiding exercise. They are avoiding the experience of exposure and judgement.

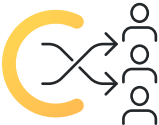
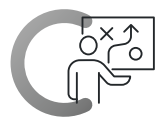
8.4 | Supplements, enhancement pressures, and unrealistic expectations

In some parts of fitness culture, participants are exposed to strong messages about rapid transformation, constant improvement, and the need for supplements or enhancement products.

These messages can blur the line between healthy aspiration and unhealthy pressure. They may also encourage unrealistic expectations about what exercise should achieve and how quickly it should work.

This matters because disappointment, frustration, or pressure to keep up can undermine wellbeing. In some cases, participants may feel they are failing if results are not immediate or visible. A responsible fitness setting should avoid reinforcing these pressures.

Table 27. Risks linked to enhancement culture

Feature			
			
Transformation messaging	Pressure for visible results	Overemphasis on supplements	Constant improvement culture
Possible concern			
			
Unrealistic expectations	Frustration and self-judgement	Confusion about what is necessary	Feeling that effort is never enough

8.5 | Disordered eating and unhealthy control patterns

In some cases, exercise may become linked to disordered eating or to rigid attempts to control food, body weight, or appearance.

This does not mean that all goal-setting around nutrition or exercise is harmful. The concern arises when patterns become extreme, secretive, or emotionally distressing, or when the person’s self-worth becomes tightly tied to control.

Fitness professionals are not expected to diagnose eating disorders. They do, however, need to recognise that exercise and body-related concerns can sometimes be part of a wider pattern of risk. Awareness matters because overly enthusiastic praise for extreme discipline or visible change may unintentionally reinforce harm.

Table 28. Warning signs that may require caution

Possible sign			
			
Extreme anxiety about food or body weight	Excessive exercise linked to eating	Distress around body changes	Praise-seeking for extreme discipline
Why it may raise concern			
			
May suggest unhealthy control patterns	May indicate a wider difficulty	May reflect deeper wellbeing concerns	May hide unhealthy behaviour

Practical actions for fitness providers

1

Avoid praising extreme discipline, excessive training, or visible change without considering the wider context.

2

Use language that supports health, wellbeing, and personal progress rather than pressure, perfection, or constant transformation.

3

Be alert to signs that exercise may be becoming rigid, compulsive, or strongly tied to self-worth.

4

Reduce appearance-based pressure in coaching, marketing, and everyday conversation.

5

Avoid giving advice on issues that fall outside fitness competence, especially where eating, severe distress, or possible clinical concerns are involved.

6

Use clear referral or signposting routes when patterns of concern appear to go beyond normal fitness practice.

Why this improves practice

Recognising personal risks linked to exercise and fitness culture helps providers create safer and more responsible environments.

It reduces the chance that harmful patterns will be normalised or rewarded. It also supports a model of fitness that is more sustainable, more inclusive, and more genuinely connected to wellbeing.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to review the language staff use when discussing goals and progress. This could include avoiding praise that centres only on weight loss, body change, or extreme commitment, and replacing it with language about consistency, wellbeing, confidence, and healthy routine. Small changes in everyday language can reduce pressure and support a healthier culture.



09

PRACTICAL RESPONSES FOR TRAINERS, COACHES AND PROVIDERS

Fitness professionals are often the people participants see most regularly. They shape the everyday experience of exercise through their behaviour, language, expectations, and responses to concern.

For that reason, practical responses in the fitness and physical activity sector can make a real difference to whether participation supports wellbeing or adds to pressure.

This does not mean that trainers, coaches, and providers should act as mental health professionals. It means they should know how to create supportive conditions, recognise when something may be wrong, respond appropriately within their role, and know when further help may be needed. Clear and realistic responses are therefore central to good practice.

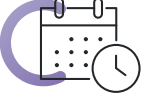
9.1 | Noticing concerns without overstepping

Fitness professionals are often well placed to notice changes in behaviour, mood, confidence, or participation.

A participant may become withdrawn, unusually distressed, highly self-critical, excessively rigid, or reluctant to engage in ways that seem out of character. Noticing these changes can be important, even when the cause is not clear.

At the same time, noticing is not the same as diagnosing. Staff should focus on what they observe, not on trying to explain it in clinical terms. A careful and respectful response is more appropriate than making assumptions.

Table 29. What staff may notice in practice

Possible sign	Appropriate interpretation
Sudden withdrawal or silence	 Something may be affecting participation
Visible distress	 The person may need support or space
Unusual rigidity around exercise	 There may be growing pressure or imbalance
Strong self-critical comments	 Confidence or wellbeing may be affected

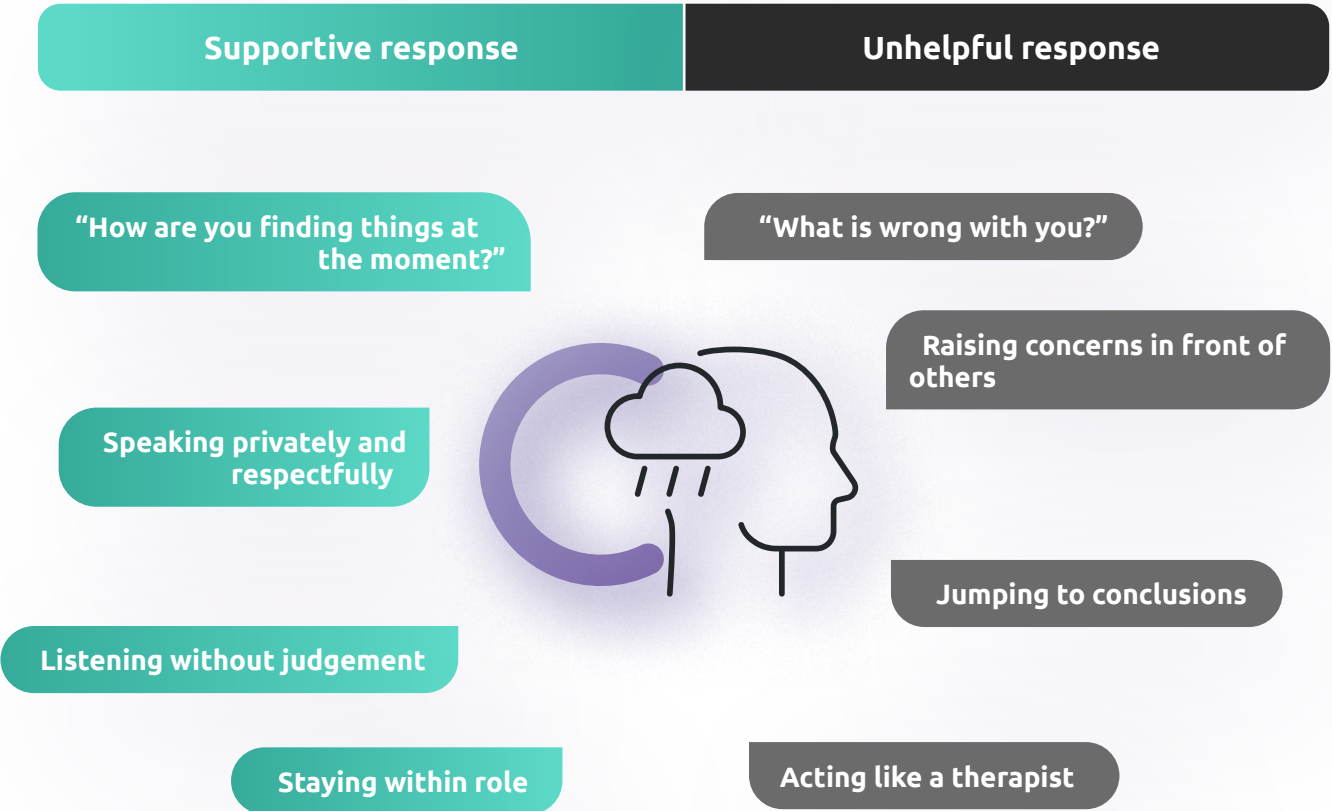
9.2 | Responding with care and respect

When concerns arise, the first response should be calm, respectful, and proportionate.

Staff do not need to have all the answers. In many cases, the most helpful first step is a simple check-in that shows care without pressure.

The way a concern is raised matters greatly. A private, supportive conversation is usually better than a public comment. The aim is to create space for the participant to speak, without making them feel exposed or judged.

Table 30. Supportive and unhelpful responses



Key message
A good response begins with respect, privacy, and careful listening.

9.3 | Using language that supports wellbeing

Language has a strong effect on how participants experience exercise. Supportive language can help people feel capable, welcome, and safe. Poor language can increase shame, pressure, or self-doubt, even when that was not intended.

This applies to coaching, feedback, goal-setting, and everyday conversation. Trainers and providers should aim to use language that supports progress, confidence, and wellbeing, rather than language based on blame, humiliation, or narrow appearance goals. Small changes in wording can have a strong effect on the tone of the environment.

Table 31. Language that helps and language that harms

Supportive response	Language to avoid
“Let’s find an approach that works for you”	“No excuses”
“Progress takes time”	“You should look better by now”
“You can build up gradually”	“Push through no matter what”
“How are you feeling today?”	“Pain is weakness”

9.4 | Knowing professional boundaries

Fitness professionals can support mental wellbeing, but they must remain within their professional role.

Their responsibility is to provide safe, supportive, and well-managed physical activity experiences. It is not their role to diagnose mental health conditions, provide therapy, or manage serious psychological difficulties on their own.

Clear boundaries protect everyone. They reduce the risk of poor advice, confusion, or overdependence. They also help staff respond with confidence, because they know what is expected of them and what should be passed on to others.

Table 32. Role boundaries in practice

Within the fitness role	Outside the fitness role
 Creating a supportive environment	 Diagnosing mental health conditions
 Checking in appropriately	 Providing therapy
 Encouraging participation	 Managing serious distress alone
 Signposting to further support	 Promising mental health treatment

9.5 | Referral, signposting, and team procedures

A good response system does not depend on individual confidence alone. Staff need clear procedures for what to do when a participant needs help beyond normal fitness support.

This includes knowing who to speak to internally, what information to record, and where to direct participants for further support.

Signposting and referral should be simple and realistic. Staff are more likely to use procedures properly when they are easy to understand and part of normal practice. This is especially important where there are safeguarding concerns, visible distress, or signs that someone may be at risk.

Table 33. Elements of a clear support procedure

Element	Why it matters
Named internal contact	 Diagnosing mental health conditions
Simple reporting route	 Reduces hesitation and confusion
Signposting list	 Helps participants access appropriate help
Safeguarding procedure	 Protects children, young people, and vulnerable adults

Practical actions for fitness providers

1

Train staff to notice concerns without making assumptions or diagnoses.

2

Encourage private, respectful check-ins when something seems wrong.

3

Use language that supports confidence, wellbeing, and realistic progress.

4

Make professional boundaries clear in staff training and internal guidance.

5

Provide simple procedures for reporting concerns, safeguarding issues, and signposting.

6

Make sure staff know where to direct participants when concerns go beyond normal fitness practice.

Why this improves practice

Clear practical responses help staff act with confidence and consistency.

They improve participant trust and reduce the chance that concerns will be ignored, mishandled, or taken beyond professional competence. They also strengthen the overall quality of the fitness environment by linking care, safety, and everyday practice.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to create a short internal guide for staff called “Notice, respond, and signpost.” This could include examples of what staff may notice, a few suggested phrases for private check-ins, a reminder about professional boundaries, and a simple list of internal and external support routes. A short tool of this kind can make responses more consistent across the organisation.

EXPERT INSIGHT:



Dr. Karlie Intlekofer,

Global Research Scientist & Personal Trainer, Matrix Fitness

Q: What role do gym owners and trainers play in supporting individual mental wellbeing?

A: They play a key role in shaping how people experience exercise. Beyond physical results, it’s about helping individuals feel supported, and comfortable in the environment. Confidence and a sense of belonging are essential for long-term engagement.

Q: What are some practical ways to build confidence in members?

A: Programmes should be structured so people can experience regular, achievable progress. Involving members in goal setting and helping them understand the purpose behind their training also increases motivation and self-efficacy.

Q: How can gyms encourage a stronger sense of community?

A: Create opportunities for positive interaction. Group activities, shared spaces, and a welcoming atmosphere where members acknowledge and support each other can make a big difference. Feeling part of a community encourages people to stay engaged.

Q: What should trainers keep in mind in their day-to-day interactions?

A: Simple actions matter: regular check-ins, asking how someone feels, and paying attention to behavioural changes. Trainers are often the first to notice when something is not right, so being aware and knowing when to guide someone towards additional support is very important.

PART III – CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE



10 PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND MENTAL WELLBEING IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Childhood and adolescence are important periods for mental, social, and emotional development.

Experiences during these years can shape confidence, coping, self-image, relationships, and attitudes towards physical activity over the longer term. This makes the quality of movement experiences especially important for young people.

Physical activity can support mental wellbeing in children and adolescents, but the benefits do not come from participation alone. They are shaped by the way activity is organised, supervised, communicated, and experienced. In youth settings, good practice therefore means paying attention not only to what young people do, but also to how participation feels.

10.1 | Physical activity as support for healthy development

Physical activity can support several aspects of healthy development in children and adolescents.

It can create opportunities for enjoyment, social connection, confidence, routine, and a sense of competence. It may also help young people manage stress, feel more settled, and develop positive habits that continue into later life.

These benefits matter because mental wellbeing in youth is closely tied to daily experiences. Supportive movement settings can become places where young people feel capable, included, and valued. This gives physical activity a role that extends beyond fitness or skill development alone.

Table 34. How physical activity can support mental wellbeing in young people

Area		Possible benefit
Confidence		Feeling more capable and willing to take part
Mood		Feeling better during and after activity
Social connection		Building friendships and shared experiences
Routine		Creating structure and healthy habits
Sense of competence		Feeling able to improve and succeed

10.2 | Experience quality matters

Young people do not benefit from all movement experiences in the same way.

An activity may be technically well organised but still feel stressful, embarrassing, overly competitive, or excluding. In these cases, participation may not support wellbeing and may even discourage future engagement.

Experience quality matters because children and adolescents are often highly sensitive to social signals. They notice whether adults are respectful, whether mistakes are treated kindly, and whether they feel accepted by the group. Enjoyment, belonging, and psychological comfort are therefore central to good youth provision.

Table 35. Features of positive and negative activity experiences

Positive experience	Negative experience
 Feeling welcome	 Feeling exposed or judged
 Encouragement and support	 Fear of making mistakes
 Age-appropriate challenge	 Pressure beyond readiness
 Enjoyment and inclusion	 Exclusion or embarrassment

10.3 | Confidence, self-image, and willingness to participate

For many young people, physical activity is closely linked to confidence and self-image.

Positive experiences can help them feel more comfortable in their bodies, more willing to try, and more confident in social settings. Negative experiences can have the opposite effect and may lead to avoidance, silence, or withdrawal.

This is particularly important during adolescence, when body awareness and social comparison often become stronger. Fitness settings and youth activity programmes need to recognise that confidence is not a small issue. It is often one of the main conditions for ongoing participation.



Key message

Young people are more likely to stay active when participation strengthens confidence rather than undermines it.

Table 36. Confidence and participation in youth settings

Experience	Possible effect
Being encouraged to try 	 Greater willingness to participate
Being supported after mistakes 	 Stronger confidence
Feeling compared or judged 	 Reduced self-belief
Feeling accepted in the group 	 More positive engagement

10.4 | Social belonging and peer relationships

Physical activity is often a social experience for children and adolescents.

Group sessions, team activities, shared routines, and informal interaction can all support belonging and friendship. For many young people, the social side of participation is one of the main reasons they continue.

At the same time, peer settings can also bring risk. Exclusion, teasing, status competition, or visible differences in ability can make activity feel uncomfortable. This means that adults need to pay attention to group dynamics, not only to programme content.

Table 37. Social factors in youth physical activity

Social factor	Possible effect on wellbeing
Friendship and shared activity 	 Greater enjoyment and belonging
Supportive group atmosphere 	 Increased confidence
Teasing or exclusion 	 Reduced comfort and willingness to take part
Strong status competition 	 Pressure and self-consciousness

10.5 | Adults shape the meaning of participation

Adults play a major role in how young people experience physical activity.

Coaches, instructors, teachers, trainers, and managers all help shape the emotional tone of the setting through their expectations, behaviour, and responses. Young people often take cues from adults about what matters, what counts as success, and how mistakes should be understood.

This makes adult practice especially important in youth settings. When adults emphasise care, encouragement, safety, and progress, participation is more likely to support wellbeing. When they emphasise pressure, comparison, or appearance, they may unintentionally increase stress.

Table 38. How adults influence youth experience

Adult approach		Likely effect
	Encouraging effort and progress	Supports confidence and learning
	Responding calmly to mistakes	Reduces fear and embarrassment
	Focusing only on performance	May increase pressure
	Using respectful communication	Strengthens trust and safety

Why this improves practice

A stronger focus on mental wellbeing in youth settings improves the quality and value of provision.

It helps fitness providers create experiences that young people are more likely to enjoy, trust, and continue. It also supports a healthier long-term relationship with physical activity by making early participation more positive and more inclusive.



Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1 Treat children and adolescents as a distinct group with specific developmental and emotional needs.
- 2 Use language that encourages effort, progress, and participation rather than comparison or perfection.
- 3 Design activity so that it feels enjoyable, supportive, and age-appropriate.
- 4 Support staff working with young people to understand how experience quality affects wellbeing.
- 5 Pay attention to confidence, belonging, and group dynamics, not only to performance or attendance.
- 6 Recognise that early experiences of activity can shape long-term attitudes towards movement and fitness.

Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a youth fitness programme to review each session using three simple questions: Did young people feel welcome? Did they have opportunities to succeed? Did the session support enjoyment as well as learning? A short reflection process of this kind can help staff keep wellbeing in view alongside physical activity goals.



11

RISKS AND SAFEGUARDING IN YOUTH FITNESS SETTINGS

Children, adolescents, and young people can benefit greatly from physical activity, but they can also be exposed to risks that affect their safety, confidence, and wellbeing.

Some of these risks are obvious, while others are built into the culture of the setting, the behaviour of adults, or the expectations placed on young participants. For that reason, youth fitness provision needs careful attention.

Safeguarding is a central part of this responsibility. It involves protecting young people from harm, but it also involves creating conditions in which they feel safe, respected, supervised, and supported. In fitness settings, safeguarding and mental wellbeing are closely linked.

11.1 | Pressure, comparison, and adult-style expectations

Young people may be exposed to forms of pressure that are not appropriate for their age or stage of development.

These can include pressure to perform, to look a certain way, to train intensely, or to behave as though they are miniature adults in a performance environment. Such expectations can undermine confidence and enjoyment.

Comparison can make this worse. Young people may compare their bodies, abilities, or progress with others, especially in visible group settings. When this happens in an unsupportive environment, participation may become stressful rather than beneficial.

Table 39. Pressures that may affect young people in fitness settings

Source of pressure	Possible effect
 Adult-style performance expectations	 Stress and reduced enjoyment
 Constant comparison with others	 Lower confidence
 Pressure for rapid progress	 Fear of failure
 Narrow ideas of success	 Feeling inadequate or excluded

11.2 | Exposure to appearance-focused fitness culture

Young people may encounter strong messages about body shape, appearance, transformation, and visible results.

In mixed-age or heavily appearance-focused settings, these messages can be especially powerful. This may lead some young people to become overly self-conscious or dissatisfied with their bodies.

This risk is important because adolescence is often a period of heightened body awareness. Fitness settings should therefore avoid reinforcing appearance pressure or presenting body change as the main purpose of participation. A healthier approach is to emphasise enjoyment, confidence, movement, and wellbeing.

Table 40. Appearance-related risks for young people

Risk factor	Possible effect
 Transformation messaging	 Unrealistic expectations
 Idealised body images	 Increased self-consciousness
 Appearance-focused feedback	 Narrow sense of worth
 Adult body norms in youth settings	 Pressure and confusion

11.3 | Inappropriate boundaries and weak supervision

Youth fitness settings require clear boundaries, clear roles, and appropriate supervision.

Problems can arise when staff are unclear about their responsibilities, when contact is unsupervised, or when behaviour standards are not clearly explained. Weak supervision can increase uncertainty and risk, even where intentions are good.

Good safeguarding depends on structure as well as care. Young people need to know who is responsible, what is expected, and where they can turn if something feels wrong. Providers also need to make sure staff understand professional boundaries in all interactions.

Table 41. Safeguarding risks linked to weak boundaries

Issue	Why it matters
 Unclear staff roles	May create confusion and inconsistency
 Limited supervision	May increase vulnerability and uncertainty
 Poor boundary awareness	May undermine safety and trust
 No clear reporting route	Concerns may go unnoticed or unaddressed



Key message
Young people need supportive adults, but they also need clear boundaries, proper supervision, and safe procedures.

11.4 | Mixed-age environments and exposure to adult behaviours

Some fitness settings bring together adults and young people in the same space.

This may be practical, but it can also expose younger users to adult language, attitudes, behaviours, or training norms that are not suitable for them. The issue is not simply age difference. It is the possible mismatch between the environment and the needs of younger participants.

Where mixed-age use exists, providers need to think carefully about timing, supervision, programme design, and the culture of the space. Young people should not be left to navigate adult fitness environments without appropriate guidance and protection.

Table 42. Risks in mixed-age fitness environments

Issue	Possible concern
 Exposure to adult training culture	Age-inappropriate expectations
 Inappropriate language or behaviour	Reduced sense of safety
 Limited youth-focused supervision	Greater uncertainty
 Shared spaces without clear structure	Difficulty protecting wellbeing

11.5 | Recognising concerns and responding early

Not all safeguarding or wellbeing concerns begin as major incidents.

Some begin as small signs, such as withdrawal, visible discomfort, distress, fear of certain spaces, or sudden changes in behaviour. Early recognition matters because it allows providers to respond before problems become more serious.

A strong youth setting does not depend on staff guessing what is wrong. It depends on staff knowing how to notice, respond, record, and report concerns appropriately. This is especially important where the young person may not feel ready to speak directly.

Table 43. Early signs that may require attention

Possible sign	Why it may matter
Sudden withdrawal	 The young person may not feel safe or comfortable
Visible distress	 A concern may need support or follow-up
Avoidance of certain sessions or spaces	 Something in the environment may be affecting them
Unusual silence or fearfulness	 There may be a wellbeing or safeguarding issue

Practical actions for fitness providers

1

Avoid placing adult-style performance, appearance, or training expectations on young participants.

2

Make sure youth provision is clearly supervised and supported by trained staff.

3

Use communication that protects confidence and reduces comparison and shame.

4

Review whether young people are being exposed to messages, behaviours, or environments that are not suitable for their age.

5

Put clear safeguarding procedures in place and make sure all staff know how to use them.

6

Respond early to signs of discomfort, distress, withdrawal, or fear.

Why this improves practice

Attention to risks and safeguarding helps create youth fitness settings that are safer, more trusted, and more supportive of healthy development.

It protects young people from avoidable harm and improves the quality of their experience. It also helps providers build environments in which wellbeing, safety, and participation are treated as inseparable.

”

Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to carry out a youth safeguarding review of the whole setting. This could include supervision routines, staff roles, reporting procedures, the timing of youth sessions, and the messages visible in posters and social media. A simple review of this kind can help identify risks that may otherwise appear normal in daily practice.



12

GOOD PRACTICE FOR GYMS AND TRAINERS WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Good youth provision does not happen by accident. It depends on careful planning, appropriate relationships, clear boundaries, and a strong understanding of how young people experience physical activity.

When gyms and trainers get these things right, they can create settings that support confidence, enjoyment, safety, and long-term engagement.

This is especially important because young people are still developing physically, socially, and emotionally. A good session for adults is not automatically a good session for younger participants. Youth provision therefore needs its own approach.

12.1 | Age-appropriate programme design

Programmes for young people should be designed around their developmental stage, confidence, and experience.

Activities should feel manageable, purposeful, and suitable for the age group involved. This helps young people participate with confidence and reduces the risk of unnecessary pressure.

Age-appropriate design also means avoiding adult-style expectations about performance, intensity, or body-related goals. Young people need activity that supports healthy development, not programmes that assume they should already think and train like adults.

Table 44. Features of age-appropriate youth provision

Feature		Why it matters
Suitable challenge level		Supports progress without overload
Clear and simple instruction		Helps young people feel secure
Developmentally appropriate goals		Reduces adult-style pressure
Balanced session design		Supports enjoyment and learning

12.2 | Enjoyment-first and confidence-building approaches

Young people are more likely to stay involved when activity feels enjoyable and rewarding. Enjoyment should not be treated as an optional extra.

It is often one of the main conditions for confidence, motivation, and ongoing participation. A setting that feels serious, intimidating, or overly critical may lose young people quickly.

Confidence-building approaches are also important. Staff should look for ways to help young people experience success, feel capable, and recover well from mistakes. This does not mean lowering expectations. It means creating conditions in which young people can learn and grow without unnecessary embarrassment or fear.

Table 45. Approaches that support confidence and enjoyment

Practice		Likely benefit
Positive encouragement		Builds confidence
Opportunities for success		Supports motivation
Calm response to mistakes		Reduces fear and shame
Enjoyable session flow		Increases willingness to return



Key message

Young people are more likely to stay active when exercise feels enjoyable, achievable, and supportive.

12.3 | Clear communication with young people and families

Good youth practice depends on clear communication.

Young people need instructions, expectations, and feedback that they can understand. Families also need clear information about how sessions are run, what the goals are, how supervision works, and who to contact if concerns arise.

Clear communication builds trust. It reduces uncertainty for both young people and families and helps create a safer and more consistent experience. It also makes it easier to respond well if problems or concerns emerge.

Table 46. Communication priorities in youth fitness settings

Communication area		Why it matters
	Clear session expectations	Helps young people feel secure
	Age-appropriate instruction	Supports understanding and success
	Information for families	Builds trust and transparency
	Named contact points	Helps concerns be raised early

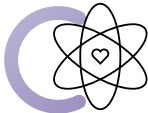
12.4 | Safe relationships, clear boundaries, and good supervision

Young people benefit from supportive relationships with staff, but those relationships must be well managed.

Good youth provision requires clear boundaries, appropriate conduct, and supervision that is visible and reliable. These are not separate from good coaching or instruction. They are part of it.

Safe relationships help young people feel respected and protected. Clear boundaries help staff act consistently and reduce the chance of confusion or harm. Good supervision also makes the setting feel more secure for families and for the young people themselves.

Table 47. Core features of safe youth practice

Possible sign			
			
Clear professional boundaries	Reliable supervision	Consistent behaviour standards	Staff understanding of safeguarding
Why it matters			
			
Protects safety and trust	Reduces vulnerability and uncertainty	Supports a respectful environment	Improves response to concern

12.5 | Inclusive and youth-friendly culture

A good youth setting should feel welcoming to different young people, not only to those who are already confident, sporty, or physically skilled.

This means creating a culture that values participation, encouragement, respect, and gradual progress. Young people should be able to enter the setting without feeling that they must already know how to behave, perform, or look.

Youth-friendly culture is also important for retention. When young people feel that the setting is meant for them, they are more likely to continue. When the culture feels narrow, exclusive, or adult-focused, participation may drop away even if the activity itself is well designed.

Table 48. What helps a setting feel youth-friendly

Practice	Likely benefit	
Welcoming tone		 Greater comfort on entry
Respect for different ability levels		 More inclusive participation
Gradual progression		 Lower pressure and stronger confidence
Visible support for young users		 Greater sense of belonging



Practical actions for fitness providers

1

Design youth sessions around developmental needs, not adult training models.

2

Make enjoyment, confidence, and participation central goals of youth provision.

3

Communicate clearly with both young people and their families.

4

Ensure that staff working with young people understand safeguarding, boundaries, and supervision requirements.

5

Review whether the overall culture of the setting feels welcoming and suitable for younger users.

6

Create clear routes for raising concerns and responding to issues early.

Why this improves practice

Good practice for young people improves both safety and quality.

It helps gyms and trainers create experiences that support healthy development, stronger wellbeing, and long-term participation. It also strengthens trust with families and shows that youth provision is being treated as a serious professional responsibility.



”

Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a gym to create a short youth provision standard for all staff involved in sessions with young people. This could include guidance on communication, supervision, suitable goals, family contact, and safeguarding procedures. A shared standard of this kind can improve consistency and help the setting feel safer and more supportive for everyone involved.

EXPERT INSIGHT:



Dr. Karlie Intlekofer,

Global Research Scientist & Personal Trainer, Matrix Fitness

Q: Why is it so important to focus on mental wellbeing when working with young people in fitness settings?

A: Childhood and adolescence are key stages for developing confidence, movement skills, and attitudes towards physical activity. The experiences young people have in gyms or sport environments can shape how they see their bodies and their relationship with exercise for years to come.

Q: What should gym owners prioritise when designing activities for young people?

A: The focus should always be on enjoyment, learning, and confidence. Activities should support skill development and positive experiences, rather than emphasising appearance or performance outcomes. When young people enjoy what they do, they are much more likely to stay active.

Q: How can trainers create a positive and safe social environment?

A: By encouraging a supportive peer culture where young people feel welcomed and included. It's also very important to avoid making comments about body weight or appearance, especially in group settings. Trainers should highlight attitude, effort, and personal progress.

Q: What role do adults play in supporting young people beyond the physical aspect?

A: A crucial one. Trainers and coaches should be attentive to behavioural signs such as anxiety, perfectionism, or body image concerns. Having the right training and maintaining open communication with families helps ensure that young people are supported in a safe and appropriate way.

PART IV – IMPLEMENTATION AND SUPPORTING TOOLS



13 A PRACTICAL ROADMAP FOR FITNESS PROVIDERS

Many fitness providers already recognise that mental health and wellbeing matter, but they may be unsure how to turn this into everyday practice.

A roadmap helps by breaking the task into clear and manageable steps. It shows that improvement does not depend on a single major change, but on a series of practical actions that can be built into normal provision.

This is important because wellbeing-supportive practice needs to be intentional. Good intentions are useful, but they are not enough on their own. Providers need a way to review what they do now, identify priorities, and make steady improvements across the organisation.

13.1 | Start with the current environment

The first step is to understand the setting as it already exists.

Providers need to look at the experience from the point of view of different users, including beginners, less confident participants, young people, and those who may already feel uncertain about entering a fitness space. This helps identify what is working well and where unnecessary barriers may still be present.

A useful review should go beyond equipment and programming. It should include communication, atmosphere, staff behaviour, first impressions, inclusion, and the way concerns are handled. Mental wellbeing is shaped by the whole environment, not by one single feature.

Table 49. Questions for reviewing the current environment

Review area	Key question
 First impressions	Does the setting feel welcoming and manageable for new users?
 Staff behaviour	Do staff communicate in respectful and supportive ways?
 Organisational culture	Does the environment support wellbeing, inclusion, and safety?
 Messages and imagery	Do posters, signs, and digital content reduce or increase pressure?
 Support procedures	Is it clear what staff should do if a concern arises?

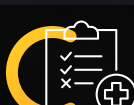
13.2 | Identify priorities and act in stages

Not every issue can be addressed at once.

Providers need to identify the areas that matter most in their own setting and focus on practical priorities. This may include staff communication, beginner experience, safeguarding, body image pressures, or the lack of clear support procedures.

A staged approach is often the most realistic. Small, well-chosen changes can have a strong effect when they are implemented consistently. A roadmap should therefore support progress over time rather than expecting instant transformation.

Table 50. Setting priorities for action

Priority area	Why it may come first	
Staff communication		Affects every participant experience
New member journey		Shapes confidence and early retention
Safeguarding procedures		Essential where young people are involved
Messaging and promotion		Influences culture and expectations
Support and referral routes		Helps staff respond appropriately to concern

13.3 | Build staff understanding and confidence

Staff need support if they are expected to contribute to mental wellbeing in practice.

They need to understand what the organisation is trying to achieve, why it matters, and what their own role involves. Training and guidance should therefore focus on practical confidence rather than abstract theory alone.

This includes knowing how to welcome people, communicate well, notice concerns, maintain boundaries, and use procedures correctly. Staff are more likely to respond well when expectations are clear and realistic. Confidence grows when support is built into normal working practice.

Table 51. Areas for staff development

Area	Why it matters	
Respectful communication		Shapes the tone of the environment
Inclusion and belonging		Helps more people feel welcome
Professional boundaries		Protects staff and participants
Responding to concern		Supports consistency and safety
Safeguarding awareness		Essential in youth and shared settings

13.4 | Turn values into visible practice

A provider may say that wellbeing matters, but participants will judge this by what they actually experience.

Values therefore need to be visible in routines, communication, staff conduct, programming, and the way the setting responds to difficulty. A wellbeing-supportive culture should be noticeable in everyday practice.

This means looking at what users see and hear. It includes the language in welcome messages, the tone of staff feedback, the design of beginner offers, and the procedures used when someone is struggling. Culture becomes real when it can be seen in ordinary interactions.

Table 52. Turning values into practice

Value	Visible sign in practice
 Respect	 Calm, non-judgemental interaction
 Inclusion	 Different users feel welcomed and supported
 Safety	 Clear boundaries and reporting procedures
 Wellbeing	 Programmes and messages go beyond appearance
 Support	 Staff know how to respond to concern

13.5 | Review, learn, and improve

A roadmap should include reflection, not only action.

Providers need simple ways to check whether changes are working and whether further improvements are needed. This does not require complex systems. It requires regular attention and a willingness to learn from experience.

Feedback from staff, participants, families, and partners can be useful here. Providers should ask whether the setting feels more welcoming, more supportive, and easier to navigate. Continuous improvement helps make wellbeing part of the organisation rather than a one-off initiative.

Table 53. Signs of progress

Communication area	Why it matters
Better feedback from participants	 The environment feels more supportive
Stronger staff confidence	 Procedures and expectations are clearer
Fewer avoidable barriers	 The setting is easier to access and understand
Better consistency in responses	 Good practice is becoming embedded



Key message
Improvement is more sustainable when it is planned, staged, and reviewed over time.

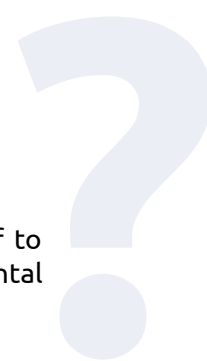
Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1 Review the current environment from the point of view of different participants.
- 2 Identify a small number of practical priorities rather than trying to change everything at once.
- 3 Train staff in communication, inclusion, boundaries, and appropriate responses to concern.
- 4 Make sure organisational values are visible in everyday practice.
- 5 Create simple procedures for support, safeguarding, and signposting.
- 6 Review progress regularly and adjust the approach where needed.

Why this improves practice

Practical tools help turn good intentions into reliable action.

They support consistency, reduce uncertainty, and make it easier for staff to respond well in real situations. They also help organisations show that mental health and wellbeing are being treated seriously in everyday practice.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to create a short three-stage wellbeing plan. The first stage could review the current environment, the second could focus on staff communication and participant experience, and the third could strengthen procedures for support and safeguarding. A simple staged plan of this kind can help organisations make progress without losing focus.



14

TOOLS, CHECKLISTS AND SIGNPOSTING

Guidance becomes more useful when it can be applied in everyday work.

Many fitness providers understand the importance of mental health and wellbeing, but they also need simple tools that can support action in real settings. Checklists, prompt sheets, and signposting tools can help turn general principles into consistent practice.

This is especially important in busy environments. Staff may have limited time, varied experience, and different levels of confidence. Practical tools help organisations respond more clearly, more consistently, and with less uncertainty.

14.1 | Simple tools support consistent practice

A strong wellbeing culture does not depend only on individual judgement.

It also depends on having shared tools that make expectations clear and reduce uncertainty. These tools help staff know what good practice looks like and what steps to take when concerns arise.

Simple tools are often the most effective. Short checklists, visible prompts, and brief guidance notes are easier to use than long documents. They can also support consistency across different staff roles and parts of the organisation.

Table 54. Types of practical tools for fitness settings

Tool	Main purpose
Environment checklist	 Review whether the setting feels welcoming and supportive
Staff prompt sheet	 Guide everyday communication and responses
Concern response guide	 Support appropriate action when worries arise
Signposting list	 Help staff direct participants to further support
Safeguarding checklist	 Strengthen youth and vulnerable-user protection

14.2 | Checklists can make the environment easier to review

Checklists help providers review their setting in a structured way.

They make it easier to identify strengths, gaps, and small changes that could improve the participant experience. This is helpful because many barriers are ordinary features of daily practice that become easy to overlook.

A good checklist should be short, clear, and practical. It should focus on what staff and managers can see, hear, and change. This makes it more useful than a long list of abstract principles.

Table 55. Example environment checklist



14.3 | Staff prompts can improve communication

Staff often benefit from short prompts that help them respond well in the moment.

These prompts are not scripts in a rigid sense. They are reminders of tone, boundaries, and good practice. They can be especially useful for newer staff or in situations involving uncertainty.

A communication prompt sheet can help staff stay calm, respectful, and clear. It can also reduce the risk of poor responses that increase pressure or confusion. This makes staff support more reliable across the organisation.

Table 56. Example staff prompt sheet

Situation	Helpful prompt
A new participant seems unsure	 "Let me know if you would like any support getting started."
A participant seems distressed	 "Would you like a moment, or would it help to talk somewhere private?"
A participant is very self-critical	 "It is fine to take this at your own pace."
A concern may be beyond fitness scope	 "There may be someone better placed to help with this."

Key message

Short prompts can help staff respond with confidence while staying within their role.

14.4 | Signposting needs to be simple and realistic

Signposting is an important part of good practice.

It helps participants access support when concerns go beyond what a fitness provider can reasonably offer. This does not require staff to become experts in mental health systems, but it does require them to know where to direct people.

A signposting list should be practical and easy to use. It should include relevant internal contacts, local support options where appropriate, safeguarding routes, and emergency actions where serious risk is present. If signposting is too vague or too complicated, it is less likely to be used well.

Table 57. Example signposting categories

Type of support	Example of what to include
Internal support route	 Named manager or wellbeing lead
External wellbeing support	 Local counselling or wellbeing service
Medical support	 GP or health service route
Safeguarding route	 Designated safeguarding contact
Emergency route	 Immediate action if someone may be at serious risk

14.5 | Tools work best when they are visible and used regularly

Practical tools only help if they are part of normal practice.

A checklist that is never used, or a signposting guide that nobody can find, will have little value. Tools therefore need to be visible, accessible, and built into routines such as induction, team meetings, staff training, and review processes.

This also means that tools should be reviewed from time to time. Organisations change, staff change, and support routes may change as well. Keeping tools current helps protect their usefulness and credibility.

Table 58. How to embed tools into practice

Action	Why it matters
 Include tools in staff induction	Makes expectations clear early
 Review tools in team meetings	Keeps them visible and active
 Store them in easy-to-find places	Reduces delay and confusion
 Update them regularly	Keeps guidance accurate and useful

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1

Develop a small set of practical tools rather than a large amount of unused guidance.
- 2

Use short checklists to review the environment, communication, and support procedures.
- 3

Give staff prompt sheets to support respectful and confident responses.
- 4

Create a simple signposting list with clear internal and external routes.
- 5

Make tools easy to find and part of normal induction and training.
- 6

Review tools regularly so they remain accurate and useful.

Why this improves practice

Practical tools help turn good intentions into reliable action.

They support consistency, reduce uncertainty, and make it easier for staff to respond well in real situations. They also help organisations show that mental health and wellbeing are being treated seriously in everyday practice.

”

Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to create a short wellbeing toolkit for staff. This could include one environment checklist, one staff prompt sheet, one safeguarding checklist, and one signposting page. A compact toolkit of this kind is more likely to be used consistently than a long policy document that staff rarely consult.



15

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER SUPPORT

Fitness providers should not be expected to address every mental health or safeguarding issue on their own.

Good practice includes knowing when further help is needed and where that help can be found. A clear resources section can support confidence, reduce uncertainty, and make signposting easier in everyday practice.

Resources are also useful for training, planning, and organisational development. They can help providers strengthen staff understanding, improve procedures, and connect with wider systems of support. For that reason, this section should be practical, selective, and easy to use.

15.1 | Mental health support resources

Fitness settings may need access to reliable mental health support information for participants and staff.

This includes services for general wellbeing concerns, more serious mental health difficulties, and urgent situations. The aim is not to turn fitness providers into mental health specialists, but to make sure that staff know where to direct people when extra help is needed.

Resources should be relevant to the context in which the guide will be used. Some will be international or European, while others will need to be added at national or local level. It is therefore useful to distinguish between broad resource categories and country-specific details.

Table 59. Mental health support resource categories

Resource type	Purpose
General mental health information	 Helps staff and participants access reliable guidance
Wellbeing support services	 Provides non-clinical support and advice
Counselling or therapy services	 Supports people who need professional help
Medical or primary care routes	 Connects people with health services
Crisis or urgent support lines	 Provides help where immediate risk may be present

15.2 | Safeguarding and child protection resources

Where children, adolescents, or vulnerable adults are involved, safeguarding resources are essential.

Providers need access to guidance on reporting concerns, responding appropriately, and understanding local safeguarding responsibilities. These resources should be easy to find and regularly reviewed.

A safeguarding section should include both internal and external routes. Internal routes help staff know who to contact inside the organisation. External routes help ensure that concerns can be passed on when further action is needed.

Table 59. Safeguarding resource categories

Resource type	Purpose	
Internal safeguarding contact		Provides a named route inside the organisation
National safeguarding guidance		Supports policy and procedural understanding
Child protection reporting route		Helps staff know where to report serious concerns
Support for vulnerable adults		Extends protection beyond youth provision
Emergency contact route		Supports urgent action when required

15.3 | Professional development and staff learning resources

Fitness providers may also benefit from resources that support staff learning and development.

These can include short guidance documents, training materials, awareness tools, and sector standards. Such resources can help organisations build confidence in communication, inclusion, boundaries, and appropriate responses to concern.

Professional development resources are especially useful when they are practical and clearly linked to staff roles. Short, applied materials are often more useful than long technical documents. The goal is to support better practice, not to overwhelm staff.

Table 60. Staff learning resource categories

Resource type	Purpose	
Communication guidance		Supports respectful and inclusive interaction
Mental health awareness materials		Builds confidence in recognising concerns
Safeguarding training resources		Strengthens youth and vulnerable-user protection
Inclusion guidance		Helps more people feel welcome and supported
Referral and signposting tools		Supports appropriate onward action



15.4 | Organisational resources and policy support

Some resources are most useful at organisational level rather than individual level

These may include template policies, reporting forms, environment checklists, communication standards, or short internal guidance documents. Such resources help organisations embed good practice more consistently across teams and sites.

Organisational resources are valuable because they reduce dependence on individual memory or confidence. They help turn values into visible routines. They also support continuity when staff change.

Table 61. Organisational resource categories

Resource type		Purpose
Environment checklist		Helps review culture and participant experience
Concern response guide		Supports consistent staff action
Safeguarding procedure		Clarifies roles and reporting routes
Signposting list		Makes onward support easier to access
Staff code or communication standard		Supports consistency in everyday practice

15.5 | Resources should be relevant, current, and visible

A long list of outdated or unclear resources is less useful than a short list of relevant ones.

Providers should therefore select resources that are credible, practical, and easy to access. They should also review them regularly to make sure details remain accurate.

Visibility matters as much as quality. Staff should know where resources are kept, when to use them, and who is responsible for updating them. A resource is only helpful if it can be found and used at the right time.



Key message

The best resource list is not the longest one. It is the one staff can find, trust, and use.

Practical actions for fitness providers

- 1 Create a short and reliable list of mental health, safeguarding, and wellbeing support routes.
- 2 Include both internal and external contacts where appropriate.
- 3 Make sure staff know where the resource list is kept and when to use it.
- 4 Review resources regularly so contact details and routes remain current.
- 5 Add short training or guidance materials that support staff confidence in practice.
- 6 Avoid overloading staff with long lists that are difficult to use.

Why this improves practice

Relevant resources make it easier for staff to respond appropriately and with confidence.

They support safer practice, better signposting, and more consistent decision-making. They also help organisations show that support for mental health and wellbeing is being taken seriously at both staff and management level.



Good practice example

A useful approach would be for a fitness provider to create a one-page support directory for staff. This could include a named internal contact, safeguarding routes, general wellbeing support, health service contacts, and an emergency action note. A short document of this kind is easy to store, easy to update, and more likely to be used when needed.





16 CONCLUSION

Mental health and wellbeing are important concerns for the fitness and physical activity sector.

Physical activity can support mood, energy, confidence, coping, and social connection, but these benefits are shaped by the way participation is experienced. For that reason, **the fitness environment itself matters.**

This Guide has argued that supportive fitness settings do not emerge by chance. They are created through respectful communication, appropriate boundaries, psychologically safe environments, clear procedures, and a wider culture that values inclusion and wellbeing. **These factors influence whether participation feels encouraging, manageable, and sustainable.**

The Guide has also shown that **the fitness and physical activity sector has a meaningful, but clearly defined, role.** Fitness and physical activity providers are not expected to diagnose or treat mental illness. Their role is to **create conditions that support positive participation**, reduce avoidable harms, recognise concerns, and respond appropriately within professional boundaries.

This is especially important because fitness settings shape more than physical outcomes. They shape **confidence, belonging, first impressions, and the meaning people attach to exercise.** In children and young people, these experiences may also influence long-term attitudes towards movement and wellbeing.

A wellbeing-supportive approach **benefits both participants and providers.** It can improve trust, retention, inclusion, and the overall quality of the fitness experience. It can also help move the sector beyond narrow messages about appearance or performance towards a broader understanding of health and human flourishing.

This Guide is one contribution to **a wider effort** to support positive change across the fitness and physical activity sector. Its value will depend on how it is used in practice, by organisations, staff, and partners who want to improve the quality of participation and the environments in which activity takes place. In that sense, the Guide is not an endpoint, but **a practical step towards safer, more supportive, and more inclusive** fitness and PA settings.

Finally, this Guide can be brought together through the

IMPACT framework for positive fitness experiences

(see Appendix B.) This provides a simple way of summarising the main message of the report and the practical qualities that support mental health and wellbeing in fitness settings.

- I** **Inclusive environments**
Fitness settings should make different people feel welcome, respected, and able to take part.
- M** **Motivating support**
Staff should encourage participation in ways that build confidence, sustain effort, and reduce unnecessary pressure.
- P** **Positive communication**
Language, feedback, and everyday interaction should support wellbeing, dignity, and realistic progress.
- A** **Accessible participation**
Opportunities for activity should feel manageable, understandable, and open to people with different needs, backgrounds, and levels of experience.
- C** **Caring practice**
Everyday provision should reflect attentiveness to safety, wellbeing, boundaries, and appropriate responses to concern.
- T** **Transformative outcomes**
The goal of fitness participation should extend beyond physical change alone to include stronger wellbeing, confidence, belonging, and healthier lives.



The goal of fitness participation should extend beyond physical change alone to include stronger wellbeing, confidence, belonging, and healthier lives.

Taken together, the IMPACT framework summarises **how the fitness and physical activity sector can help create experiences that are not only active, but also supportive, inclusive, and genuinely beneficial** for mental health and wellbeing.



APPENDIX A. WORKING DEFINITIONS

Exercise

Exercise refers to a specific form of physical activity that is planned, structured, and repetitive, and that aims to improve or maintain physical fitness. Exercise commonly occurs in gyms, fitness centres, and organised training environments.

Fitness settings

Fitness settings refer to commercial gyms, community fitness centres, training studios, and similar environments in which individuals participate in structured or semi-structured exercise activities. These settings may include personal training, group exercise classes, youth programmes, and recreational training sessions.

Mental health

Mental health refers to a state of wellbeing in which individuals recognise their abilities, cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities. Mental health is understood as more than the absence of mental illness. It includes emotional, psychological, and social functioning.

Mental illness

Mental illness refers to clinically recognised psychological or psychiatric conditions that affect mood, thinking, behaviour, or emotional regulation. Examples include depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Diagnosis and treatment of mental illness are the responsibility of qualified health professionals.

Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing refers to the positive aspects of mental health, including positive emotions, life satisfaction, resilience, and a sense of purpose. In the context of physical activity, wellbeing may be supported through experiences of competence, enjoyment, social connection, and meaningful engagement in movement.

Physical activity

Physical activity refers to any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. This includes everyday activities such as walking and cycling, as well as organised sport and exercise.

Psychological safety

Psychological safety refers to an environment in which individuals feel able to participate, ask questions, express concerns, and make mistakes without fear of judgement, humiliation, or exclusion. In fitness environments, psychological safety is influenced by staff behaviour, organisational culture, and peer interactions.

Referral

Referral refers to the process of directing an individual to an appropriate professional service when specialised support is required. In the context of mental health, referral may involve signposting individuals to healthcare professionals, counselling services, or community support organisations.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding refers to policies and practices intended to protect individuals, particularly children and vulnerable adults, from harm, abuse, exploitation, or neglect. Safeguarding includes safe supervision, appropriate professional boundaries, and clear procedures for reporting concerns.

Staff

In this Guide, the term staff is used in a broad and inclusive sense to refer to all individuals working within fitness settings. This includes employed personnel as well as freelance and self-employed professionals, such as personal trainers, coaches, instructors, and other practitioners contributing to the delivery of fitness and physical activity services.

APPENDIX B. CONCEPT NOTE

The IMPACT Framework for Positive Fitness and Physical Activity Experiences

A practical framework for mental health and wellbeing in fitness settings.



Purpose.
This concept note outlines the **IMPACT framework as a clear and memorable model for creating positive fitness and physical activity experiences that support mental health and wellbeing.**

Background

Fitness settings are often discussed in relation to physical health, appearance, and performance. This emphasis is understandable, but it can narrow the way participation is understood and delivered. Increasing attention is now being given to the wider human value of physical activity, including its relationship with mental health, wellbeing, confidence, belonging, and quality of life.

Within this context, there is a clear **need for a simple and memorable framework** that can help fitness and physical activity providers translate broad principles into everyday practice. The proposed **IMPACT framework** responds to this need. It brings together the core message of the Mental Health & Wellbeing Guide in a form that is practical, accessible, and easy to communicate across the fitness and physical activity sector.

Rationale

The fitness and physical activity experience is shaped by more than exercise itself. It is also shaped by the environment, the behaviour of staff, the tone of communication, the accessibility of participation, and the extent to which people feel safe, respected, and supported. A framework is useful because it helps bring these factors together into a coherent model for practice.

Aim

The aim of the IMPACT framework is to provide the fitness and physical activity sector with a clear and memorable **model for creating positive fitness experiences that support mental health and wellbeing**. It is intended to help providers move beyond a narrow focus on physical outcomes alone and towards a broader understanding of what good fitness provision should achieve.

Objectives

The framework has five main objectives:



support a **shared language** for positive and wellbeing-supportive practice across the sector;



help providers **translate evidence and guidance into clear operational principles**;



strengthen the **everyday quality of participant experience** in gyms, studios, clubs, and other fitness and PA settings;



support staff development by offering a simple structure for training, reflection, and communication;



encourage a broader model of success in fitness, one that includes confidence, belonging, safety, inclusion, and healthier lives, as well as physical outcomes.

The IMPACT Framework

The framework is built around six practical principles.

	Principle	Meaning in practice
I	 Inclusive environments	Fitness settings should make different people feel welcome, respected, and able to take part.
M	 Motivating support	Staff should encourage participation in ways that build confidence, sustain effort, and reduce unnecessary pressure.
P	 Positive communication	Language, feedback, and everyday interaction should support wellbeing, dignity, and realistic progress.
A	 Accessible participation	Opportunities for activity should feel manageable, understandable, and open to people with different needs, backgrounds, and levels of experience.
C	 Caring practice	Everyday provision should reflect attentiveness to safety, wellbeing, boundaries, and appropriate responses to concern.
T	 Transformative outcomes	The goal of fitness participation should extend beyond physical change alone to include stronger wellbeing, confidence, belonging, and healthier lives.

Proposed uses

The IMPACT framework can be used in several ways:

1

as a **summary model** within the Mental Health & Wellbeing Guide itself;

2

as a **staff development tool**;

3

as a **quality assurance prompt**;

4

as a **structure** for reviewing participant experience across fitness and physical activity settings.

5

in **communication and advocacy**;

6

and, as a **practical tool for sector engagement**.



Expected value:

It **simplifies complexity without losing substance**. It translates a broad body of guidance into a structure that is easy to understand and apply.



Strategic value:

by bringing together inclusion, motivation, communication, accessibility, care, and transformation, the framework **encourages a wider view of what counts as quality** in fitness and physical activity provision. This can help organisations strengthen **both participant wellbeing and the long-term credibility of the sector**.



Conclusion

The IMPACT framework offers a practical and coherent way of summarising what positive fitness experiences should look like, and how the sector can help create experiences that are not only active, but also supportive, inclusive, and genuinely beneficial for mental health and wellbeing.

APPENDIX C. FIND OUT MORE

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This Guide has been prepared to support the fitness and physical activity sector in understanding the relationship between physical activity, exercise environments, and mental health and wellbeing. It is intended to support gym owners, managers, trainers, instructors, and other stakeholders in creating settings that strengthen mental wellbeing while reducing avoidable risks. It contributes to the wider goal of making physical activity more supportive, inclusive, and meaningful for all.

The content of this Guide was developed by Prof. Dr Richard Peter Bailey, Dr Ra'ed Ali Mohammed Al-Khamaiseh, and Dr Nadia Samsudin from UCSI University.

Prof. Dr Richard Bailey is Professor of Education and Deputy Dean at UCSI University, specialising in the intersection of physical activity, education, and wellbeing. His work, spanning sport science, public health, and human development, provides the evidence-based foundation of this Guide, particularly in demonstrating how exercise environments can support social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing.

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