

Psychological Gym: The Workout for the Mind

The aim of this article is to try and remove some of the barriers that might prevent people from accessing mental health services or therapy generally. In order to do this, I will start by exploring the current perception of mental health. Then I will attempt to draw some parallels between seeing a counsellor/psychotherapist and accessing a gym. People generally don't think twice about accessing a gym or talking about different gym routines or exercises. However, this cannot be said with regards to accessing therapy or talking about mental health. It seems that talking about our physical health is not so stigmatising as talking about our psychological health.

It appears that, over time, peoples' perception of mental health has changed considerably. Recently, in the UK the idea of having a shrink or therapist has gathered momentum, especially in London. Various celebrities and public figures have highlighted their battles with mental health in an attempt to reduce stigma around it. For example, Rio Ferdinand publicly televised the difficulties he faced coming to terms with the death of his wife. Prince Harry has also publicly acknowledged how the loss of his mother impacted on his mental health as he was growing up. Both referring to the use of counselling.

That said....It is my opinion that there is a long way to go before people's perception changes. Working as a psychotherapist, for over ten years, I still encounter clients who enquire whether they are mad or a nutter for accessing therapy. Equally, young people who I work with often mention their friends reaction when they find out that they're in therapy. Very often citing the terms 'retard' or 'mental case'.

In reply, I try and encourage clients that just as they wouldn't think twice about attending a gym, they shouldn't think twice about accessing therapy/mental health services. We have a psychological muscle that needs exercising, just as much as our physical muscles. Unfortunately, in society there appears to have been a split between mind and body. The general emphasis and acceptance being on our physical bodies, such as diets, exercise routines etc. One of the aims of therapy is to try and connect the head and the body back together again. The aim being in order for people to be able to try and use their minds to understand and make some meaning out of their lives, rather than just their bodies. In my work with professional sports people, I find this especially true. Their focus has been on getting the body in shape, at the detriment of their mind and mental health. We only have to look in newspapers for evidence of this.

I think one of the main factors why people may tend to opt for the physical gym compared to the Psychological Gym is complex and too big of discussion topic for me to write about. However, it is my opinion that one reason, is that for some people dealing with physical pain, is a lot easier to deal with compared to emotional pain. Hence, we could surmise that people who access therapy are actually psychologically stronger, if not physically stronger. The idea that people are weak who access therapy is totally incorrect.

As a way of trying to bridge the gap between peoples perception of accessing a gym compared to accessing therapy I like to use the term '**Psychological Gym**' with my clients. My goal is that by using this term, it might help to change peoples perception of accessing or talking about mental health issues.

