

## What?

Thinking of self-care often brings to mind images of face masks, a good book and a cup of tea, and while these activities can certainly support our wellbeing, the word has a much broader meaning in healthcare. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as ***‘the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote and maintain their own health, prevent disease, and cope with illness and disability, with or without the support of a health or care worker.’***<sup>1</sup>

## Why?

At least 400 million people currently lack access to essential health services, and the WHO anticipates a global shortage of 11 million health workers by 2030, highlighting the ***‘urgent need to find innovative strategies that go beyond the conventional health-sector response’***.<sup>1</sup> On International Self-Care Day, we examine the impact of exercise on depression as a key and established example.



## A systematic review and meta-analysis on the effect of exercise on depression<sup>2</sup>

Population: 14,170 participants with **clinically diagnosed depression** from 218 randomised controlled trials

Intervention: Different forms of exercise compared with other common treatments for depression and standard of care



Results: Statistically significant **reductions in depression with dance, walking/jogging, yoga, strength training, aerobic exercise, tai chi/qigong**; moderate clinically meaningful effects with exercise combined with SSRIs or psychotherapy.



## Author's comments

- **Exercise can be a practical form of self-care for people to incorporate into their daily lives.** However, people with depression might face barriers, such as low motivation and fatigue, or limited access to sport and exercise facilities. Therefore, it is important that healthcare workers try to engage people in physical activity that is achievable and enjoyable.
- The findings of the systematic review show that **multiple different types of exercise can make a difference.** Encouraging people to find forms of exercise that they personally find enjoyable helps them build sustainable long-term habits.
- Self-care can come in many forms, but it is truly about what works for the individual, whether that's stress management techniques, exercise or self-monitoring for an illness – **what works for one person's health may not work for another.** We should also note that self-care can not replace pharmacological or psychological interventions, and should be used in parallel.

## References

1. World Health Organisation. (2021). WHO Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health and Well-being. URL: [WHO guideline on self-care interventions for health and well-being, 2022 revision](#)
2. Noetel, M. et al. (2024). Effect of exercise for depression: systematic review and network meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. BMJ 2024;384:e075847. DOI: [10.1136/bmj-2023-075847](#)