



Feature

Life balanced

Riding a bike can transform mental health and physical wellbeing. Cycle for Health participants tell **Adrian Wills** how it helps

Dan developed depression and anxiety after suffering a bereavement at university. Andrea finds it difficult to communicate and tends to isolate herself. Both have been prescribed cycling as a form of treatment for their poor mental health as part of Cycle for Health, a ground-breaking referral scheme funded by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority's CityConnect programme. Both say it's transformed their lives.

At its worst, Dan's depression meant he was unable to get out of bed for four days. He lost all motivation and spiralled into hopelessness. He says: "You lose enjoyment in life and the things you used to enjoy doing. You stop living, pretty much, and get very low. It's not a good way to live."

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Dan, who's 31 and from Featherstone, near Wakefield, has struggled with depression



ADRIAN WILLS
Head of Comms,
Cycling UK
When he's not cycling, Adrian is writing books

and anxiety for around 15 years, but last year was introduced to the Cycle for Health programme through a community health and wellbeing college. He joined a small group at an athletics track away from traffic, where he was able to build his confidence and bike-handling skills.

"We did a little bit of cycling around the track just to get used to the bikes, then a bit of gear changing and graduated to doing some signalling. Eventually we went around the park and tried to get used to pedestrians and other things you might encounter. I think that was one of the biggest parts of it for me, learning to communicate with the people cycling around you."

While the course has boosted his mental health, it's improved his physical well-being too. "You might have a bad week, and you come here and you might feel a little bit low, feel a bit tired, a bit drained, but you leave feeling invigorated and energetic," says Dan.



For Andrea, 47, from Wakefield, the course has been an opportunity to meet people and make friends – a remarkable achievement for someone who admits to suffering from anxiety and who tends to withdraw from society.

“I hadn’t been on a bike for years and years. I couldn’t get on or dismount safely, so it was really learning the basics,” she reveals. “We did all sorts of activities, weaving in and out of each other on the bikes and going through cones. We learned about balance and safety checks; I didn’t even know where the front and back brakes were!”

And, like Dan, she’s seen a huge difference in her mental health. “I’m more confident. I’m able to be out with other people more than I would normally. And health-wise, my fitness has improved. My lung function is a lot better than it has been, and now I actually want to go out and do other things, and keep cycling, keep active, and really start living my life.”

FITTER AND HAPPIER

Cycle for Health is now in its fourth year in West Yorkshire. At the start of the programme, more than two-thirds of those who took part admitted they weren’t doing the recommended levels of physical activity each week. By the end of the programme, that had dropped to a third, with almost 80% reporting their fitness had improved.

Referrals to the Cycle for Health scheme have come from GPs, hospitals, clinical commissioning groups, and mental health charities.

Jacqueline Sharp, an occupational therapist based at the Fieldhead Mental Health Hospital in Wakefield, says: “We’ve seen some really positive benefits – for example, people who were having difficulty motivating themselves, even coming out of their bedroom, who then started looking forward each week to doing the cycling. And the difference in people’s energy levels when they came back from having done this enjoyable activity was really evident.”

The programme, as its name suggests, is not only about tackling mental health but physical conditions too. Tom Murray, Cycling UK Project Officer, reveals: “We get people coming who may be in remission from cancer. We also get people with type 2 diabetes, or they may be recovering from surgery – a hip operation, for example.”

RIDING HIGH

In Eccles in Greater Manchester, where a similar pilot scheme has been running, 60-year-old Yasma joined the programme as a way of getting back to cycling after developing osteoarthritis in her knees, and losing her confidence to ride. Her instructors helped her with her saddle height and explained she was gripping the handlebars too tightly: small changes that made a huge difference.

1 IN 4 people will experience a mental health problem this year. It will cost the NHS more than **£12billion**



Top: Yasma had lost her confidence to ride
Below: cycle instructor Paul Pryce

Better by bike

Cycle for Health has three targets:

- to increase activity levels thereby improving health and wellbeing;
- to change travel behaviour by offering cycling as a mode of transport; and
- to offer opportunities to cycle where it otherwise would not be possible.

Over 12 weeks, participants receive cycle tuition, develop cycling skills, and go on led bike rides. The main route onto the programme is via referral from a professional within a health setting who considers that 12 weeks of cycling and activity will have a positive effect on a person’s mental or physical wellbeing.

Find out more at: cyclinguk.org/community-outreach/health



She admits: “I was finding I was having difficulty breathing because I wasn’t using the gears correctly. Now I have more stamina and I’m less out of breath, and it’s improved my confidence.”

Jo Amess, a Cycle for Health Guide Ride Leader, explains: “The aim of the Cycle for Health scheme is to get people active, so if you’ve been inactive previously, or if you’re not really into sport, it’s getting you out there on a weekly basis.”

Paul Pryce, a cycle instructor who worked on the Manchester pilot scheme, adds: “Some people aren’t sure they can ride a bike – it might have been 10 or more years since they tried. But usually within five to ten minutes they’re doing loops and grinning, remembering what it was like when they were a child. That’s a big leap forward for them.” ●

i More info
There’s video of the Cycle for Health programme on the Cycling UK website. Visit: cyclinguk.org/cycleforhealth-video1