

Walking football enriches lives

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New research from Abertay University has found organised football sessions have a direct improvement on the lives of people with mental health conditions like schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder.

Since December 2015, Abertay academics Emma Lamont, and Professor Geoff Dickens have been working on a collaborative project with NHS Tayside and NHS Fife which offers regular five-a-side [football](#) and walking football sessions to people who have experience of [mental health conditions](#)

The research, which is due to be published, found participants reported a range of positive benefits from the sessions including an enhanced ability to form and sustain relationships and friendships, improved fitness and health, and a feeling of peer support from team mates.

"What we found is that when players went along to the football and perhaps weren't having a good day then others could recognise this and say 'I've been there, I know how you feel and it's going to get better'," said Lamont, of the Division of Mental Health Nursing & Counselling.

She added: "Some players said that, at their worst, they had been unable to leave the house for months, but then after joining the football group gradually started feeling a little better."

The study looked at four different groups, some of which have been playing together for as long as 15 years.

Ages range from 18 to 60 and there is a mixture of male and female participants.

Sessions take place at community centres in Tayside and Fife and are co-ordinated by [mental health professionals](#) such as nurses, physios, volunteers and sports coaches, including highly specialist physiotherapist Gillian McDonald of NHS Tayside.

Lamont said: "These are specifically mental health football teams for service users who play as an aspect of care.

"They compete in mental [health](#) leagues in Scotland and talked about going to these tournaments as a big motivator for them - they were proud of what they achieved.

"If someone is acutely unwell and in hospital they can come to play football as therapy."

At the beginning of the research, Lamont held focus groups with the teams and asked an extensive range of questions.

She said: "Some of the men had been quite successful in football when they were younger and were in teams before [mental health](#) problems started and took away the chance to pursue a professional career.

"So being able to access these teams is huge for them. They really talked like this was life-changing and there was a real team-spirit and camaraderie developed through these sessions.

"Many of them would go for a drink or a curry together, forming a lasting relationship."

Provided by University of Abertay Dundee

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