

**‘Sport Tackles the Mental Health and Wellbeing Crisis’
Evidence Submission to the Sport for Development Coalition**

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Introduction: summary of expertise and reason for submitting evidence

Catherine Wheatley is part of a team of researchers at the University of Oxford studying relationships between physical activity and brain health. Collectively, the team has approximately £100m in funding from the Wellcome Trust and the National Institute of Health Research. Dr Wheatley’s published research focuses on associations between fitness, physical activity and mental health and wellbeing.

Hannah Beecham is the founder and chief executive of RED January, an annual social media campaign challenging people to be physically active every day during January, and highlighting the potential for improvements in mood and wellbeing. The campaign has received support from the mental health charities Mind and Sport in Mind. Around 50,000 people have taken part each year since its launch in 2016.

RED January and Oxford University are working together to explore the public health potential of this **free, community-based initiative using physical activity to support mental health, which targets health inequalities and does not rely on face-to-face delivery**. The team collected quantitative research data during RED January 2021, which took place during the third UK Covid-19 lockdown, and both qualitative and quantitative data during RED January 2020.

i. Examples and case studies of good practice on the use of sport and physical activity to support mental health and wellbeing in response to Covid-19 and the recovery from the pandemic.

RED January (www.redtogether.co.uk) is an **annual social media campaign, which challenges people to do something active ‘every day, your way’ throughout the month of January to ‘beat the blues away’**. The campaign is now in its sixth year: it was not established in response to Covid-19, but this year it took place during the early weeks of ‘lockdown 3’ when daily exercise was one of the few permitted exceptions to the government’s stay at home guidance.

RED January is **free and open to anyone**: participants **set their own exercise goals** and receive regular emails during the month offering support, advice and inspiration to keep active. Some people opt to raise sponsorship money or buy a T-shirt or other merchandise. There are also vibrant **RED January communities on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter where ‘REDers’ share their physical activity goals and achievements, and their mental health status**. RED January challenges people to be active every day ‘in a way that works for you.’ For some people this might be running five miles a day, for others it might be learning to swim or simply walking in the park.

This year **48,230 people signed up** to take part: of these, **82% were female and 70% were classed as inactive when they registered**, reporting doing 30 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity on fewer than five days per week. **Some 65% were aged 31-50¹**.

Taking part in RED January supported physical activity during a month of total lockdown, according to our survey data.² Some 70% reported being active every day, or missing only one or two days, while 74% said they were either more active or much more active than usual. The biggest barriers to daily participation were work or family obligations: 35% of participants were home-schooling and 12% were looking after family or friends who were ill or in hospital.

Most chose to be active by **running, walking or taking part in self-guided or online exercise at home** because gyms, sports clubs and other exercise venues were closed. **Most felt they had more time to be active, and had found new ways to be active, as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions.** Many reported trying cold-water swimming and paddle boarding. Our survey showed that a large majority were not worried about leaving their home to exercise, and that government guidance specifying daily exercise as a reason to leave home neither encouraged nor discouraged activity.

Interview data collected by the University of Oxford and RED January in 2020 highlighted how having the **freedom to adapt exercise goals to suit individual circumstances including time constraints, injuries or fitness levels allows REDers to maintain daily activity.**

"[For] people who do long shifts or have other commitments it's quite a lot of pressure to exercise every day. But by saying something it means that, you know, ten minutes of yoga on YouTube - you've still done more [than otherwise]." REDer, Fred.

"There have been days when I've got home and thought oh, I can't be bothered... today has been awful and I've earned the right to sit on the sofa. But then that other voice has told me no, just go out, 10 minutes that's all you need." REDer, Marion.

There is evidence that taking part in RED January supported mental health and wellbeing among those surveyed in 2021. Against a backdrop of increases in population levels of depression and anxiety, and falling levels of happiness and life satisfaction over the month of January,³ measures of mental health and wellbeing in our sample were either unchanged or improved. On average we found a small but significant improvement in happiness, a reduction in anxiety and no change in life satisfaction⁴, and no change on a widely-used clinical measure of wellbeing⁵. We acknowledge there may be some positive response bias in these findings.

Qualitative evidence from 2021 social media posts (not part of the research project) suggests that **RED January 2021 encouraged physical activity for mental health.** Example comments include:

¹ Grouptree (2021). RED January registration data

² University of Oxford and RED January (2021). 2,349 REDers (86% female)

³ University College London (2021) Covid-19 Social Study Results Release 30.

⁴ Office of National Statistics wellbeing measures.

⁵ Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

"My energy levels are up and I am mentally feeling stronger already." REDer, Melissa

"Feels great to have a routine and clear my head each day. I need this now more than ever." REDer, Mark

Interview data collected by the University of Oxford and RED January in 2020 highlighted **mental health aims and outcomes that were self-selected and personally-relevant**. Social media posts (not part of the research) also suggested that REDers feel **a sense of belonging to a mutually supportive community**. Example comments include:

"[The challenge helps to]...kick start...a change in how you view yourself. Or how you view your mental health and how you want to look after yourself." REDer, Kevin

"RED January was for me a goal and a stepping stone...to psychologically build myself back up that I've given myself the confidence that I can do this [exercise]." REDer, Ian

"It's quite nice to give some knowledge and advice... and it encourages other people to share it and then people actually realise they're not isolated," (REDer, Roseanne)

A final round of survey data will be collected in July 2021 to examine long-term physical activity behavior change and mental health.

ii Learning and evidence that can inform policy, funding and practice in the mental health sector and health sector more broadly.

The initial aim of our research partnership is to explore elements of RED January that motivate engagement with physical activity for mental health, and those that contribute to sustained participation. The ultimate goal is to measure the impact of taking part in RED January on mental health and wellbeing. The learning presented here is drawn from studies examining data from RED January 2020 and 2021.

There is good evidence that RED January targets health inequalities: a large majority of REDers are **women**, who are less likely than men to be active and more likely to report mental health problems. An analysis of postcode data from 2020 revealed that a substantial minority of participants are from **areas of relatively high deprivation**.

As a virtual challenge, **RED January was both cost-effective and suitable for remote delivery** during a period when face-to-face meetings were accompanied by potential health risks. Overheads are very low: one individual ran the campaign in 2021.

In contrast to more prescriptive interventions such as Couch to 5K, REDers are empowered to set their own goals and work towards personal physical and mental health outcomes. RED January is a social media campaign, but **there is preliminary evidence that its principles align with theoretical models of health behaviour change**. This is important because interventions that target theoretical constructs can be evaluated and replicated accurately, and tend to have stronger effects. Qualitative evidence from interviews and social media suggests that **autonomous goal-setting and a sense of relatedness appears to motivate**

REders to get and stay active. These concepts align with Self-Determination Theory⁶, a behavioural framework frequently used in exercise interventions.

Motivating people with low mood to exercise can be challenging: there are many emotional and affective barriers including low self-efficacy and simple lack of enjoyment. Against this backdrop, RED January is offering support to many thousands of people with low mood to get and stay active during January – and potentially beyond.

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The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Wellcome Trust or the NIHR. The funding bodies had no role in the writing of this manuscript. Evidence is preliminary and is not for general publication without prior consent.

⁶ Deci EL, Ryan RM. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychol Inq.* 2000;11(4):227–68.