

# LOUISE'S STORY

Image for illustration purposes only.



Louise is 27 and lives in a large town in England with her mum, stepdad, little sister and dog. After being diagnosed with depression 18 months ago, her relationship broke down and she gained a lot of weight. She became isolated; losing touch with her friends and family and got into severe financial difficulty after leaving her job. This forced Louise to move back home with her parents and she felt very low.

Louise sought advice for her depression from her GP, he recommended going for a walk or to the gym, but for Louise this seemed like an impossible strategy.

***“How can I when just getting up and having a shower is difficult? I can't even go to the shop opposite my house for a pint of milk, do you think I'm going to drive or get a bus to the gym; step foot into a gym?”***

Louise was active as a child, often playing sport with her brother and his friends. But she increasingly felt anxious about performing and dropped out of sport aged 16. Since then, she has taken part in a few one-off exercise classes but now feels she has developed 'extreme gym phobia' after suffering panic attacks when going to the gym. Louise recalls one experience:

***“I couldn't keep up, and the other women were smashing it. I was a 20-year-old, being out-bummed and tumbled by 80-year-olds. That was the worst experience of my life. I got in the car and cried.”***

Louise now feels like she is slowly starting to find herself again... Louise knew that she had to change if life was going to move on. She

started taking care of her appearance again, walking the dog, and finding work.

Due to her 'gym phobia' she had no intention to start exercising, but she would often moan about herself, “Oh, I'm so sluggish and I just look gross and I've got no self-confidence.” One day her friend had enough, “Well, shut up moaning about it and we'll join the gym.”

Louise was aware that her friend was the only one honest and forceful enough to ignore her excuses, so she agreed on one condition, “Let's eliminate one problem; men. I'll only go to a women's gym.”

She worried about the cost of getting active, “I can't justify it, I'm living at my parent's.” But her attitude changed, realising that she needed to prioritise this, “I would waste money on coffees and pastries. This could actually really help with my healing. I can't afford not to go to the gym.”

Even with her mind made up, it still took several phone calls and three weeks to just arrange the membership appointment. Over the weeks, the consequences of not going became more real “If I don't start, nothing is going to change. It's just delaying everything I want.”

On getting her gym membership, Louise felt excited that she had taken the first step forward, and started to dream of a positive future. But she had to wait a week for her gym induction and she became scared again.

*“The day of my induction, I was so scared, I thought I was going to throw up, I had real bad heart... palpitations. I genuinely felt, like, ‘oh my god, I’m really worried’. My mum, bless her, dropped me to the gym ... she thinks that if she didn’t drop me there, I wouldn’t have gone.”*

Although initially a little uneasy with a male instructor, she was quickly reassured by the staff who listened to her, gave advice, support and motivation.

*“I’ve been in the gym for half an hour, and I survived. I haven’t been anxious. I walked in, and now, I’m leaving, feeling ... hmm, okay!”*

### SINCE THEN...

Louise has worked hard to keep up her gym routine. She prefers early morning sessions with her 17-year-old sister. They have playlists for the drive to the gym and for when they are working out. In addition to setting her own short-term goals, the gym staff continue to encourage her, offering to set new, inspiring programmes.

Louise feels a huge sense of achievement. She has lost a substantial amount of weight and is starting to “get me back”. Louise appreciates that she could not have done it without the support of her friend and family, and that she was lucky to find a gym that supported her to overcome her fears.

*“You can use all the excuses, like, ‘Oh, I’m really tired, I’ve had a stressful day at work, I don’t feel too well. But, if you really want something, you’ll do it, and that’s what I keep thinking, like, ‘Do I actually really, want this? Yes, I do’.”*

### KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶ Something that seems as simple as going for a walk can be a mammoth effort for someone struggling with their mental health.
- ▶ A fear of exercise and the exercise environment can have real impact on women’s physical activity choices and their ability to exercise.
- ▶ The process of deciding to start and maintain exercise can be long and thwarted with practical, competence and motivation barriers.
- ▶ Every interaction with an activity provider has the potential to fuel those barriers or to alleviate fears.
- ▶ The importance of coaches/ instructors who are able to relate well to women who lack confidence and/ or are anxious.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO GET WOMEN ACTIVE

- ▶ Think about programming; women’s only sessions throughout the day, beginners only classes, classes with gradual progression, new starters sessions to meet the instructors and see the environment, or pre-class ‘learn the moves’ sessions.
- ▶ Offer exercise support or mentoring, to support women to get active.
- ▶ Leverage GPs support to encourage women to try activities most suited to them.
- ▶ Review the cost of your sessions to ensure that women on a low income can access them.
- ▶ Offer a chance to socialise, build a sense of community, share experiences, and make new friends.