

How Parkour Protects Mental Health

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I recently threw myself in at the deep end, joining dozens of freerunners from across the world at Parkour Generations' 11th Rendezvous Weekend. While the benefits of exercise to your mental health have long been understood, it struck me that parkour – which is the non-competitive discipline of training to move freely over and through any terrain using only your body, principally through running, jumping and climbing – could be an effective and exciting way to protect mental and emotional wellbeing. Here's why.

Community

Those who train in parkour are impressive, yes, but not intimidating. All those that I met were inclusive, supportive, encouraging and so enthusiastic about what they do and sharing knowledge. The parkour community provides a space wherein you don't necessarily have to talk at length if you don't feel up to it or act a certain way, which can be a huge relief when you're feeling at odds with the world.

Perspective

Parkour demands that you re-imagine your environment and your relationship to it. How can you get from A to B, differently? This kind of creative thinking provides a whole new way of seeing the world, a gift to anyone who is familiar with depression and low moods, when the world can seem incomprehensibly bleak and unchanging. The self-awareness brought about by considering your position within your environment is a release from feeling disconnected and numb. Parkour prompts you to work with your body and surroundings, not against them.

Confidence

Viewing your environment differently opens up a world of challenges and obstacles, which can be daunting. As collective as it is, parkour is an individual journey. We were encouraged to 'break a jump', to overcome a personal challenge, whether that was jumping from a 10 ft wall or jumping between bollards. The personal nature of progress in parkour is a rare thing in life, where we are constantly being encouraged into competition and comparison with one another. It's about pushing yourself, but mostly it's about trusting yourself and being proud when you make it across the gap.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is known to be beneficial for a range of mental health difficulties and for emotional regulation. Parkour, being a holistic practice that engages mind and body, is a kind of movement mediation. You are in 'flow', moving, both focused and relaxed about the task in hand. For those who struggle to sit still and have found traditional sitting meditation isn't for them, parkour could be an excellent alternative.

Parkour Generations run classes in London. **Free Your Instinct** is a Bristol-based charity that offers structured parkour training for mental health.