



# Happy cycling

Cycling is as good for your mental health as it is for your body. **Rob Ainsley** found out how and why your bike keeps anxiety and depression at bay

**C**ycling makes us feel good. We all know that. Many of our happiest moments have come that way – mountain-pass exhilaration, tea-stop contentment with friends, or just the simple, vital pleasure of self-propelled liberation. It makes us feel alive.

But there's more to it. Cycling provides long-term mental health benefits too, notably against chronic problems such as anxiety and depression.

Everyone goes through bad patches now and then. But is it depression? The borderline isn't easily defined. It's like deciding when a dry spell turns into a drought: it's a question of depth, duration, and effect on everyday life.

Three months of perpetual despair, for instance, is probably more than a bad patch. Symptoms vary, but depression often causes major lack of sleep and reduced appetite. You can't face straightforward tasks, even leaving the house or getting out of bed. You get no pleasure out of things you once enjoyed; you despair permanently; you stop looking after yourself. Your self-esteem plummets, you stop seeing friends, maybe take to drink, and generally go downhill. Women are more likely than men to get depressed, but men are more likely to kill themselves because of it. It is, emphatically, not something you can simply 'snap out of'.

And it's a common and growing problem, according to Dr Radha Modgi of the mental health charity MIND. She guesses that, at any one time, about ten per cent of a GP's population will be suffering from mental problems. And more starkly, that '99.9 per cent of people at some stage in their life will suffer from anxiety or depression'. In other words, you and me.

## A great escape

Time for a bike ride. Like all exercise, Radha points out, cycling reduces your levels of the 'stress hormone' cortisol, which is associated with anxiety and a racing

pulse. It also increases your levels of endorphins – your body's natural 'feelgood chemicals' such as serotonin. Some antidepressant drugs increase serotonin levels chemically; well, cycling does it naturally. And of course all that activity can help you spend the dark hours sleeping instead of lying awake with a churning mind.

But cycling has psychological benefits too, beyond what you can get at the gym. On a bike you're in control again, interacting with the real world on your own terms. Every ride feels like an achievement. You can think things through, head cleared by the fresh air – or drift Zen-like into a relaxed, thought-free calm. You can have solitude – or enjoy easy, commitment-free sociability on a group ride. In the middle of a world apparently determined to grind you down, you can create a space you can cope in, even enjoy. 'It improves self-esteem and confidence, and helps look after your body and your mind,' says Radha. And – unlike drugs – you can self-administer it as much, and as often, as you like.

This isn't mere theory, as Cambridge cyclist Andrew Heywood can tell you. Last Christmas, the 27-year-old was getting nervous all the time, 'like you feel before a driving test'. He was sick each morning before going to work, couldn't sleep, lost confidence, and was in a state of what he calls 'permaglum'. The doctor diagnosed depression, and three things happened which brought it under control. Andrew was prescribed some antidepressant drugs to address a chemical imbalance; he received some counselling; and he bought a bike.

'I'd mountain biked as a teenager but stopped,' he says. 'So I bought a new bike and started cycling again. Initially I was happy after a ride, and good for the rest of the day, but then I'd go downhill. After nine months of regular cycling, though, I found my general mood had improved a lot. The more I did it the better I felt. I'm now better able to cope, and less anxious. I wouldn't have recovered as quickly with just the medication



and counselling. Cycling is in my routine now, and I certainly don't intend to stop!' The fact that his girlfriend now has a bike too should do that intention no harm.

### Back to happiness

Someone else who found cycling turned his life around – football writer Bernie Friend – put his story into a book, *Cycling Back to Happiness* (Pen Press, 2007). It's part light-hearted travelogue about doing some of the North Sea Cycle Route, and part serious account of how he tackled his own demons by cycling head-on at them.

Bernie comes across as the sort of no-nonsense bloke you'd enjoy a beer and a joke with after the match, so it's a surprise to hear him talk about his long history of phobias and mental traumas. He suffered long-term travelling anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Trips away from his comfort zone of immediate home filled him with irrational dread and panic attacks. The untimely death of his mother could have sent him over the edge, but he determined to sort himself out. He decided to go on a long cycle trip, despite not having biked since his childhood BMX days.

Bernie chose his route for practical reasons (although it's 6,000km, you can do it in stages), and a psychological one. Wherever he went on the North Sea's perimeter, he felt he was facing home, just over the water. 'At the start, the adrenalin was pumping hard, and I flew through Holland,' he says. He fought off some subsequent panic attacks, and the self-confidence his trip gave him has proved life-changing. That touring solitude started to work some magic: 'the forests, the sand dunes, the sea, the waves – it was all calming and therapeutic, and gave me time to think and work stuff out.'

'It's totally transformed me,' he adds. 'Now I cycle to work every day, a 26-mile round trip from Leigh to Basildon. I love the freedom, the way it allows you to switch off, and to think.' This summer Bernie took an extensive trip to the US, which he could not have even contemplated before he started cycling.

### Better by bike

The old stigma about mental health problems is gradually changing. Talk to your friends and you'll probably find every one has had some sort of

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experiences, either personally or through someone close to them. People such as Andrew and Bernie are happy to talk publicly, so that others don't feel they have to suffer in terrified silence.

But Radha Modgi warns we still have some way to go. Depression is getting more prevalent among the young. 'There's so much pressure on people these days,' she says, 'but no one teaches you about mental fitness, how to cope with stress or anxiety.' Many schools these days seem to be discouraging pupils from cycling, so the way a bike can enhance your mental as well as physical well-being is another reason for fighting that trend.

Radha is a keen cyclist herself, along with her boyfriend. 'I love the sense of freedom it gives you. It's exercise, but doesn't feel like "exercise" – and no matter what else happens that day, if you've been riding, you feel you've achieved something. You can make it part of your lifestyle and keep doing it all your life.'

Cycling is no magic cure for life's reverses. Some common causes of mental breakdown (unemployment, divorce) may need a particular way out (a job, a new relationship); others (progressive illness, bereavement) may have no solution. But at least we know that getting on your bike will make you feel that bit better and more able to cope. Not just today, but in the long term too.

Old, young, tourer, commuter or mountain biker, whatever your age or favourite form of cycling, getting on a bike is just as good for your mental health as it is for your physical health