

Join the club

PSYCHOTHERAPIST SALLY BROWN EXPLAINS WHY WE SHOULD ALL THINK ABOUT GOING 'BACK TO SCHOOL' THIS SEPTEMBER



“Group activities are a wonderful way to boost mental and physical health”



Pick of the best

SIGN UP FOR SINGING

Not only do choir members have a sense of social connectedness, rehearsing for 90 minutes reduces blood pressure and perception of pain, according to recent research. See bigsinging.org or makingmusic.org.uk.

GET CRAFTY

Knitting in a group enhances the release of serotonin, the calming chemical, according to Cardiff University research. Quilting, crochet, jewellery, paper crafts, dressmaking and lacemaking are other popular craft-based groups. See craftscouncil.org.uk for all on offer.

KNOCK ON WOOD

One of the newer clubs to gain popularity is wood carving. Grain and Knot runs wood carving groups in London: grainandknot.com, or visit the Association of Wood Turners of Great Britain's website for a list of wood crafting clubs nationwide: www.awgb.co.uk.

HIT THE ROAD

Cycling has become so popular it's even been called 'the new golf' - there were 15,000 members of British Cycling back in 2005, now there are 125,000. Find out how to join a club or start your own via BritishCycling.org.

What's your favourite TV programme? If it's the Great British Bake Off, the Great British Sewing Bee, or the Great Pottery Throw Down, you're not alone - we can't get enough of them either! But why settle for just watching the contestants make, bake and create when you can do them for yourself? Joining a club has never been more popular. And the good news, is that hobbies aren't just an enjoyable way to spend your leisure time: they're one of the best ways to boost quality of life and improve general wellbeing...

According to studies, happiness levels are boosted by nine per cent for every club you belong to, while being a member of two clubs has been found to be as protective for health as physical exercise. "Retirement is when we often lose the social groups we belonged to at work, making it important that we establish new contacts" says social psychologist Dr Juliet Wakefield. "We risk reducing our mental and physical health when we lose social connections."

There's a dynamic that happens when we connect with a group that can radiate across our whole life, says integrative psychotherapist Hilda Burke (hildaburke.co.uk). "Research shows that churchgoers are 35 per cent more likely to live

longer than non-church goers. But what's interesting is that this applied even to people with no religious convictions - it seems it is simply coming together with a supportive group of like-minded individuals on a weekly basis that conveys the benefits." Even if you're not religious, finding your own 'church', and connecting with a club could be the best investment you make for your long-term health and wellbeing.

It goes without saying that you only get the positive benefits if you feel comfortable with a group. "It sounds obvious, but if you have a hobby or interest, choosing a club based on that increases the likelihood of you meeting people you get on with," says Dr Wakefield. Even though we're hardwired to spend time in groups, joining a new group can give you that 'first day at school feeling', says Burke. "Allow at least two weeks in any group to settle in. If you continue to feel out of place, it may not be the group for you."

While perennial favourites such as the Women's Institute, bowls, Rotary, and birdwatching clubs are still going strong, now there are clubs for just about everything. Not sure where to start? Try Meetup.com to find out what's happening near you and be sure to check out our favourite picks for some inspiration, (see right):



Virtual clubbing

Can't get out or don't have the time to join a club? Connecting online via Twitter or YouTube for example, can bring many of the benefits of feeling part of a community, says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. "The internet is a gateway for interaction that ultimately helps us feel less lonely because it helps us find like-minded people. I have connected with fellow greyhound owners as far away as Chicago and San Francisco on Instagram!", says Hilda.