

Mental Health Mates

MHM Meet-Up Starter Pack

Thanks for showing interest in running a Mental Health Mates (MHM) meet-up!

Bryony Gordon established MHM in February 2016 as a safe space for you to walk and talk about mental health problems **without fear of judgement**.

We're thrilled you'd like to bring MHM to your area; together we can **break the stigma** and support each other.

Please check our 'Walks' page to see if we've previously held a walk near you. If we've already appeared in your area, do email us on hello@mentalhealthmates.co.uk to check if your local walk leader is still active, or to discuss having a separate walk nearby (some cities, like London and Birmingham, have several). In some cases, there will never have been a walk near you. Either way, let's get planning your first meet-up.

What happens at a meet-up?

We base our meet-ups around a walk, with a cup of tea at the start or end of the event (or maybe both!). This is because walking and talking helps us relax, but we know exercise is also great for mental health.

People are welcome to run or jog if they want - we've even had marathon runners join in - but most of us just enjoy walking along and chatting in small groups. The walk route should always be gentle: think trainers or possibly wellies, not walking boots and hiking poles!

Anyone who attends is **welcome to bring family, friends or even their dog for support**. However, most people come alone, so it's important to make everyone feel included. Some will be in a 'good place' with their mental health and others may be struggling, but **the group is open to everyone affected by a mental health condition** – their own, or that of someone close to them.

Planning

Where should I hold my meet-up?

Decide on a location that's easy to find (with good public transport links and possibly signposts), which has a **central meeting point, like a cafe**. Then everyone can get refreshments before and after.

How do I plan a route?

A circular route works best, as anyone who loses sight of the group for any reason can find us again. Our walks tend to



be about a mile - for example, we walk around the Serpentine in Hyde Park. You don't need a complicated or long route, as the aim is to be **accessible for all levels of fitness**. Please aim for a route suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs.

What about dates and times?

We normally pick Sunday mornings or Tuesday evenings, because many people find Sundays lonely (plus there's the 'Sunday night dread' of the week ahead). During the week, most people are working, caring for children and relatives, or attending medical/therapy appointments, so **we save daytime meet-ups for weekends**. Tuesdays work well for weekday evening meet-ups, as people tend to be busy later in the week. **Try to avoid Friday or Saturday evenings** - cafes, pubs and parks will be noisy, and we find turnout is lower.

Please don't organise a weekend morning meet-up before 11:00am. Though most walk attendees live locally, some travel 10-50 miles to get there, relying on public transport. Others may have had sleepless nights due to their mental health issues, so late mornings are better for them.

"Being part of Mental Health Mates has made a big difference and everyone I have met through it has been great."

What happens now I've planned my walk?

- Tell us which **precise location, date and time** you've picked (we normally do Sunday mornings or a Tuesday evening) by sending an email to our dedicated walk leader inbox, hello@mentalhealthmates.co.uk. We'll publicise it on the Mental Health Mates website and on social media, and list you (by first name only) as the walk leader.
- We also like to list an email address for you, with your permission. This means local people with questions about your walk can talk to you directly. **Please tell us if you are happy for us to include your email address in the listing**. Some people choose to create a new, specific email account for MHM, such as mentalhealthmatesnewcastle@gmail.com. You are welcome to do this – again, tell us, so we can add to the event listing.
- **Create a poster in JPEG format** to promote your walk, and email us your design before you distribute it, so we can check for errors and edits. JPEG format is very standard and looks great on social media; unfortunately, **we can't add PDF or PNG files to social media, so we need JPEGs only – files that end in '.jpg'**. We like to use an easy free app called [Canva](#), which has poster templates. [Download our Canva poster guide here](#). Alternatives include Desygner (for Android phone and tablet users) or Microsoft Paint (for computers). Give us a shout if you can't get to grips with the design bit, and we can help.
- **Your poster must include the Mental Health Mates website (mentalhealthmates.co.uk)**, and maybe social channels if there's enough space, so that people can find out what the meet-up involves. We like to mention that it's a peer support group, or we describe it as **'a place to walk and talk without fear of judgement'**.



Please try to avoid using words like 'therapeutic' or 'mindful', which can sound misleading because MHM is not a therapy service.

- **Posters must always be approved by MHM admins.**
- Print your poster and hand copies to local places, such as town halls, libraries, hairdressers, doctors' surgeries, or the cafe where you plan to meet. If you don't have a printer, use one at your local library, or ask a friend.
- As a walk leader, you'll be made an admin on our [Facebook page](#) (provided you have a Facebook account!). You can post about the walk and answer people's questions.
- Walk leaders are part of an organisers' email group, so Bryony and the main admin team can contact every leader at once, should we need to share any updates with you.
- Remember to take it easy; what you are doing is an amazing thing, but don't push yourself. If it feels overwhelming or you feel unable to do the walk, that's totally ok - just let us know ASAP. Most importantly, **do ask for help if you're struggling**: we understand!
- Charge your phone before the meet-up, so you can check social media and emails to know of any last-minute messages (e.g. someone telling you they're running late but still want to join in). Keep an eye on the hashtag [#mentalhealthmates](#).



Anything else I should know?

- We've trialled using [Eventbrite](#) to get people to register for the walk – it's a free service that gives direct contact with those who have RSVP'd. You don't have to use Eventbrite, but it's great if your meet-ups become popular.
- **Walks should always be free to attend, and non-commercial.** Please don't promote a personal business or service on the walk, and don't pick a location that people must pay to enter (such as a stately home or gardens with paid admission).
- Consider buying a few balloons to take to the walk - we use blue star-shaped ones, but any will do. If possible, write 'Mental Health Mates' on the balloons with a permanent marker.



How can I prepare for bad weather?

- We prefer to meet at cafes or bandstands, but if your meeting point is in the open, perhaps arrive with an umbrella or two!
- If the weather's bad, understandably, fewer people might turn up than planned.
- **Keep to the agreed meeting point** until everyone's arrived, then consider moving indoors to a cafe or pub (if this isn't triggering for anyone attending) should the bad weather continue.

On the Day

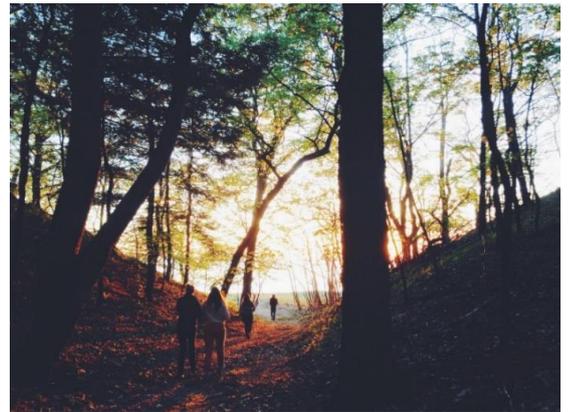
How will I start the meet-up once everyone's arrived?

- You could make a speech about why you're all here, but it doesn't need to be elaborate.
- Run through the rules (see below) to explain how MHM works.

- Ask everyone to **introduce themselves**, saying their name and perhaps a bit of information, such as where they've travelled from, the last program they watched on TV or what they do for a living.
- Hang around in the meeting point for 10 minutes before you start walking, in case anyone's late.

What are the rules of the meet-up?

- MHM must be a **safe space**; what happens at the meet-up stays at the meet-up, and we respect each other's privacy.
- People can choose to talk about their mental health or talk about other things, from what's on TV to current affairs. There is no pressure to discuss your condition, medication or treatment.
- A meet-up is not a therapy session and we are not qualified therapists or medical professionals; **we're an informal peer support group** offering a friendly ear.
- Group leaders or members might like to take a photo of the meet-up, but they can only do this with consent. Anyone who doesn't want to be photographed, or tagged in a photo on social media, must be allowed to opt out.
- People can leave at any time if they feel uncomfortable, as long as they let you know they're leaving.
- The most important thing is that people are up and out. They don't need to share their inner thoughts unless they want to.
- **Congratulate everyone on coming to the walk** - and give yourself a pat on the back!



How does a meet-up finish?

- Try and get people's email addresses, to let them know about upcoming walks. Hopefully you will find people who could help organise the walks when you are busy!
- Thank everyone for coming, and point any non-locals in the right direction to get home.

What if nobody turns up?

- Most meet-ups involve 10-20 people but if only one person turns up, it will be worth it! You can build the group over time.
- Because meet-ups only take 1-1.5 hours and are so important for wellbeing, most people do attend once they've agreed to. However, bear in mind we all have bad days and emergencies that stop us being there.

Any tips for keeping conversation flowing?

- People often open up about their interests, like films, TV, books and hobbies.
- Pets, jobs and family members are also good conversation starters.
- **Use open-ended questions** that can't be answered with a 'yes' or 'no', e.g. 'How far away do you live?' rather than 'Are you local?'.
- If you feel comfortable, share a bit of your own story to make people feel at ease.



- Focus on the local area - ask how well everyone knows it, and if they have any favourite places nearby.
- If someone looks lonely or is separated from the group, make an effort to involve them.

Help - I don't feel up to running the event today - what do I do?

Send us an email ASAP (to bryony@mentalhealthmates.co.uk) and a member of the admin team will be in touch. You can also tweet us ([@findyourwe](https://twitter.com/findyourwe)). We will then spread the word that the event won't go ahead. If you've posted the event on our Facebook page, it's worth commenting to let people know directly.

Don't take it out on yourself if you are unable to run a planned meet-up; **we only ask that you let us know at the earliest opportunity** so we can keep everyone informed.

" If you're in two minds about coming along to a future meet-up, I'd urge you to take a chance and see what it's like."

What happens now the meet-up is over?

- Email hello@mentalhealthmates.co.uk to tell us how it went, in a sentence or two – how many people turned up, if there were any teething problems, if the venue worked well, etc. Brief feedback from every walk means we can continue to improve MHM.
- If you took a group photo you want to share, why not attach it to your email?
- Start planning your next walk! We recommend holding a meet-up **once or twice a month**, but see what works for you and your group. Most walk leaders hold them every six weeks.
- For every future walk, please email the full details for approval to hello@mentalhealthmates.co.uk, followed by your poster in JPEG format. **Each walk needs its own poster**, but you're welcome to reuse a template and just change the dates.

If you have other questions in the planning stages, please email bryony@mentalhealthmates.co.uk.

To tell us about your confirmed walk plans, please email the date, time and location of your walk (and, when it's ready, the JPEG image file of your poster) to hello@mentalhealthmates.co.uk.

We look forward to helping you run your own MHM meet-up soon!



www.mentalhealthmates.co.uk

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/findyourwe> (search @findyourwe)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/918721931544553> (search 'Mental Health Mates')

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/mentalhealthmates> (search @Mentalhealthmates)