

# **PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING IN HEALTH & FITNESS FACILITIES**

A Survey of Fitness Professionals



## INSIDE

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Results
  - 3 Priorities in Theory
  - 4 Priorities in Practice
  - 5 Confidence in Knowledge and Skills
  - 6 Marketing
  - 7 Addressing Mental Health and Well-being
  - 8 Inclusion
  - 9 Partnering and Referrals
  - 10 Staff Training and Certification
  - 11 Programming
- 12 Conclusion



*This resource was created with a generous grant from the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation.*



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the survey was to understand clubs' and fitness professionals' perspectives on:

1. The role of fitness centers in optimizing mental health
2. Knowledge and readiness to address mental health in practice
3. Current practices addressing mental health

### Methods

It was administered to club and studio operators and fitness professionals between November 18, 2021 and December 26, 2021 as a baseline survey. The follow-up survey will be administered in April 2022 and will assess changes in knowledge, awareness, attitudes and perspectives.

The survey was shared via email and social media with IHRSA member clubs, studios, and affiliates, IHRSA U.S. and international partners, and John W. Brick Foundation partners.

The survey results were collected via SurveyMonkey and analyzed in Excel.

Respondents see the importance of being in this space. They prioritize providing integrated physical and mental health offerings as essential to helping people move along their health and wellness journeys.

# RESULTS



**701**  
SURVEY  
RESPONDENTS

## Demographics

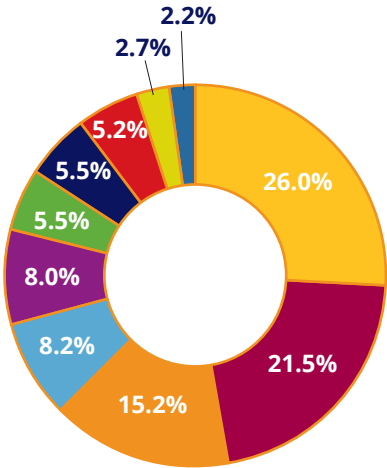


**85%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
ARE BASED IN THE  
UNITED STATES



**15%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
ARE BASED  
INTERNATIONALLY

## Location

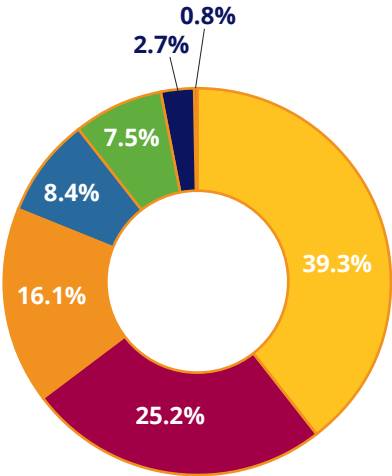


- C-SUITE
- GENERAL MANAGER
- OTHER (CONSULTING, MARKETING, REGIONAL MANAGEMENT, HR, SPORTS INSTRUCTOR)
- GROUP EXERCISE INSTRUCTOR
- FITNESS DIRECTOR
- PERSONAL TRAINER
- ADMINISTRATION
- MEMBER SALES
- PROGRAM DIRECTOR
- ALLIED HEALTHCARE



**47.5%** OF RESPONDENTS  
CAME FROM LEADERSHIP ROLES

## Role



- MULTIPURPOSE FITNESS CENTER
- FITNESS ONLY HEALTH CLUB
- OTHER, INCLUDING UNIVERSITY, MEDICAL FITNESS AND CORPORATE
- NON PROFITS
- STUDIOS (BOUTIQUE, PERSONAL TRAINING)
- SPORTS/ATHLETIC COMPLEXES
- CROSSFIT



**39.3%** OF RESPONDENTS  
CAME FROM MULTI-PURPOSE FACILITIES

## Facility Type



## Priorities in Theory

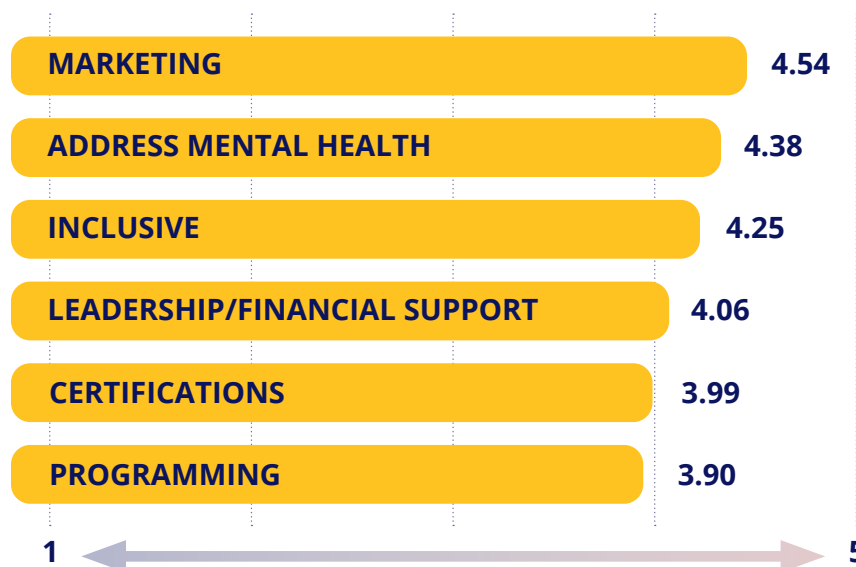
Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1–5, the importance of the following (5 being very important and 1 being not at all important).

### Club operators and fitness professionals think it is **most important** for them to:

1. Highlight the mental health benefits of exercise in **marketing** to prospective members (average 4.54 )
2. **Address** mental, not just physical, health and well-being with clients/members (average 4.38)
3. Take action to make their facilities, programs, and services more **inclusive** of people with mental health diagnoses (for example, anxiety, depression) (average 4.25)

### Club operators and fitness professionals think it is **least important** for them to:

1. Offer targeted **programming** to address mental health conditions like anxiety and depression (average 3.90)
2. Pursue additional **certifications** relevant to mental health and mental illness to improve practice (average 3.99)
3. Have **manager/leadership support** (including financial) in obtaining training and certifications relevant to expanding inclusion of people with and addressing mental health conditions (average 4.06)



## Priorities in Practice

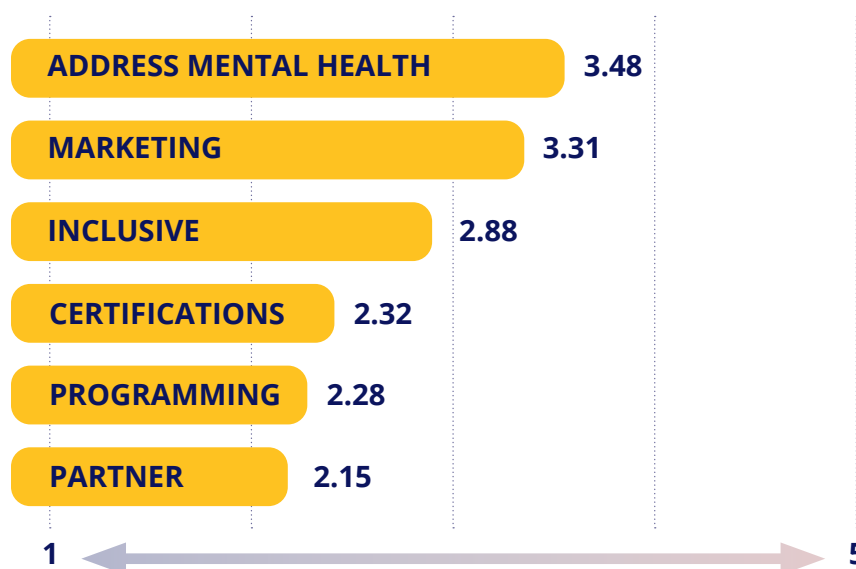
Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1–5, how likely they were to do the following (5 being at least every month and 1 being never).

### Club operators and fitness professionals are most likely to:

1. **Address** mental (and not just physical) health and well-being with clients/members (average 3.48)
2. Highlight the mental health benefits of exercise in **marketing** to prospective members (average 3.31)
3. Pay attention to making programs and services **inclusive** to people with mental health diagnoses (e.g. anxiety, depression) (average 2.88)

### Club operators and fitness professionals are least likely to:

1. **Partner** with mental health practitioners to offer physical activity/exercise programs and services (average 2.15)
2. Offer targeted **programming** to address mental health conditions like anxiety and depression (average 2.28)
3. Pursue additional **certifications** relevant to mental health and illness in order to improve practice (average 2.32)



## Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

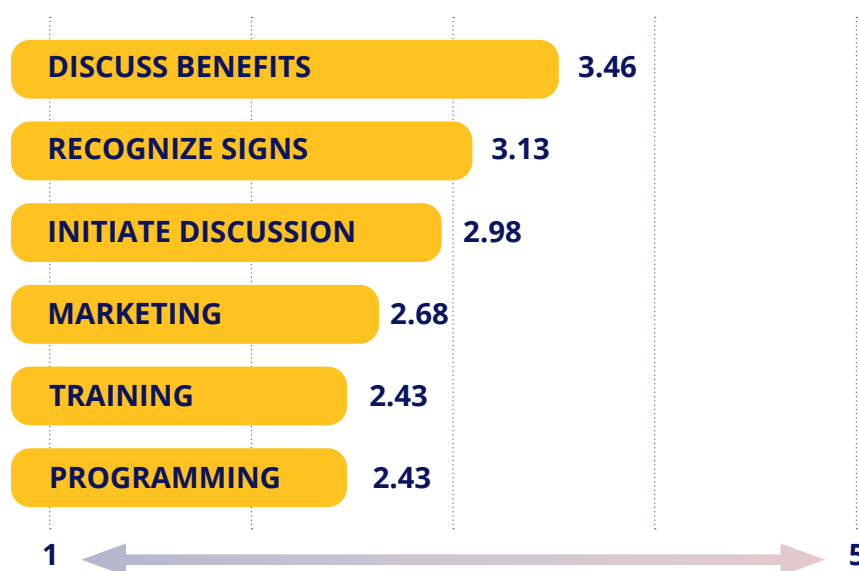
Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1–5, how knowledgeable they were about the following (5 being expert and 1 being not at all knowledgeable).

### Club operators and fitness professionals feel most confident in their knowledge and skills to:

1. **Discuss** the benefits of physical activity/exercise and the connection between mental health with members and prospective members (average 3.46)
2. **Recognize** the signs and symptoms of common mental health conditions including depression and anxiety (average 3.13)
3. Initiate a **discussion** about mental health with our members and clients (average 2.98)

### Club operators and fitness professionals feel least confident in their knowledge and skills to:

1. Design an effective exercise **program** for someone with anxiety or depression (average 2.43)
2. **Train** or coach a client with a mental illness (average 2.43)
3. **Market** or promote myself or my facility as an effective option to help people address mental health through exercise (average 2.68)





## Marketing

### Priorities in Theory

Club operators and fitness professionals place the highest importance on marketing over addressing mental health and well-being with clients/members (#2), inclusion (#3), partnering (#4), training and certifications (#5, #6) or programming (#7). Just over 90% (90.4%) of respondents say that it is very important (65.8%) or moderately important (24.6%) for fitness centers to highlight the mental health benefits of exercise in marketing to prospective members.

**90.4%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT IT IS  
IMPORTANT TO  
MARKET THE MENTAL  
HEALTH BENEFITS  
OF EXERCISE

### Priorities in Practice

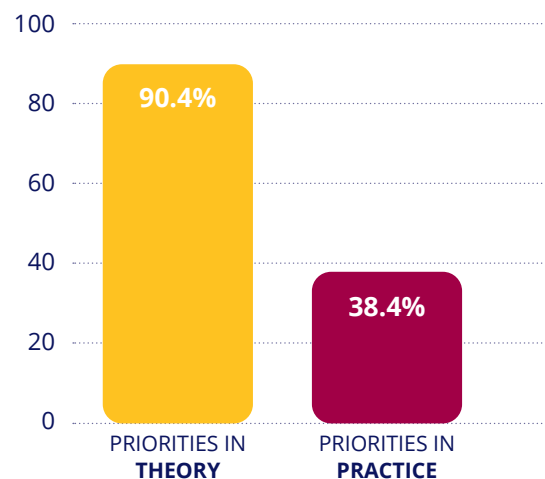
Yet, less than half (45.2%) of respondents report that they highlight the mental health benefits of exercise in marketing to prospective members at least every month (19.0%) or many times a year (26.2%). Moreover, almost a quarter (22.8%) report that they never (10.9%) do it, or maybe once a year (11.9%). Overall, only 38.4% of respondents report that they or their facilities market or promote themselves as an effective option to help people address mental health through exercise.

**45.2%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT THEIR FACILITY  
HIGHLIGHTS THE  
MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS  
OF EXERCISE IN MARKETING  
TO PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS  
AT LEAST EVERY MONTH  
OR MANY TIMES A YEAR

### Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

Over 40% (43.6%) of club operators and fitness professionals have little confidence in their knowledge and skills to market or promote themselves as an effective option to help people address mental health, with respondents reporting it is not true (24.2%) or a little true (19.4%) that they have the knowledge and skills.

**43.6%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
HAVE LITTLE  
CONFIDENCE IN THEIR  
KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS  
TO MARKET THEMSELVES  
AS AN EFFECTIVE OPTION  
TO HELP PEOPLE ADDRESS  
MENTAL HEALTH



## Addressing Mental Health and Well-being

### Priorities in Theory

Club operators and fitness professionals place the second highest importance, after marketing, on addressing mental health and well-being with clients/members. Almost 85% of respondents think that it is very important (59.0%) or moderately important (25.7%) that fitness professionals do so.

**85%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT IT IS  
IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS  
MENTAL HEALTH AND  
WELL-BEING WITH  
CLIENTS/MEMBERS

### Priorities in Practice

Although clubs are more likely to address mental health and well-being with clients/members than any other practice, only slightly more than half (53.0%) of respondents report that they do so at least every month (23.7%) or many times a year (29.3%). Moreover, 19.2% report that they never (9.2%) do it, or maybe once a year (10.0%).

**53%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT THEY ADDRESS  
MENTAL HEALTH AND  
WELL-BEING WITH  
CLIENTS/MEMBERS AT  
LEAST EVERY MONTH  
OR MANY TIMES A YEAR

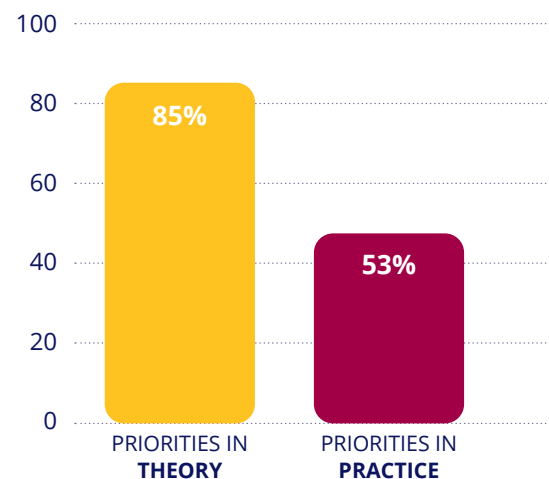
### Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

Club operators and fitness professionals have the highest confidence in their knowledge and skills to discuss the benefits of physical activity/exercise and the connection between mental health with members and prospective members. Over half (54.5%) of respondents report being expert (14.7%) or very knowledgeable (39.8%).

**54.5%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
HAVE THE HIGHEST  
CONFIDENCE IN THEIR  
KNOWLEDGE AND  
SKILLS TO DISCUSS THE  
BENEFITS OF EXERCISE AND  
THE CONNECTION WITH  
MENTAL HEALTH

In contrast, club operators and fitness professionals have little confidence in their knowledge and skills to train or coach a client with a mental illness. Only about a quarter (24.3%) report being expert (4.7%) or very knowledgeable (19.6%).

**24.3%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
HAVE LITTLE  
CONFIDENCE IN THEIR  
KNOWLEDGE AND  
SKILLS TO TRAIN OR  
COACH A CLIENT WITH  
MENTAL ILLNESS







## Inclusion

### Priorities in Theory

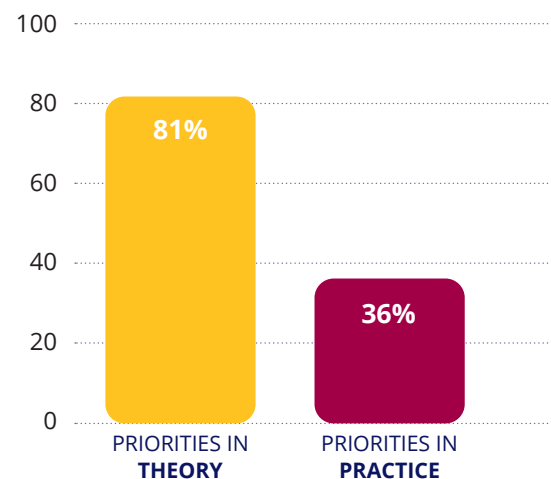
Club operators and fitness professionals place the third highest importance on inclusion. 81% of respondents think that it is very important (52.4%) or moderately important (26.9%) that fitness centers take action to make their facilities, programs, and services more inclusive of people with mental health diagnoses (for example, anxiety, depression).

**81%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT IT IS IMPORTANT  
THAT FITNESS CENTERS  
TAKE ACTION TO MAKE THEIR  
FACILITIES, PROGRAMS,  
AND SERVICES MORE  
INCLUSIVE OF PEOPLE WITH  
MENTAL ILLNESS

### Priorities in Practice

However, only about a third (36.0%) of respondents report that they pay attention to making programs and services inclusive to people with mental health diagnoses (e.g. anxiety, depression) at least every month (16.8%) or many times a year (19.2%). Moreover, 41% report that they never (23.5%) do it, or maybe once a year (17.5%).

**36%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT THEY PAY  
ATTENTION TO MAKING  
PROGRAMS AND SERVICES  
INCLUSIVE TO PEOPLE  
WITH MENTAL ILLNESS AT  
LEAST EVERY MONTH



## Partnering and Referrals

### Priorities in Theory

Almost three-quarters (74.1%) of respondents think that it is either very important (46.8%) or moderately important (27.3%) that fitness centers work more closely with mental health practitioners to offer physical activity/exercise programs and services.

**74.1%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
SAY THAT IT IS  
IMPORTANT THAT  
FITNESS CENTERS WORK  
MORE CLOSELY WITH  
MENTAL HEALTH  
PRACTITIONERS

### Priorities in Practice

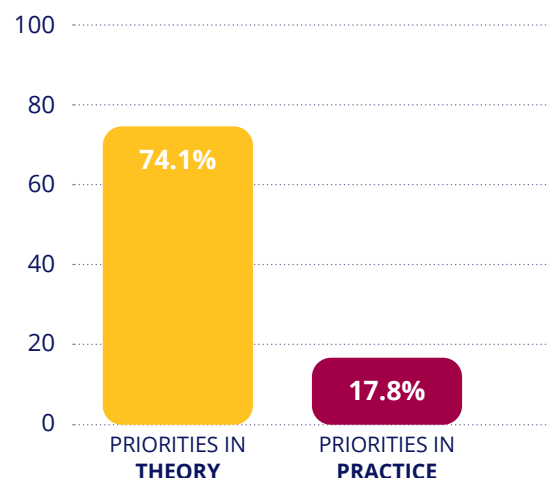
Yet, only 17.8% of respondents report that they work with mental health practitioners to offer physical activity/exercise programs and services at least every month (7.8%) or many times a year (10.0%). Moreover, almost two-thirds (65.8%) report that they either never (44.5%) do it, or maybe once a year (21.3%). Overall, only 28.9% of respondents report that they or their facility have a relationship or partnership with a medical or healthcare professional specializing in mental health.

**17.8%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
REPORT THAT THEY WORK  
WITH MENTAL HEALTH  
PRACTITIONERS AT  
LEAST EVERY MONTH OR  
MANY TIMES A YEAR

### Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

41.5% of all club operators and fitness professionals have little confidence in their knowledge and skills to establish a relationship or partnership with a medical or healthcare professional specializing in mental health, with respondents reporting it is either not true (22.1%) or a little true (19.4%) that they have the knowledge and skills. About a third (33.8%) of club operators and fitness professionals have little confidence in their knowledge and skills to recognize when they need to refer a client to a mental health professional and how to make that referral, with respondents reporting it is not true (17.4%) or a little true (16.4%) that they have the knowledge and skills.

**41.5%**  
**OF RESPONDENTS**  
HAVE LITTLE  
CONFIDENCE IN THEIR  
KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS  
TO ESTABLISH A RELATIONSHIP  
OR PARTNERSHIP WITH  
A MEDICAL OR HEALTHCARE  
PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIZING  
IN MENTAL HEALTH



## Staff Training and Certification

### Priorities in Theory

Although club operators and fitness professionals rank training and certification as second to last in importance, a total of 69.2% of respondents think that it is either very important (42.1%) or moderately important (27.1%) that fitness professionals pursue additional certifications relevant to mental health and mental illness to improve practice. The numbers are comparable for manager and leadership support (including financial) of staff in obtaining training and certifications relevant to expanding inclusion of people with and addressing mental health conditions.

**69.2%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
SAY THAT IT IS  
IMPORTANT THAT  
FITNESS PROFESSIONALS  
PURSUE ADDITIONAL  
CERTIFICATIONS RELEVANT  
TO MENTAL HEALTH

### Priorities in Practice

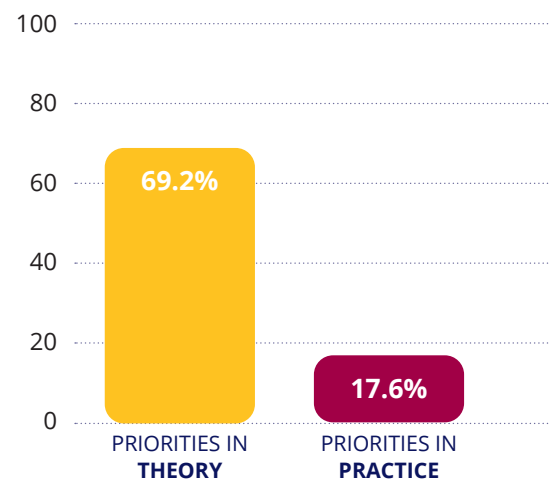
Only 17.6% of all respondents report that they pursue additional certifications relevant to mental health and illness in order to improve practice at least every month (7.6%) or many times a year (10.0%). Moreover, 61.7% report that they either never (31.7%) do it, or maybe once a year (30.0%). The numbers are comparable for manager and leadership support (including financial) of staff in obtaining training and certifications relevant to expanding inclusion of people with and addressing mental health conditions.

**17.6%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
PURSUE ADDITIONAL  
CERTIFICATIONS RELEVANT  
TO MENTAL HEALTH AT  
LEAST EVERY MONTH

### Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

87.2% of respondents report that they would be interested in mental health training as a fitness professional, with 40.1% interested in basic training, 17.6% interested in advanced training, and 29.5% interested in becoming a specialist.

**87.2%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
REPORT THAT THEY WOULD  
BE INTERESTED IN  
MENTAL HEALTH  
TRAINING AS A FITNESS  
PROFESSIONAL



## Programming

### Priorities in Theory

Club operators and fitness professionals place the least importance on programming. Still, two-thirds (66.3%) of respondents think that it is either very important (38.3%) or moderately important (28.0%) that fitness centers offer targeted programming to address mental health conditions like anxiety and depression.

**66.3%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
SAY THAT IT IS  
IMPORTANT THAT  
FITNESS CENTERS OFFER  
TARGETED PROGRAMMING  
TO ADDRESS MENTAL  
HEALTH CONDITIONS

### Priorities in Practice

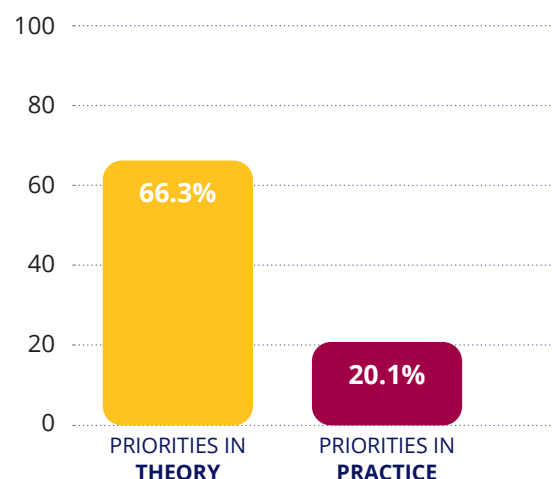
Only 20.1% of respondents report that they offer targeted programming to address mental health conditions like anxiety and depression either at least every month (8.7%) or many times a year (11.4%). Moreover, almost two-thirds (62.0%) report that they either never (38.3%) do it, or maybe once a year (23.7%).

**20.1%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
REPORT THAT THEY OFFER  
TARGETED PROGRAMMING  
TO ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH  
CONDITIONS AT LEAST  
EVERY MONTH

### Confidence in Knowledge and Skills

Half (50.6%) of club operators and fitness professionals have little confidence in their knowledge and skills to design an effective exercise program for someone with anxiety or depression, with respondents reporting it is either not true (28.3%) or a little true (22.3%) that they have the knowledge and skills.

**50.6%**  
OF RESPONDENTS  
HAVE LITTLE CONFIDENCE  
IN THEIR KNOWLEDGE  
AND SKILLS TO DESIGN  
AN EFFECTIVE EXERCISE  
PROGRAM FOR SOMEONE  
WITH ANXIETY OR  
DEPRESSION





## Conclusion

### Thoughts vs. Actions

There is a large disconnect between what club operators and fitness professionals think is important for them to do to address mental health and well-being in a club-based setting, and what they actually do. This disconnect is particularly pronounced with partnering and programming. Three-quarters of respondents think it is important to partner with mental health professionals, but two-thirds almost never do it. Similarly, two-thirds of respondents think targeted programming is important, but only 20% offer it.

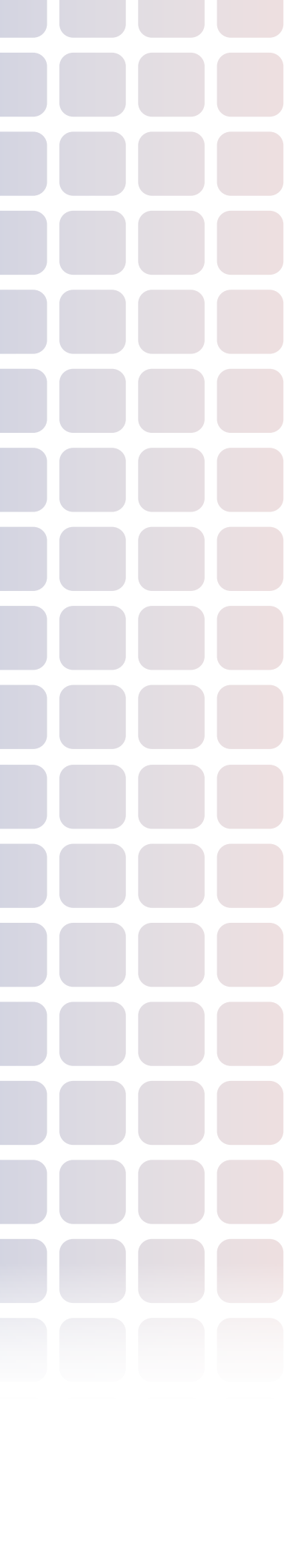
### Confidence is Key

Club operators and fitness professionals have the most confidence in their knowledge and skills to talk about mental health and well-being with clients/members. However, they have the least confidence in their knowledge and skills to turn talk into action with programming, training or marketing. This is particularly true of working with members with more severe mental illness, designing program content, or marketing themselves as effective in helping people address mental health

“We do our best to be genuine and discuss how exercise affects how we feel, why we keep doing it, and how it has helped us. It’s about being fearless and vulnerable. This allows us to show that we are human and have human issues.”

— CROSSFIT OWNER





through exercise. Knowledge and skills can be acquired—and confidence to use them can be bolstered—with training and certification. There is a strong appetite for training and certification, as almost 90% of respondents said they would like training and/or certification.

### **Staffing and Training Concerns**

There are many perceived staffing and training challenges with moving into this space. Club operators and fitness professionals cite barriers such as finding the right people with the right qualifications, training staff to recognize mental health issues and to know when and how to refer to the appropriate experts, and accessing ongoing training through continuing education. They also cite concerns about working within scope of practice and liability.

### **Potential Entry Points**

Those seeking to move into this space see discussing the mental and physical health benefits of exercise with clients/ members and prospective members as an entry point. The discussions can take place informally as part of classes or sessions, or more formally in marketing and promotional materials. Again, club operators and fitness professionals cite concerns about having the requisite training to design evidence-based program content themselves.

### **The Importance of Being in the Mental Health and Wellness Space**

Despite the perceived challenges, respondents do see the importance of being in this space. They see it as a critical role for clubs, part of building an inclusive environment within the club. They view fitness professionals playing an important role in normalizing and destigmatizing mental health. Finally, they prioritize providing integrated physical and mental health offerings as essential to helping people move along their health and wellness journeys.

“I think our role is to provide support to people with mental health issues and to partner with their doctors and mental health specialists to do our best to make the environment conducive to helping our clients improve their overall wellness.”

— A GROUP EXERCISE INSTRUCTOR





Special thanks to the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation for their support of this project, the health clubs and studios who were interviewed for the case studies, IHRSA and John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation partners for helping publicize this survey, and all of the fitness industry professionals who participated in the survey.

To learn more about the John W. Brick Mental Health Foundation, visit [johnwbrickfoundation.org](http://johnwbrickfoundation.org).



#### About the IHRSA Foundation

The IHRSA Foundation's mission is to promote health through exercise.

[ihrsafoundation.org](http://ihrsafoundation.org)

[foundation@ihrsa.org](mailto:foundation@ihrsa.org)