

WWE CHAMP AND HOLLYWOOD HEAVYWEIGHT DWAYNE JOHNSON GETS FULL RESPECT FOR OPENING UP ABOUT HIS MENTAL HEALTH, BUT WHAT CAN HIS STORY TEACH US ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL FITNESS AND MENTAL STRENGTH? **HFM INVESTIGATES...**

WORDS **ROISÍN DERVISH-O'KANE**

When you picture 'depression' the last thing you see is 118kg of heavyweight wrestling, champion-grade dude. But on a recent episode of Oprah Winfrey's *Master Class*, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson opened up about his past struggles. 'With depression, I found one of the most important things to remember is that you are not alone,' the 43-year-old told Winfrey.

Now, he may be worth \$160 million, have multiple box office smashes and nine WWE heavyweight champion titles to his name. But rewind 20 years, and Johnson was holed up in his parent's flat, having a rough time. The then-aspiring American football player had just been cut from his new team, the Calgary Stampeders due to injury, and was struggling with the failure. But he found his motivation. 'After a month and a half of staying in that room, I got a call,' he says – it was a request to re-join the team. But, as he told his father, pro wrestler Rocky Johnson, the 23-year-old had a new plan. 'My gut tells me I'm done. I want to get into the business...will you train me?'"

The rest, as they say, is history. If you're lost as to the significance of Johnson talking about his quarter-life crisis, it's time for some statistics. Suicide is now the biggest killer of men under 45 in the UK, claiming the lives of around 5000 annually. 'The solution, in part, lies with those who can confront



THE ROCK BEATS THE BLUES



The Rock takes on John Cena

// DEPRESSION IS A REAL ILLNESS – YOU CAN'T JUST SNAP OUT OF IT //

traditional male stereotypes,' said BBC journalist Simon Jack, in his 2015 *Panorama* investigation. And he's right: although half as many men as women report experiencing depression globally, the numbers suggest that for thousands of guys, the illness is going unreported and untreated until it becomes unbearable. While more people are accepting that depression is – as the NHS website states: *A real illness...not a sign of weakness or something you can 'snap out of'* – stigma remains. As one of the most masculine men on the planet, just by admitting to depression, Johnson delivers a metaphorical slam-dunk to the idea that 'real' men are emotionally indestructible.

Johnson's story also illustrates the potentially game-changing impact that harnessing our physical fitness can have on our mental health. Science says you don't need the physique of a quarterback-turned WWE champ either. 'If we could put physical activity in a pill, it would be prescribed to every depressed patient that walks through the door,' says Professor Greg Whyte,



former Olympic heptathlete, professor in applied sport and exercise science at Liverpool John Moores University and author of *Achieve The Impossible* (Bantam Press, £12.99). A 2013 paper backs him up, concluding that 25 of the 30 studies analysed show that exercise is linked with a reduced risk of subsequent depression. Recent research from Sweden even found that workouts function like a 'depression detox': purging the blood of a substance we accumulate during stress, which can harm the brain. But the benefits of exercise on our mental health go far beyond the post-workout buzz. 'It's a complex bio-psycho-social response,' says Professor Whyte. 'Yes, endorphins give us the exercise high, but as we invariably exercise with other people, we benefit socially, and the goal-setting we

INTERVIEW THE ROCK

THREE WAYS TO BEAT THE BLUES

DON'T FIGHT UNCOMFORTABLE THOUGHTS

'Let it pass,' says William Pullen*, psychotherapist and creator of Dynamic Running Therapy. 'Mindfulness gets you out of your head and into your surroundings. Look at the trees, focus on your breathing or run your hands across a carpet.'

BREAK THE CYCLE

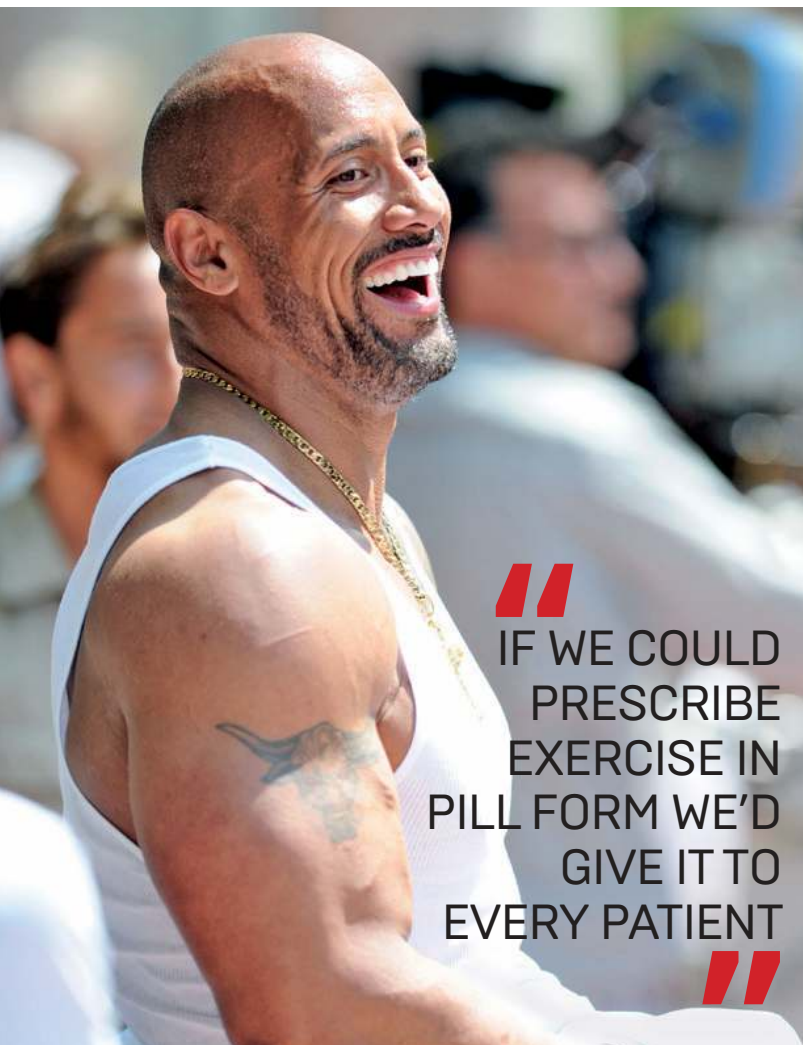
'As a man, your body is primed for a challenge,' says Pullen. 'Depression happens when you stop moving, so find something that puts you back in your body,' he adds. 'List six things you haven't done, with the first being something you've always wanted to do, working up to a real challenge. Do all of them and you'll get a breakthrough.'

RUN THROUGH IT

Dynamic Running Therapy (DRT) fuses talk therapy with running, and Pullen, its creator, regularly offers sessions in London's Hyde Park. Got a mate in need? Use DIY DRT principles: plan an hour-long run, let them set the pace, and offer questions, not opinions. May be a factor in a game of Fifa afterward, to reset the bro-quilibrium.

*VISIT WILLIAMPULLENPSYCHOTHERAPIST.COM





“ IF WE COULD PRESCRIBE EXERCISE IN PILL FORM WE’D GIVE IT TO EVERY PATIENT ”

THREE RULES FOR BALANCED TRAINING



DON'T THINK MORE = BETTER

Overtraining can lead to burnout. 'There is a tipping point, where too much physical pressure has a 'maladaptive response', causing too much stress and injury. This can also happen with psychological pressure in pre-disposed individuals,' says Whyte.



DO BE WISE TO 'BIGOREXIA'

Muscle dysmorphia affects one in 10 men in UK gyms, recent reports say. According to the NHS this belief where men think they aren't big enough may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. 'If someone repeatedly cancel on other areas of their life to train, then that's a warning sign,' says Roberts.*



DON'T FOLLOW #FITSP0

You know the formula: profound quote at top some shiny abs. 'I bet it makes most guys feel like shit,' says Roberts. 'It reduces fitness down to an image and says if you're strong, you can get there – but if you can't, you're a loser,' he adds.

do around physical activity is beneficial for our psychological health,' he adds. This could be anything from completing a HIIT class to – if you are battling depression – simply going for a walk. 'Having a goal that you want to achieve gives you focus, and from that, you have the ability to redefine yourself in a positive way,' he continues. After his

setback, Johnson reinvented himself from jilted quarterback to aspiring pro-wrestler, but you can bet he didn't get there overnight. To nail your own return to form, Professor Whyte suggests setting mini challenges that are tough, yet doable. 'It's important to keep the big picture in mind, but by celebrating these short-term goals, you will create an understanding

of yourself as a successful person,' Professor Whyte explains.

To build both brain and body, think like an athlete. 'We'll be happier if we focus on the athletic, not the aesthetic,' says star trainer Dan Roberts. He advises you focus on a performance objective, like lifting 50kg, which could also help regulate anxiety, a US study found.

One of the most empowering things you can do – even if you've no intention of stepping in the ring – is to cultivate your fighting strength. 'Guys really get something out of martial arts training. Knowing you can handle yourself lends a certain confidence,' says Roberts.

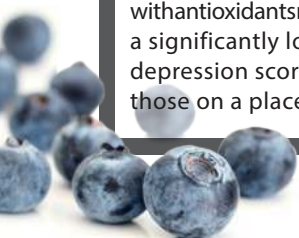
Ideal then, if your ego has taken a bruising. 'Pride isn't always a brilliant emotion, but if you are feeling like shit, connecting to it really helps in getting back to normal,' he says. You will need patience, too. 'If you haven't been to the gym in ages, do five press-ups and see how you feel. Then work up to 10,' says Roberts. 'This isn't about PBs.' As the big man himself says: 'Have faith, and on the other side of your pain is something good.' Rock-solid words (sorry) from a man who's been there. **HFM**

YOUR MOOD-BOOSTING DAY ON A PLATE

7.30 AM BREAKFAST

ADD: BERRIES

Blueberries, raspberries and strawberries are packed with antioxidants. In a study published in the *Journal Of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine*, patients who were retreated with antioxidants reported a significantly lower depression score than those on a placebo.



12:30 PM: LUNCH

ADD: OILY FISH

Men on a fish-rich diet saw a 20% reduction in depression risk, a Chinese study found. Researchers believe that the omega-3 fatty acids in fish may alter the microstructure of brain membranes, modifying the activity of neurotransmitters involved in depression: dopamine and serotonin.



7.30 PM: DINNER

ADD: TURMERIC

Participants in a Chinese study who supplemented for six weeks had a lower depression score, reduced inflammation in the brain, and lowered cortisol, reports the *Journal Of Clinical Psychopharmacology*. The active ingredient curcumin is thought to boost mood.

