Dr Tom Ainsworth’s recent research utilises behaviour design theory to encourage beneficial exercise amongst patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). At the intersection of a number of disciplines, including design, social psychology and healthcare, his research seeks to enable the development of design interventions that influence a person’s attitude or behaviour for the benefit of their health.

The research identifies ‘designable factors’ – ideas, objects, and environments (virtual and real), which are specific to people with RA. These can then be understood and selectively influenced to increase the ability and willingness of patients to engage with long-term therapeutic exercise recommendations. Dr Ainsworth’s work also explores existing motivations and interests in the activities of daily life that can be targeted to incorporate therapeutic exercise interventions.

The study demonstrates that traditional approaches to design that focus primarily on ‘desirability’, ‘inclusivity’ and ‘mass market’ are not, in their current form, adequate to address the complex health needs of modern society. His research argues for design innovations that integrate health into everyday life and promote resilience in health, enabling people to live longer, happier lives, and reduce the need for long-term assistance and support.

Through his research, Dr Ainsworth aims to increase the integration of objects and environments that encourage healthy activities into the home, the workplace and social spaces through the development of new business models and design values. The growing impact of his ideas has nurtured close collaborations with colleagues at Brighton and Sussex Medical School and Arthritis Research UK, in addition to co-developing new projects with a range of external partners including the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art and the Design Council UK.