

8 LIFESTYLE CHANGES THAT CAN IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

Human beings are holistic and connected. Mental health and physical health impact on each other. Most of the lifestyle changes that can improve our bodies will also help our minds and we can all benefit from knowing about them.

1. Exercise: It's not only the cheapest antidepressant but it lowers the risk of depression happening in the first place. Regular exercise improves school academic performance at one end of the age scale and reduces the risk of memory loss at the other. Some is good, more is better.



2. Nutrition: A rainbow diet of multi-coloured fruit and vegetables that includes oily fish and watches the calories — your granny was right when she told you fish is brain food. Fish oil supplements, and possibly vitamin D, may add benefit (check with your pharmacist if you take prescription medication).

3. Nature: Exposure to the outdoors, natural sounds (including silence), sunlight (as opposed to artificial lighting) and fresh air, can all reduce stress and ameliorate or prevent depression. Just getting out of the office for a short walk is better than staying cooped up all day.

4. Relationships: Human beings are hard-wired to be sociable. Spending more time with family and friends and widening social group contacts tends to improve happiness and quality of life. Conversely, social isolation increases the risk of mental and physical ill health. We don't yet know enough about the impact of social media relationships to judge how well these can replace face-to-face contacts.



5. Recreation: Resurrect an old hobby or try something new. If it's an outdoor activity all the better but what matters is that it engages your concentration and intellect. Channel surfing with the TV remote does not qualify.

6. Relaxation and stress management: Anything from basic muscle relaxation techniques through to yoga and meditation may be what does it for you. Go to a class or teach yourself — there is plenty of self-help material out there. It will work best if you use it regularly.



7. Caring and service: Altruistic behaviour such as voluntary work is positively associated with improved psychological wellbeing. In helping others, we help ourselves, provided the level of care input is sustainable.

8. Openness about mental health: Mental ill health is common but remains stigmatised in our society. We are all at risk of being affected. Recognising when problems are starting, seeking help early and being receptive to the mental health needs of those around us benefits everyone.

