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FIVE STEPS TO MENTAL WELLBEING

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Scientific evidence points to five steps that we can take to improve our mental wellbeing. If you give them a try, you may feel happier, more positive and able to get the most from your life.

Your mental health is important. Some mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, are common. If you have such an illness, it's important to get the right treatment..

However, there's more to good mental health than avoiding or treating mental illness. There is also positive mental wellbeing.

This article explains:

- What is mental wellbeing?
- The five steps to mental wellbeing

Why is mental wellbeing important? First, we all want to feel good about ourselves and the world around us, and be able to get the most from our lives.

There is also evidence that good mental wellbeing is important for our physical health, and that it can help us achieve the goals we set for ourselves.

What is mental wellbeing?

Sarah Stewart-Brown, professor of public health at the University of Warwick and a wellbeing expert, says that when we talk about mental wellbeing, we mean more than just happiness.

"It's useful to start with the idea that overall wellbeing involves both the mind and the body. And we know that physical and mental wellbeing are closely related," she says.

"Of course, feeling happy is a part of mental wellbeing. But it is far from the whole. There is a deeper kind of wellbeing, which is about living in a way that is good for you and good for others around you.

"Feelings of contentment, enjoyment, confidence and engagement with the world are all a part of mental wellbeing. Self-esteem and self-confidence are, too. So is a feeling that you can do the things you want to do. And so are good relationships, which bring joy to you and those around you.

"Of course, good mental wellbeing does not mean that you never experience feelings or situations that you find difficult. But it does mean that you feel you have the resilience to cope when times are tougher than usual."

Mental wellbeing can take many different forms, but a useful description is feeling good and functioning well.

Wellbeing and society

Over the last 50 years, we in Britain have become richer. Despite this, evidence from population surveys – in which people were asked to rate their own happiness or mental wellbeing – shows that mental wellbeing has not improved.

This suggests that many of the things we often think will improve our mental wellbeing – such as more possessions, more money to spend or expensive holidays – on their own do not lead to a lasting improvement in the way we feel about ourselves and our lives.

The message is clear: it's time to rethink wellbeing.



Evidence and wellbeing

Over the last 20 years, new evidence has emerged about what really causes lasting improvements to mental wellbeing.

"Some of this evidence comes from observational studies in which scientists look at the behaviour and wellbeing of certain sections of the population," says Professor Stewart-Brown. "Other evidence comes from trials in which scientists take a group of people and ask them to change their behaviour or participate in a treatment or other intervention, such as an exercise programme, and then watch what happens to their wellbeing."

To gain evidence on wellbeing, scientists have to find ways to measure it. Often, they measure wellbeing using a series of questions that ask subjects how they feel about themselves, their lives and the world around them. Find out how happy you are: use our interactive Wellbeing self-assessment tool.

Wellbeing in your life

Many factors influence our wellbeing. Evidence shows that the actions we take and the way we think have the biggest impact.

It can help to think about "being well" as something you do, rather than something you are. The more you put in, the more you are likely to get out.

"The first thing you can do for your own wellbeing is become curious about it," says Professor Stewart-Brown.

"Start to think about what you've done in the past to promote mental wellbeing, and whether it worked. Then think about new things that you can try.

"Remember, no-one can give wellbeing to you. It's you who has to take action."

Five steps to mental wellbeing

Evidence suggests there are five steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

If you approach them with an open mind and try them out, you can judge the results yourself.

- connect – connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Spend time developing these relationships. When it comes to wellbeing, other people matter. Evidence shows that good relationships – with family, friends and the wider community – are important for mental wellbeing.

Building stronger, broader social connections in your life can increase your feelings of happiness and self-worth.

Many of us would like to spend more time with people who are important to us. Sometimes, having a busy life can make this difficult.

But evidence shows that our relationships affect both our physical health and mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing means feeling good – about ourselves and the world around us – and functioning well.

Nurturing our relationships can help us feel happier and more secure, and can give us a greater sense of purpose. That makes investing in relationships one of the five evidence-based steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

How relationships can help our wellbeing

Human beings are social animals, and our relationships with other people matter to us.





Several studies suggest that good relationships are associated with positive mental wellbeing. For example, a 2002 study of 222 students in the US found that the happiest among the group had stronger social relationships than those who were less happy.

Strong relationships with family and friends can allow us to share our feelings and know that we are understood. They provide an opportunity to share positive experiences, and can give us emotional support, as well as the chance to support others.

Relationships help build a sense of belonging and self-worth. There's also evidence that wellbeing can be passed on through relationships, so that being around people with strong mental wellbeing can improve your own mental wellbeing.

Build relationships for wellbeing

Taking time to strengthen and broaden relationships is good for your wellbeing, and good for the wellbeing of the other people involved.

Building relationships for wellbeing means:

- strengthening your relationships with people who are close to you, such as family and friends
- broadening your relationships in your community and the wider world

There are many ways to build stronger and closer relationships:

- Make time each day to spend with your family. This might include "family time" that is fixed each day, or time that you find around other commitments.
- Arrange a day out with friends you haven't seen for a while.
- Switch off the TV tonight and play a game with the children, or just talk.
- Speak to someone new today.
- Have lunch with a colleague.
- Visit a friend or family member who needs support or company.
- Volunteer at a local school, hospital or community group. This is also a way of giving your time.
- Friends of the Elderly needs volunteers to help out with its day centres, befriending services and activities in care homes, and to get involved in its Be a Friend campaign.
- Be active – you don't have to go to the gym. Take a walk, go cycling or play a game of football. Find the activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life.

Being active is great for your physical health and fitness. But evidence shows that it can also improve your mental wellbeing.

We think that the mind and body are separate. But what you do with your body can have a powerful effect on your mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing means feeling good – both about yourself and about the world around you. It means being able to get on with life in the way that you want.

Evidence shows that there is a link between being physically active and good mental wellbeing. That makes being active one of the five evidence-based steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

Being active doesn't mean you need to spend hours in the gym, if that doesn't appeal to you. Find physical activities that you enjoy and think about how to fit more of them into your daily life.

How physical activity can help your mental wellbeing

Scientists think that physical activity helps maintain and improve wellbeing in a number of ways.

Physical activity can help people with mild depression. Evidence shows that it can also help protect people against depression and anxiety.

Physical activity is thought to cause chemical changes in the brain, which can help to positively change our mood.



Some scientists think that being active can help improve wellbeing because it brings about a sense of greater self-esteem, self-control and the ability to rise to a challenge.

How you can get more active

If you want to get active, think about physical activity in the broadest sense.

It can help to read the physical activity guidelines for adults.

Adults aged 19 and over should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity – such as fast walking or cycling – a week.

Find activities that you enjoy, then make them a part of your life.

There's lots of information and advice on NHS Choices to help you get active.

- Find activity ideas in Get fit for free.
- Start running with our Couch to 5K podcasts.
- Find activities that are right for you with our interactive Sport and fitness tool.
- Find out how to start running, swimming, cycling and dancing in Exercise: getting started.
- There is lots more information and advice on getting active in Health and fitness.
- Keep learning – learning new skills can give you a sense of achievement and a new confidence. So why not sign up for that cooking course, start learning to play a musical instrument, or figure out how to fix your bike.

Learning new skills can be useful, but it can also positively affect our mental wellbeing. It doesn't have to mean getting more qualifications. There are many ways to bring learning into your life.

Many of us associate learning with childhood or our student days. As adults, it can seem as though we have less time or need to learn new things.

But evidence shows that continuing to learn throughout life can help improve and maintain our mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing means feeling good – about yourself and the world around you – and being able to get on with life in the way you want.



Learning can boost self-confidence and self-esteem, help build a sense of purpose, and help us connect with others.

That makes learning one of the five evidence-based steps that we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

How learning can help your wellbeing

Some studies have shown that learning throughout life is associated with greater satisfaction and optimism, and improved ability to get the most from life.

For example, in a 2004 study, 145 adults were interviewed about learning throughout life and various aspects of their health and wellbeing. The study found that people who involved themselves in more learning reported feeling higher self-esteem and a greater ability to cope with stress. They also reported more feelings of self-confidence, hope and purpose.

Some scientists think that setting goals and working towards them plays an important role in the way learning influences wellbeing. Setting targets and hitting them can create positive feelings of accomplishment and achievement.

Many forms of learning involve being around and interacting with other people. This can help us build and strengthen our social relationships.



How you can start learning

If you want to make learning a bigger part of your life, it helps to think about learning in the broadest sense.

Classes and formal courses are great ways to learn new things, but there are lots of other ways too. You might:

- Learn to cook a favourite dish that you've never eaten at home. Check out these healthy recipes if you're stuck for ideas.
- Visit a gallery or museum and learn about a person or period in history that interests you.
- Take on a new responsibility at work, such as learning to use an IT system or understanding the monthly reports.
- Fix that broken bike or garden gate. Once you've done that, how about setting yourself a bigger DIY project?
- Sign up for a course you've been meaning to do at a local night school. You might learn a new language, or try something practical such as plumbing.
- Rediscover an old hobby that challenges you, whether it's making model aeroplanes, writing stories, sewing or knitting.
- Give to others – even the smallest act can count, whether it's a smile, a thank you or a kind word. Larger acts, such as volunteering at your local community centre, can improve your mental wellbeing and help you build new social networks.

Most people would agree that giving to others is a good idea. But it can also improve your mental wellbeing.

Small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones – such as volunteering in your local community – can give you a sense of purpose and make you feel happier and more satisfied about life.

Sometimes, we think of wellbeing in terms of what we have: our income, our home or car, or our job. But evidence shows that what we do and the way we think have the biggest impact on mental wellbeing.

Positive mental wellbeing means feeling good – about yourself and the world around you – and being able to get on with life in the way you want.

Helping and supporting other people, and working with others towards a shared goal, is good for our mental wellbeing. Giving to others is one of the five evidence-based steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

How giving can help your mental wellbeing

Several studies suggest that acts of giving and kindness – small and large – are associated with positive mental wellbeing.

For example, a 2004 study in 373 older adults found that some aspects of wellbeing were higher in those who did volunteering projects, compared with those who did not.

Brain science has shown that giving to others and co-operating with them can stimulate the reward areas in the brain, helping to create positive feelings.

Helping and working with others can also give us a sense of purpose and feelings of self-worth.

Giving our time to others in a constructive way helps us strengthen our relationships and build new ones.

Relationships with others also influence mental wellbeing.

How you can give

Giving can take many forms, from small everyday acts to larger commitments.

Today, you could:

- Say thank you to someone, for something they've done for you.
- Phone a relative or friend who needs support or company.
- Ask a colleague how they are and really listen to the answer.
- Offer to lend a hand if you see a stranger struggling with bags or a pushchair.

This week, you could:



- Arrange a day out for you and a friend or relative.
- Offer to help a relative with DIY or a colleague with a work project.
- Sign up to a mentoring project, in which you give time and support to someone who will benefit from it.
- Volunteer in your local community. That might mean helping out at a local school, hospital or care home. Find out more about how to volunteer.
- Be mindful – be more aware of the present moment, including your feelings and thoughts, your body and the world around you. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness", and it can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.

It can be easy to rush through life without stopping to notice much. Paying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, and to the world around you – can improve your mental wellbeing.

Some people call this awareness 'mindfulness', and you can take steps to develop it in your own life.

Good mental wellbeing means feeling good about life and yourself, and being able to get on with life in the way you want.

You may think about wellbeing in terms of what you have: your income, home or car, or your job. But evidence shows that what we do and the way we think have the biggest impact on wellbeing.



Becoming more aware of the present moment means noticing the sights, smells, sounds and tastes that you experience, as well as the thoughts and feelings that occur from one moment to the next.

Mindfulness, sometimes also called "present-centredness", can help us enjoy the world more and understand ourselves better.

Being aware is one of the five evidence-based steps we can all take to improve our mental wellbeing.

What is mindfulness?

Mark Williams, professor of clinical psychology at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, says that mindfulness means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment.

Professor Williams says that mindfulness can be an antidote to the "tunnel vision" that can develop in our daily lives, especially when we are busy, stressed or tired.

"It's easy to stop noticing the world around us. It's also easy to lose touch with the way our bodies are feeling and to end up living 'in our heads' – caught up in our thoughts without stopping to notice how those thoughts are driving our emotions and behaviour," he says.

"An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with our bodies and the sensations they experience. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the present moment. That might be something as simple as the feel of a banister as we walk upstairs.

"Another important part of mindfulness is an awareness of our thoughts and feelings as they happen moment to moment.

"Awareness of this kind doesn't start by trying to change or fix anything. It's about allowing ourselves to see the present moment clearly. When we do that, it can positively change the way we see ourselves and our lives."

How mindfulness can help



Becoming more aware of the present moment can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better.

"When we become more aware of the present moment, we begin to experience afresh many things in the world around us that we have been taking for granted," says Professor Williams.

"Mindfulness also allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience and to see how we can become entangled in that stream in ways that are not helpful.

"This lets us stand back from our thoughts and start to see their patterns. Gradually, we can train ourselves to notice when our thoughts are taking over and realise that thoughts are simply 'mental events' that do not have to control us.

"Most of us have issues that we find hard to let go and mindfulness can help us deal with them more productively. We can ask: 'Is trying to solve this by brooding about it helpful, or am I just getting caught up in my thoughts?'

"Awareness of this kind also helps us notice signs of stress or anxiety earlier and helps us deal with them better."

Studies have found that mindfulness programmes, where participants are taught mindfulness practices across a series of weeks, can bring about reductions in stress and improvements in mood.

How you can be mindful

Reminding yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you is the first step to mindfulness.

"Even as we go about our daily lives, we can find new ways of waking up to the world around us," says Professor Williams. "We can notice the sensations of things, the food we eat, the air moving past the body as we walk. All this may sound very small, but it has huge power to interrupt the 'autopilot' mode we often engage day to day, and to give us new perspectives on life."

It can be helpful to pick a time – the morning journey to work or a walk at lunchtime – during which you decide to be aware of the sensations created by the world around you. Trying new things, such as sitting in a different seat in meetings or going somewhere new for lunch, can also help you notice the world in a new way.

"Similarly, notice the busyness of your mind. Just observe your own thoughts," says Williams. "Stand back and watch them floating past, like leaves on a stream. There is no need to try to change the thoughts, or argue with them, or judge them: just observe. This takes practice. It's about putting the mind in a different mode, in which we see each thought as simply another mental event and not an objective reality that has control over us."

You can practise this anywhere, but it can be especially helpful to take a mindful approach if you realise that, for several minutes, you have been "trapped" in reliving past problems or "pre-living" future worries. To develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, some people find it helpful to silently name them: "Here is the thought that I might fail that exam". Or, "Here is anxiety".

Formal mindfulness practices

As well as practising mindfulness in daily life, it can be helpful to set aside time for a more formal mindfulness practice.

Several practices can help create a new awareness of body sensations, thoughts and feelings. They include:

- meditation – participants sit silently and pay attention to the sensations of breathing or other regions of the body, bringing the attention back whenever the mind wanders
- yoga – participants often move through a series of postures that stretch and flex the body, with emphasis on awareness of the breath
- tai-chi – participants perform a series of slow movements, with emphasis on awareness of breathing