

# How to Look after your mental health



mental  
health  
foundation

Your mental health:

**It's important to take care of yourself and get the most from life. This booklet suggests 10 practical ways to look after your mental health.**

## What is mental health?

**‘Hi, how are you doing?’**

**‘I’m good thanks, glad it’s the weekend. You?’**

**‘Bit fed up actually, it just feels like everything I do goes wrong.’**

This conversation is about mental health. Mental health is about the way you think and feel and your ability to deal with ups and downs.

Being mentally healthy doesn’t just mean that you don’t have a mental health problem. If you’re in good mental health, you can:

- make the most of your potential
- cope with life
- play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends

Some people call mental health ‘emotional health’ or ‘wellbeing’ and it’s just as important as good physical health.

Mental health is everyone’s business. We all have times when we feel down or stressed or frightened. Most of the time those feelings pass. But sometimes they develop into a more serious problem and that could happen to any one of us.

Everyone is different. You may bounce back from a setback while someone else may feel weighed down by it for a long time.

Your mental health doesn’t always stay the same. It can change as circumstances change and as you move through different stages of your life.

There’s a stigma attached to mental health problems. This means that people feel uncomfortable about them and don’t talk about them much. Many people don’t even feel comfortable talking about their feelings. But it’s healthy to know and say how you’re feeling.

## 1 – Talk about your feelings

Talking about your feelings can help you stay in good mental health and deal with times when you feel troubled.

Talking about your feelings isn't a sign of weakness. It's part of taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what you can to stay healthy.

Talking can be a way to cope with a problem you've been carrying around in your head for a while. Just being listened to can help you feel supported and less alone. And it works both ways. If you open up, it might encourage others to do the same.

It's not always easy to describe how you're feeling. If you can't think of one word, use lots. What does it feel like inside your head? What does it make you feel like doing?

You don't need to sit your loved ones down for a big conversation about your wellbeing. Many people feel more comfortable when these conversations develop naturally - maybe when you're doing something together. If it feels awkward at first, give it time. Make talking about your feelings something that you do.

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## 2 – Keep active

Experts believe exercise releases chemicals in your brain that make you feel good.

Regular exercise can boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, look and feel better. Exercise also keeps the brain and your other vital organs healthy.

*'I get a huge buzz from my rock 'n' roll class. Hours later, my legs ache, but I'm still smiling.'*

Exercising doesn't just mean doing sport or going to the gym. Walks in the park, gardening or housework can also keep you active. Experts say most people should do about 30 minutes exercise at least five days a week. Try to make physical activity that you enjoy a part of your day.

*'It's increased my confidence, as I've proved to myself that I can do things, and I'm also much fitter and have lost weight. We always have a lot of fun.'*

### 3 – Eat well

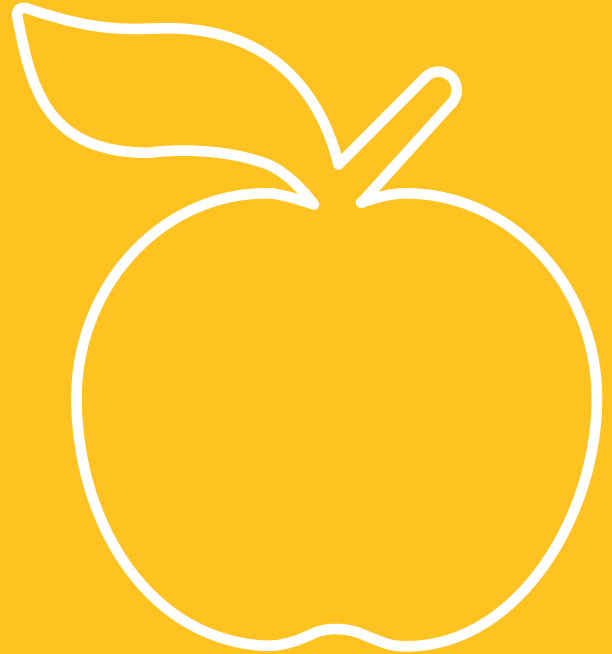
**There are strong links between what we eat and how we feel – for example, caffeine and sugar can have an immediate effect.**

**But food can also have a long-lasting effect on your mental health. Your brain needs a mix of nutrients to stay healthy and function well, just like the other organs in your body. A diet that's good for your physical health is also good for your mental health. A healthy balanced diet includes:**

- lots of different types of fruit and vegetables
- wholegrain cereals or bread
- nuts and seeds
- dairy products
- oily fish
- plenty of water

**Eat at least three meals each day and drink a lot, though not too much alcohol. Try to limit how many high-caffeine or sugary drinks you have.**

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## 4 – Drink Sensibly

**We often drink alcohol to change our mood. Some people drink to deal with fear or loneliness, but the effect is only temporary.**

When the drink wears off, you feel worse because of the way alcohol withdrawal symptoms affect your brain and the rest of your body. Drinking is not a good way to manage difficult feelings.

Apart from the damage too much alcohol can do to your body, you would need more and more alcohol each time to feel the same short-term boost. The other methods in this booklet are healthier ways of coping with tough times.

Occasional light drinking is perfectly healthy and enjoyable for most people. Stay within the recommended daily alcohol limits:

**Three to four units a day for men**  
**Two to three units a day for women**

Visit [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) for more information.

Many people smoke or use drugs or other substances to change how they feel. But again, the effects are short-lived. Just like alcohol, the more you use, the more you crave. Nicotine and drugs don't deal with the causes of difficult feelings. They don't solve problems, they create them.

Drinking is not a good way to manage difficult feelings.



**‘Just chilling  
out with friends  
relaxes me.  
We have a laugh  
and I feel good.’**

## **5 – Keep in touch**

**Strong family ties and supportive friends can help you deal with the stresses of life.**

**Friends and family can make you feel included and cared for. They can offer different views from whatever’s going on inside your own head. They can help keep you active, keep you grounded and help you solve practical problems.**

**There’s nothing better than catching up with someone face-to-face. But that’s not always possible. Give them a call, drop them a note or chat to them online instead. Keep the lines of communication open. It’s good for you!**

**If you’re feeling out of touch with some people, look back at our section on talking about your feelings and get started!**

**It’s worth working at relationships that make you feel loved or valued. But if you think being around someone is damaging your mental health, it may be best to take a break from them or call it a day completely. It’s possible to end a relationship in a way that feels ok for both of you.**

**It can be hard to cope when someone close to you dies or you lose them another way. Counselling for bereavement or loss can help you explore your feelings. The next section suggests how to find a counsellor.**



## 6 – Ask for help

**None of us are superhuman. We all sometimes get tired or overwhelmed by how we feel or when things go wrong.**

If things are getting too much for you and you feel you can't cope, ask for help. Your family or friends may be able to offer practical help or a listening ear. Local services are there to help you. For example, you could:

- join a support group like Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous to help you make changes to your life
- find a counsellor to help you deal with your feelings or make a fresh start
- visit a citizens advice bureau if you want advice on debt

Your GP may be able to refer you to a counsellor. For information about how to find a qualified counsellor yourself, see page 24.

You should consider getting help from your GP if difficult feelings are:

- stopping you getting on with life
- having a big impact on the people you live or work with
- affecting your mood over several weeks

Over a third of visits to GPs are about mental health. Your GP may suggest ways you or your family can help you. Or they may refer you to a specialist or another part of the health service.

Your friends or family may be able to offer practical health or a listening ear.



**‘Sometimes when I’m sitting on the bus, I let my thoughts flow and it really helps me.’**

## **7 – Take a break**

**A change of scene or a change of pace is good for your mental health.**

**It could be a five-minute pause from cleaning your kitchen, a half-hour lunch break at work or a weekend exploring somewhere new. A few minutes can be enough to de-stress you. Give yourself some ‘me time’.**

**Taking a break may mean being very active. It may mean not doing very much at all. Take a deep breath... and relax. Try yoga or meditation, or just putting your feet up.**

**Listen to your body. If you’re really tired, give yourself time to sleep. Without good sleep, our mental health suffers and our concentration goes downhill. Sometimes the world can wait.**

**You can download our relaxation podcasts at [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help/podcasts](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help/podcasts)**

Doing an activity you enjoy probably means you're good at it and achieving something boosts your self-esteem.



## 8 – Do something you're good at

**What do you love doing? What activities can you lose yourself in? What did you love doing in the past?**

Enjoying yourself helps beat stress. Doing an activity you enjoy probably means you're good at it and achieving something boosts your self-esteem. Concentrating on a hobby like gardening or a crossword can help you forget your worries for a while and change your mood.

It can be good to have an interest where you're not seen as someone's mum or dad, partner or employee. You're just you. An hour of sketching lets you express yourself creatively. A morning on the football pitch gets you active and gives you the chance to meet new people.

**'I'm learning the guitar. You have to really concentrate on getting it right so there's no room in my head for worries.'**

## 9 – Accept who you are

Some of us make people laugh, some are good at maths, others cook fantastic meals.

Some of us share our lifestyle with the people who live close to us, others live very differently.

We're all different. It's much healthier to accept that you're unique than to wish you were more like someone else. Feeling good about yourself boosts your confidence to learn new skills, visit new places and make new friends. Good self-esteem helps you cope when life takes a difficult turn.

Be proud of who you are. Recognise and accept what you are not good at but focus on what you can do well. Work out if there's anything about yourself that you still want to change. Are your expectations realistic? If they are, work towards the change in small steps.

**‘Being happy with who I am now means I enjoy living in the moment.’**

Feeling good about yourself boosts your confidence.



**‘Friends are really important... We help each other whenever we can, so it’s a two-way street and supporting them uplifts me.’**

## **10 – Care for others**

**Caring for others is often an important part of keeping up relationships with people close to you. It can even bring you closer together.**

**Why not share your skills more widely by volunteering for a local charity? Helping out can make us feel needed and valued and that boosts our self-esteem. It also helps us see the world from another angle. That can help to put our own problems in perspective.**

**Find out more about volunteering at [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk)**

**Caring for a pet can improve your wellbeing too. The bond between you and your pet can be as strong as between people. Looking after a pet can bring structure to your day and act as a link to other people. Lots of people make friends by chatting to fellow dog walkers.**

## Support and information

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### Mental Health Foundation

**Our website offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.**

Website: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

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### Confidential help and support

**The Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.**

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)  
Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

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### Counselling

**The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy**

Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
Email: [bacp@bacp.co.uk](mailto:bacp@bacp.co.uk)  
Telephone: 01455 883300

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### UK Council for Psychotherapy

Website: [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk)  
Telephone: 020 7014 9955

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### General health information

**NHS Direct provides information 24 hours a day.**

Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)  
Telephone: 0845 4647

**We hope you found this booklet useful and informative.**

**The Mental Health Foundation is an independent charity. We rely on the support of people like you to fund our pioneering research and information provision.**

**To find out how you can donate or become involved with the work of the Foundation contact us.**

Website: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/)

Telephone: 020 7803 1121

Email: [supporter@mhf.org.uk](mailto:supporter@mhf.org.uk)

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