

How to

improve and maintain
your mental wellbeing



how to



mental
wellbeing

This booklet is for anyone who wants to improve and maintain their mental wellbeing, whether they have a diagnosis of a mental health condition or not. It explains what can affect our mental health and gives practical suggestions about how to stay mentally well.

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What is mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing describes your mental state – how you are feeling and how well you can cope with day-to-day life. Our mental wellbeing can change, from day to day, month to month or year to year.

If you have good mental wellbeing (or good mental health), you are able to:

- feel relatively confident in yourself – you value and accept yourself and judge yourself on realistic and reasonable standards
- feel and express a range of emotions
- feel engaged with the world around you – you can build and maintain positive relationships with other people and feel you can contribute to the community you live in
- live and work productively
- cope with the stresses of daily life and manage times of change and uncertainty.

What can affect my mental wellbeing?

We all have times when we have low mental wellbeing – when we feel sad or stressed, or find it difficult to cope. For example, when we suffer some sort of loss; experience loneliness or relationships problems; or are worried about work or money. Sometimes, there is no clear reason why we experience a period of poor mental health.

However, there are some factors that may make someone more vulnerable to experiencing a period of poor mental health.

For example, if you experience:

- childhood abuse, trauma, violence or neglect
- social isolation, loneliness or discrimination
- homelessness or poor housing
- a long-term physical health condition
- social disadvantage, poverty or debt
- unemployment
- caring for a family member or friend
- significant trauma as an adult, such as military combat, being involved in a serious accident or being the victim of a violent crime.

Mental health problems and wellbeing

If you experience low mental wellbeing over a long period of time, you are more likely to develop a mental health problem.

If you already have a mental health problem, e.g. depression or anxiety, you are more likely to experience periods of low mental wellbeing than someone who hasn't. However, you can still have periods of good wellbeing, where you are able to manage your condition and your life without becoming unwell.

What can I do to stay mentally well?

Whether you have a mental health problem or not, there may be times or situations in your life that are more difficult than others. The capacity to stay mentally well during those times is called 'resilience'. This section suggests some ways you might be able to develop and strengthen your resilience, so that you can deal with everyday life and face difficult situations without becoming unwell.

Talk about the way you feel

If you are facing a difficult time, talking about the way you feel with someone you know and trust can often help. Your friends or family may be able to offer you practical help or advice and give you another perspective on what is causing your problems. Even if they can't help, often just talking something through and feeling that there is someone to listen and understand you can make you feel much better.

Build healthy relationships with people

●● *My true friends have stuck by me through thick and thin, never judged me and, when I was at my lowest, stayed with me through my darkest hours.* ●●

Building and maintaining constructive relationships with people is an important part of staying mentally well. If you spend time around positive and supportive people, you are more likely to have a better self-image, be more confident and feel able to face difficult times. In return, if you are caring and supportive to other people, you are more likely to get a positive response from them. You are then more likely to feel better about yourself and your ability to play an active part in society.

If you do not have the social contact you feel you need, or experience feelings of loneliness for whatever reason, this can also have a negative impact on your mental wellbeing. For information and advice about how

to increase your social contact and overcome feelings of loneliness, see Mind's booklet *How to cope with loneliness*.

Look after your physical health

If you have good physical health, you are more likely to have good mental health. Sleep patterns, diet and physical activity all have an impact on your mental wellbeing.

Sleep

If you have trouble sleeping, this can have a serious impact on your mental wellbeing. Negative feelings are likely to be exaggerated and you might find you are more irritable and less confident. (See Mind's booklet *How to cope with sleep problems* for help with establishing a good sleep routine.)

Diet

●● *I see a significant improvement in my mood when I eat right.* ●●

Eating healthily has a positive impact on your physical and mental health. Eating a well-balanced diet at regular meal-times with plenty of water and vegetables will help you to feel more healthy and happy. Stopping or reducing your alcohol intake, and avoiding tobacco and recreational drugs can also help improve your general wellbeing.

Physical activity

●● *My sister dragged me to the gym and made me join when I was at a very low point, but it was the best thing she did for me. I'm now managing my depression and feeling a lot better in myself. It wasn't easy, but definitely worth it.* ●●

Physical activity is good for mental health, particularly if you exercise outdoors. Being active can help reduce depression and anxiety and boost your self-confidence. It also releases endorphins – 'feel-good' hormones that can help improve your mood. It doesn't matter whether you prefer

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gardening, gentle walking or something more active – you will almost always feel better for having done some physical activity. (See *Mind tips for better mental health: physical activity*.)

Do something you enjoy

Doing something you enjoy can improve your confidence and help you stay well. Make time to do things you like, whether it's cooking, seeing your friends or doing DIY. Some people find that doing something creative, such as drama, drawing or sewing, helps them to express themselves positively and deal with any difficult emotions in a positive way.

●● *Composing and playing music helps me express feelings that are difficult to explain in words.* ●●

Learning something new, or taking up a new hobby, can also boost your confidence and occupies your mind in a positive and active way. If you want to try a new hobby, think about what you are good at, or things that you have always wanted to try. You can find information about volunteering organisations and local groups, clubs or classes at your local library, in local newspapers or magazines, or online.

Do something for someone else

Doing something for someone else, such as helping a friend or relative with their chores or volunteering for a charity, has been shown to have a positive impact on mental wellbeing. It can help you improve your self-confidence and meet new people, and makes you feel that you are making a positive contribution to your community. (See 'Useful contacts' on p. 21 for information about volunteering opportunities in your area.)

Set yourself a challenge

Set yourself a challenge that you can realistically achieve. This doesn't have to be anything particularly large but should have meaning for you. For example, you might decide you are going to write a letter to your

local paper or start going to a regular exercise class. You will feel satisfied and proud of yourself when you achieve your goal, and feel more positive about yourself as a result.

●● *I find that crafting not only helps me relax, but it also improves my confidence when I finish a project and I am happy with the results, especially if it's a gift for someone or something that improves the appearance of my home.* ●●

Relax

It's important to make time to relax, even if you don't feel under stress. This may mean going away for the weekend, spending an evening doing something you like, or even just taking a five-minute break to look out of the window. Learning a relaxation technique, such as breathing exercises, yoga or meditation, can also help you relax and reduce stress levels. (See *Mind tips for better mental health: relaxation*.)

●● *Regularly attending a yoga class has taught me ways to relax and clear my head. This helps me feel more in control of my mental health, which in turn makes me feel more positive about the future.* ●●

Some people also find that alternative and complementary therapies, such as massage, acupuncture and reflexology, can help them relax and help them maintain their mental wellbeing. (See the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council in 'Useful contacts' for a list of accredited practitioners.)

Remember – relaxation is not the same as recreation. Hobbies and other activities can become stressful if they become excessive. (See Mind's booklet *Mind guide to managing stress*.)

Identify mood triggers

Keeping track of your moods in a mood diary can help you work out what affects your mental wellbeing and recognise changes in your mood that would be difficult to spot otherwise. For example, you may realise that eating certain foods or seeing a certain person has an effect on your mood. Or you may tend to experience a particular mood at a particular time, such as before your period or in winter.

Knowing what affects your moods can help you take steps to avoid or change the situations that have a negative impact on you. Even if you can't change the situation, knowing your triggers can help you remember to take extra care of yourself during difficult times.

You can create your own mood diary, or there are lots to choose from on the internet (see 'Useful contacts' on p. 21).

Look after yourself during difficult times

👉👉 *What helps me is being honest with how well I'm coping and getting support when I need it.* 👉👉

Everyone has times when they face challenging situations and find it difficult to cope. If you are experiencing a difficult time, or are unwell, it's important to look after yourself and try and get through.

Be careful not to put too much pressure on yourself to carry on as normal. You may need to take a break from your usual responsibilities, for example reducing your social activities or workload. Take small steps and don't expect too much of yourself. Try to get enough sleep and eat regularly. If you are finding it difficult to cope on your own, don't be afraid to ask for help. For example, you may need time off work or help with day-to-day tasks, such as cleaning or childcare.

Stay safe. If your feelings become overwhelming, and you have suicidal thoughts or you think you may self harm, remember that you can pick

up the phone at any time of night or day and talk to the Samaritans. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.21 and Mind's booklet *How to cope with suicidal feelings*.)

Learn to accept yourself

●● *The more I am at peace with myself and who I am, the more I am likely to be at peace with others and who they are.* ●●

One of the most important steps in staying mentally healthy is to learn to accept yourself. If you value yourself, you are more likely to have positive relationships with other people and find it easier to cope with difficult times in your life.

Here are some tips to help you increase your self-esteem (also see Mind's booklet *How to increase your self-esteem*):

- Try not to compare yourself to other people.
- Don't strive for perfection.
- Acknowledge your positive qualities and things you are good at.
- Learn to identify and challenge unhelpful thinking patterns.
- Use self-help books and websites to help you change your beliefs.
- Spend time with supportive people.
- Be assertive – don't allow people to treat you with a lack of respect.
- Engage in work and hobbies that you enjoy.

●● *What helped me was the realisation that this is who I am, to stop fighting it and realise that life may not be what you expected it to be... Then, just start living again.* ●●

Learning to accept who you are can be very difficult, particularly if you are trying to do it on your own. If you feel that low self-esteem is having a significant impact on your mental health, you may find it helpful to talk your feelings through with a therapist. (See 'Talking treatments' on p.15 for more details.)

What can I do to stay mentally well if I have a mental health problem?

All of the suggestions in the section 'What can I do to stay mentally well?' are relevant to everyone, regardless of whether you have a mental health problem or not. However, here are some tips that are directly relevant to maintaining your mental wellbeing if you have a mental health diagnosis.

Be involved in your treatment

If you have a mental health problem, being involved in your treatment can help you stay well. Research shows that the more involved you are in decisions about your treatment, the more likely you are to recover from a mental health problem. Any mental health professional you see should discuss your treatment options with you, and you have the right to be involved in the decision-making process at every stage in your treatment.

Even if you are receiving compulsory treatment under the Mental Health Act 1983, your doctor should discuss different treatment options with you and take your preferences into account when making a decision about your treatment. However, under compulsory treatment, the doctor in charge of your treatment can override your preferences if they think another treatment is the most appropriate one for your mental health problem at the time. (For details about compulsory treatment, see the booklet *Mind rights guide 3: consent to treatment*.)

Manage your medication

If you are on medication, it is important to learn to manage this in a way that works for you. For example, if your medication makes you feel drowsy, you may want to ask your GP if you could take it in the evening. Or you may find that you feel better if you avoid alcohol or certain foods.

👉👉 *I start the day with meds to make sure I make it through the day, then listen to my children and give them a hug.* 👉👉

If you experience side effects because of your medication, you should discuss this with your GP or psychiatrist. They can help you decide whether to continue taking the medication and give you advice about how to manage any side effects. You can also find information and advice about taking psychiatric drugs in Mind's booklet series *Making sense*.

If you want to come off medication, make sure you know all the pros and cons of doing so and how best to do it carefully. Get as much information and support as possible. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of coming off psychiatric drugs*.)

Tell people what helps

Different things work for different people when they're unwell. Telling your friends, family and any medical or social care professionals what works for you can help them understand what you need if you become ill. For example, you may want to let your doctor know that a particular therapy or medication has worked for you in the past. Or you may want to tell your friends and family that it helps to talk through your feelings or that you prefer to be left alone.

You may also want to make a crisis plan, or advance decision, to tell people what you want to happen if you are in crisis. This can help reduce stress and address any worries about what will happen to you or your family if you become ill. (See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to crisis services* for more information.)

What other support is available?

You may find that, despite your best efforts, you are unable to maintain your mental wellbeing on your own. In this case, you might want to seek professional help to address whatever is affecting your mental wellbeing.

Practical help

If there is a particular situation that is affecting your mental wellbeing, the best thing to do is to seek specialist practical help to resolve the problem. Having someone professional who is familiar with your type of situation can see it objectively and usually get to the root of the problem more quickly. For example, if:

- someone close to you has died and you are struggling to cope, you may want to talk to a bereavement counsellor
- you have legal, money or housing problems that are causing you stress or anxiety, you may find it useful to talk to your local Citizen's Advice (CAB)
- you are caring for someone and finding the situation difficult, there are support groups that can help
- you have been unemployed for a long time and this is affecting your mental health, you may want to talk to a careers advisor
- problems at work are affecting your mental wellbeing, read your organisation's policies to find out what rights you have and what support mechanisms are available.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.20 for organisations that may be able to help.

Peer support

Peer support means talking to people who have been through similar experiences; for example, in a support group, online forum or website. It can be a useful source of support and understanding. However, if you're accessing peer support online, think carefully about what information you

want to share – you don't always know who you're talking to. You can get details of peer support groups that might be relevant to you by contacting the Mind Infoline. (See Mind in 'Useful contacts' on p.20.)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and yoga. It has been shown to help people become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, it is easier to manage them. The 'Be Mindful' website has more information and details of local classes around the UK (See 'Useful contacts' on p.20.).

Talking treatments

If you are facing problems that are affecting your mental wellbeing, and you can't resolve these yourself, you may find a talking treatment helpful.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that aims to identify connections between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and to help you develop practical skills to manage them. It has been shown to be particularly effective for low self-esteem and anxiety-based conditions. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy*.)

If your problems stem from early life experiences you might find that other talking therapies, such as person-centred therapy, psychodynamic therapy or interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), can help you address these experiences more thoroughly. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments*.)

If you want to try a talking treatment, your GP can provide information and refer you to a local service. However, waiting lists for talking treatments on the NHS can be long, so you may prefer to seek therapy or counselling privately. Private therapists will charge a fee, but some offer a reduced rate for people on a limited income. (See BACP and BABCP in 'Useful contacts' on p.20 for a list of accredited private therapists).

Medication

If you are unable to resolve any difficulties you are having yourself, and your feelings develop into a mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression, you may be offered prescription medication by your GP. These drugs don't cure mental health problems, but aim to ease the most distressing symptoms.

Many people find these drugs helpful, as they can lessen symptoms and allow them to continue with their normal activities. However, drugs can have side effects that may make some people feel worse rather than better. Your GP should talk you through the potential advantages and disadvantages of taking any psychiatric medication and discuss possible alternative treatments. You can also find information about the effects of psychiatric drugs in Mind's booklet series *Making sense*.

My mental wellbeing checklist

You might find it helpful to use the checklist below to identify the factors that are affecting your mental health. You can then think start to think about some of the solutions that might help, from those suggested in the booklet. Use the pages overleaf to help you plan.

	Yes	No
• I have someone I can talk to about my feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I have good friends that I can trust	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I sleep well most of the time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I eat healthily most of the time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I do some physical activity regularly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I make time for the things I enjoy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I do things to help other people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I feel I achieve things	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know how to relax	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know what affects my moods	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I am kind to myself about who I am	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I look after myself during difficult times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I am as involved in my treatment as I want to be	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know how to manage my medication in a way that works for me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I feel confident that my friends, family and doctors know what works for me when I'm unwell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I feel confident that my friends, family and doctors know what to do in a crisis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I know when I need to seek professional help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

My resilience plan

Use this space to focus on what is working for you and what isn't.

Things that have a positive effect on my wellbeing

Things that have a negative effect on my wellbeing

Think about how you might be able to change the things that don't work and experience more of the things that do.

Things I could try to improve my situation

Who I might ask for help

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

Be Mindful

web: bemindful.co.uk

Information, and details of local mindfulness courses and therapists.

Bereavement Advice Centre

helpline: 0800 634 9494

web: bereavementadvice.org

Support for people who have been bereaved.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304

web: babcp.com

Lists accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 01455 883 300

web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

For practitioners in your area.

Carers UK

advice line: 0808 808 7777

web: carersuk.org

Independent information and support for carers.

Citizens Advice

advice lines: tel. 08444 111 444
(England); 0844 477 2020 (Wales)
web: citizensadvice.org.uk
Confidential advice on a range
of issues.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council

tel: 020 3178 2199
web: cnhc.org.uk
Register of complementary
healthcare practitioners.

Direct.gov.uk

web: direct.gov.uk/en/employment
Information about employment
rights and services, and
career advice.

Mood diaries

web: moodpanda.com
web: moodscope.com
web: medhelp.org/land/mood-tracker
web: mappiness.org.uk
Some examples to try. There are
many more available.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris, PO Box 90 90
Stirling FK8 2SA
24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90
email: jo@samaritans.org
web: samaritans.org
Emotional support for
anyone in distress.

Volunteering England

web: volunteering.org.uk
Information and advice about
volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering Wales

web: volunteering-wales.net
Information and advice about
volunteering opportunities.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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