

Five steps to mental wellbeing

Below are five things that, according to research, can really help to boost our mental wellbeing:

- **Connect** – connect with the people around you: your family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Spend time developing these relationships. Learn more in [Connect for mental wellbeing](#).
- **Be active** – you don't have to go to the gym. Take a walk, go cycling or play a game of football. Find an activity that you enjoy and make it a part of your life. Learn more in [Get active for mental wellbeing](#).
- **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? Find out more in [Learn for mental wellbeing](#).
- **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. Learn more in [Give for mental wellbeing](#).
- **Be mindful** – be more aware of the present moment, including your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you. Some people call this awareness "mindfulness". It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges. Learn more in [Mindfulness for mental wellbeing](#).

Connect for mental wellbeing

When it comes to our wellbeing, other people matter.

Evidence shows that good relationships – with family, friends and our wider communities – are important for our mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing means feeling good – about ourselves and the world around us – and functioning well.

Building stronger, wider social connections can help us feel happier and more secure, and give us a greater sense of purpose.

How relationships help our wellbeing

Human beings are social animals. Relationships build a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Strong relationships with family and friends 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.

They give us a chance to support others – something else that is known to promote mental wellbeing.

There's also evidence that wellbeing can be passed on through relationships. Being around people with strong mental wellbeing can improve your own mental wellbeing.

Build relationships for wellbeing

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 lots of ways to build stronger and closer relationships:

- If possible, take time each day to be with your family. This could include a fixed "family time" each day.
- Arrange a day out with friends you haven't seen for a while.
- Switch off the TV and play a game with the children, or just talk (see some tips on [talking to children about feelings](#) and [talking to teenagers](#)).
- Make the effort to phone people sometimes – it's all too easy get into the habit of only ever texting, messaging or emailing people.
- 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.
- Make the most of technology – video chat apps like Skype and FaceTime are a great way of staying in touch with friends and family, particularly if you live far apart.

Get active for mental wellbeing

Being active is great for your physical health and fitness, and 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 you want.

Evidence shows that there is a link between being physically active and good 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 exercise helps 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 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 improve wellbeing because it brings about a sense of greater [self-esteem](#), self-control and the ability to rise to a challenge.

Learn for mental wellbeing

Learning new skills can be useful, but research shows it can also improve our mental wellbeing.

It doesn't have to mean getting more qualifications. There are lots of different 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 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.

How learning can help your wellbeing

Research shows that learning throughout life is associated with greater satisfaction and optimism, and improved ability to get the most from life.

People who carry on learning after childhood report higher wellbeing and a greater ability to cope with stress. They also report more feelings of self-esteem, hope and purpose.

Setting targets and hitting them can create positive feelings of achievement.

Learning often involves interacting with other people. This can also increase our wellbeing by helping us build and strengthen social relationships.

Learn more about [connecting for mental wellbeing](#).

How you can keep 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? There are lots of free video tutorials online.
- 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 for mental wellbeing

Most people would agree that giving to others is a good thing. On top of this, 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. It can make you feel happier and more satisfied with 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.

How giving helps your mental wellbeing

Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness – small and large – are associated with positive mental wellbeing.

Giving to others and co-operating with them can stimulate the reward areas in the brain, creating 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 help mental wellbeing.

How you can give more

Giving can take lots of different 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, such as helping out at a local school, hospital or care home. Find out [how to volunteer](#).

Mindfulness

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". Mindfulness can help us enjoy life more and understand ourselves better. You can take steps to develop it in your own life.

[What is mindfulness?](#)

[How mindfulness helps mental wellbeing](#)

[How to be more mindful](#)

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[More tips on wellbeing](#)

What is mindfulness?

Professor Mark Williams, former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, says that mindfulness means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment.

"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.

"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 helps mental wellbeing

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 things that we have been taking for granted.

"Mindfulness also allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience," says Professor Williams, "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."

Mindfulness is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as a way to prevent [depression](#) in people who have had three or more bouts of depression in the past.

See the NICE guideline on [depression in adults](#).

How to be more mindful

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

Notice the everyday

"Even as we go about our daily lives, we can notice the sensations of things, the food we eat, the air moving past the body as we walk," says Professor Williams. "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."

Keep it regular

It can be helpful to pick a regular 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.

Try something new

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.

Watch your thoughts

"Some people find it very difficult to practice mindfulness. As soon as they stop what they're doing, lots of thoughts and worries crowd in," says Professor Williams.

"It might be useful to remember that mindfulness isn't about making these thoughts go away, but rather about seeing them as mental events.

"Imagine standing at a bus station and seeing 'thought buses' coming and going without having to get on them and be taken away. This can be very hard at first, but with gentle persistence it is possible.

"Some people find that it is easier to cope with an over-busy mind if they are doing gentle [yoga](#) or [walking](#)."

Name thoughts and feelings

To develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, some people find it helpful to silently name them: "Here's the thought that I might fail that exam". Or, "This is anxiety".

Free yourself from the past and future

You can practice mindfulness 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.

Different mindfulness practices

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

Mindfulness meditation involves sitting silently and paying attention to thoughts, sounds, and the sensations of breathing or parts of the body, bringing your attention back whenever the mind starts to wander

Yoga and [tai chi](#) can also help with developing awareness of your breathing.

Visit the Mental Health Foundation's website for an [online mindfulness course](#) or details of mindfulness teachers in your area.

Is mindfulness helpful for everyone?

"Mindfulness isn't the answer to everything, and it's important that our enthusiasm doesn't run ahead of the evidence," says Professor Williams.

"There's encouraging evidence for its use in health, education, prisons and workplaces, but it's important to realise that research is still going on in all of these fields. Once we have the results, we'll be able to see more clearly who mindfulness is most helpful for."