



# Mental Wellbeing

**We continue our series of articles by Dr Libby Artingstall and Dr Sile McDaid, Co-Founders and Directors of Team Mental Health. This month it's all about positive steps to support mental health and wellbeing...**

**As 'Mental Health Awareness Week' has now come to an end, alongside the welcomed media and political interest, we feel it is important to reflect on the positive steps we can take to support our mental health and wellbeing.**

Firstly, it's important to think about the language we use when talking about mental health. If we don't get this right, it can serve to maintain stigma. There's a distinct difference between 'mental health' and 'mental ill health'.

The World Health Organisation defines 'mental health' as "a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community".<sup>1</sup>

'Mental ill health' reflects a deterioration in our mental health and its causes can be multifactorial and complex. However, it's important for us all to realise that like physical health, we all have mental health and we need to know how to look after it and protect it.

It is time to ensure ongoing awareness and align our mental health with our physical health. Many of the things we can do to look after and protect our physical health also promote positive mental health and wellbeing and can protect against developing some mental health problems.

In 2008, the report detailing the 'Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project' was published. This set out what the Government, individuals and businesses could do to ensure the best possible mental development and mental wellbeing for everyone in the UK in the 21st century. Over 80 papers and science reviews were commissioned to inform the results.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the final report, the the New Economic Foundation (NEF), on behalf of Foresight, published 'The 5 ways to Mental Wellbeing'. The evidence shows that we can reduce some mental health problems and support people to flourish with improvements in wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

The 5 actions set out in the document are:

- Connect
- Be active
- Take notice
- Keep learning
- Give

More than 10 years on, many of us do not recognise that by embracing these simple actions and making them part of our daily lives, we can promote positive mental health and reduce the risk of developing certain mental health problems. The evidence over this time has not changed. Indeed, it has actually increased and strengthened the findings outlined within this original report.

**So, what can we do?**

## Connect

Loneliness is a significant risk factor for developing mental health problems.<sup>4</sup> We know that developing a sense

of belonging to people with shared values and ideas is protective. In an era of increasing screen use, text, email and social media, it is now more important than ever to ensure we make time for physical interaction and connection. Having good support networks in place, through family, friends and colleagues matters.

## Be active

A recent study published in The Lancet has increased our understanding of the positive impact of physical exercise on mental health. A key finding was that "individuals who exercised had fewer days of poor mental health". Whilst "all exercise types were associated with a lower mental health burden, the largest associations were seen for popular team sports, cycling and aerobic and gym activities, as well as durations of 45 minutes and frequencies of 3 - 5 times per week".<sup>5</sup>

## Take notice

Enjoy the moment, be present and take the time to understand your own thoughts and feelings. Practicing mindfulness techniques can be a helpful way to increase self-awareness and appreciate the world around us. It's important to practise mindfulness in a way that feels right for you. This may be on your own, using online applications, or in a group setting.

## Keep learning

Mental stimulation, especially as we get older, has also been shown to protect our mental health. We can do this by taking up new hobbies, rediscovering old interests, or setting ourselves new goals to achieve. If busy schedules don't allow this, simple acts like brushing our teeth a couple of times a week with our non-dominant hand can be effective.<sup>3,6</sup>

It's all about the challenge!

## Give

Expressing kindness and gratitude have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. These don't have to be big gestures. Somethings as simple as saying 'thank you' or smiling can make a difference. If you have more time you can do something nice for someone, or volunteer to support a cause you care about. There is evidence that keeping a gratitude diary every evening, documenting three good things about your day reduces stress and promotes wellbeing.<sup>6,7</sup> Remember, be kind to yourself too!

Now is the time to act! Let's work together to make sure that 'mental health awareness' isn't just one week a year. It needs to be an essential component of every day, every week, every year.



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**For more information as to how Team Mental Health can support you, your team or organisation please visit our website**

[www.teammentalhealth.co.uk](http://www.teammentalhealth.co.uk)



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