

Wellbeing Newsletter

The managing mental health edition

Issue 33

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Making People Better



In this month's newsletter we talk about how to look after your own mental health, what to do if you experience feelings of suicide, misconceptions about lower back pain, and how to support someone who has cancer.

This newsletter includes information about sensitive and potentially triggering topics.

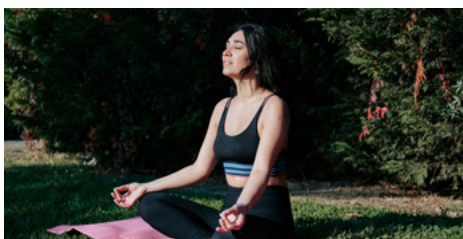
How to look after your mental health: Five small steps that can make a big difference

Mental health is a critical aspect of our overall wellbeing, but it often gets overlooked. In reality, taking care of our mental health is just as important as looking after our physical health.

Our experts have shared five tips to help kick-start your mental health self-care routine. They may be small in practice, but they could make a mighty difference to your overall wellbeing.

“
Remember - your mental health is just as important as your physical health, and it deserves the same level of care and attention.”

– Counsellor, Vita Health Group



1/ Practice mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness involves paying attention to what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment, without judgement. Becoming more aware of the present moment can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better. In fact, mindfulness can help to reduce stress and anxiety, enhance emotional regulation, and improve focus. Practising mindfulness for just a few moments can reduce stress levels and bring a sense of calm into your day.



2/ Maintain a balanced diet

The food we consume can have a profound impact on our mental health. Nutrient-rich foods can improve brain function, mood and energy levels. Aim to incorporate a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats into your diet. Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon and walnuts, are particularly beneficial for brain health. Additionally, staying hydrated and reducing the intake of sugar and processed foods can help stabilise mood swings and improve concentration.



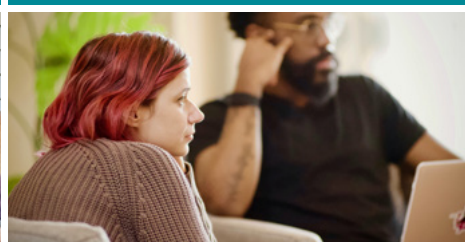
3/ Stay physically active

Regular physical activity can be a powerful tool for improving mental health. Exercise releases endorphins which are our body's natural mood lifters and can help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. Exercise and movement can also help to improve sleep, boost self-esteem, and increase overall energy levels. You don't need to engage in an intense workout to feel the benefit - even moderate activities like walking, cycling, or yoga can be highly effective. The key is to find an activity you enjoy and make it a regular part of your routine.



4/ Cultivate social connections

Humans are inherently social beings and maintaining strong social connections is vital for mental wellbeing. Positive relationships provide support, reduce stress, and contribute to a sense of belonging. Make time to connect with family and friends, whether that's through in-person meetings, phone calls, or video chats. Engaging in social activities or joining clubs and community groups can also help build new relationships and expand your social network.



5/ Set boundaries and learn to say no

Setting boundaries is crucial for maintaining mental health. It involves understanding your limits and communicating them effectively to others. Overcommitting and taking on too many responsibilities can lead to burnout and increased stress. Learning to say no when necessary is an important skill, which will enable you to prioritise your own wellbeing and focus on activities that truly matter to you. Practice assertiveness and remind yourself that it's okay to put your needs first.



World Suicide Day: What to do if you feel suicidal or have suicidal thoughts

Every year on September 10th organisations and communities around the world come together for World Suicide Day. The aim is to raise awareness of how we can create a world where fewer people die by suicide.

Our psychological wellbeing practitioners have shared some really important information on suicide, including how to cope with feelings of suicide and where to go for immediate and longer-term support.



Stay in the present moment

If we feel suicidal, it can be hard to focus on day-to-day life. Breaking down the day into smaller chunks can help us to feel more in control of the situation. Plan for the next few hours and write down what you might do next to help you manage your thoughts and feelings.



Try relaxation techniques

If you're feeling anxious or scared, relaxation techniques can help to bring a sense of calm to a difficult situation. You could try grounding techniques, relaxing music, stepping out into nature or visualising a happy moment in your life. Arts and crafts activities can be therapeutic and help to relax the mind - making a scrapbook of happy memories could be a beneficial activity for you.



Write your thoughts down

When we are scared, anxious or stressed we may experience frightening thoughts which can be alarming. Writing down your thoughts can help to clear your mind, reflect and make better sense of what you're experiencing. Think of your writing time as a safe space which is free from judgement. After you've written down your thoughts and feelings, you may feel a sense of relief from ripping up the paper and throwing it away. Alternatively, think about reading your list out to someone you trust - talking about how we feel can significantly help to manage negative thought cycles and reduce symptoms.



Create a personal "First Aid" box

Fill a box with memories and items that can provide you comfort and lift your mood when you feel low. The box should include objects that bring a smile to your face and things you have a connection to. For example:

- A book you enjoy reading
- Positive quotes
- Photos of happy memories and loved ones
- Letters
- Poems
- Encouraging notes to yourself
- A cuddly toy
- A perfume or smell that is important to you.





Stay connected with others

Connection is important for our overall wellbeing, but it's particularly important at a time when we're managing difficult thoughts and feelings. If you feel able to, share how you are feeling with a friend or family member and help them understand how they can help you during this time. Even if you don't want to share how you are feeling, spending time with someone you trust and enjoy being around can help you cope with difficult thoughts and feelings.



Reach out for professional support

- Book an appointment with your GP - they will signpost you to the right support and can talk to you about medication which may be available to help you
- If you're experiencing anxiety and depression, you can refer yourself to an [NHS Talking Therapy service](#)
- Call the Samaritans - whatever you're going through, a Samaritan will face it with you. The Samaritans are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Call 116 123 for free
- Text SHOUT to 85258: SHOUT is a confidential 24/7 crisis text support for times when you need immediate assistance:



What to do in a crisis

If you or someone you care about is experiencing an emotional or mental health crisis and needs immediate attention, reach out to your/ the person's GP, the GP out-of-hours service, or call the NHS on 111.

If you fear for someone's immediate safety, guide them to A&E or dial 999 for immediate medical assistance.

What does it feel like to be suicidal?

We are all different and that means we will have different experiences and thoughts about suicide.

How you might think or feel if you're suicidal:

- Hopeless, like there's no point in living
- Tearful and overwhelmed by negative thoughts
- Unbearable pain that you can't imagine ending
- Useless, not wanted or not needed by others
- desperate, as if you have no other choice
- Like everyone would be better off without you
- Cut off from your body or physically numb
- Fascinated by death.

What you may experience if you're suicidal:

- Poor sleep, including waking up earlier than you want to
- A change in appetite, weight gain or loss
- No desire to take care of yourself, for example neglecting your physical appearance
- Wanting to avoid others
- Making a will or giving away possessions
- Struggling to communicate
- Self-loathing and low self-esteem
- Urges to self-harm.

It's important to know that suicidal thoughts are not permanent - like all feelings, they will pass. If you notice any of these signs in yourself, seek help from a medical professional as soon as possible.



Listen

Vita Health Group's director of clinical services, Philip Adkins, appeared on the Open Journal Blogcast to talk about suicide and suicide prevention. If you're interested in finding out more, you can listen here.

[Listen here](#)

World PT Day: We clarify four common misconceptions about lower back pain



World Physiotherapy (PT) Day takes place every year on September 8th and this year the focus is on lower back pain.

Most of us will experience lower back pain at some point in our lives. In fact, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has confirmed that it's the most common musculoskeletal problem globally.

Despite so many of us suffering from it, there are still some dangerous misconceptions about back pain that may prevent people from getting the support they need or taking action to manage symptoms.

With that in mind, our musculoskeletal therapists have busted four common myths, and have shared their top advice for managing lower back pain.



Myth 1/ Bed rest is best

Although bed rest can temporarily help to ease back pain, especially when your pain is severe, it is important to keep as active as you are able to be, as soon as you can. Finding an exercise or activity you can tolerate is really important and can help build your confidence and tolerance of your back pain. There are no rules on what this activity could or should be but you could try walking or swimming.



Myth 2/ My back pain is so severe, I must need a scan

Reassuringly, the vast majority of back pain cases are not serious and do not require a scan, even if your pain levels are severe. The causes of lower back pain are often non-specific, that is, not caused by a specific structural issue or disease. Many changes visible on a scan are not correlated to pain levels. Research has shown that people with severe back pain may not have any significant scan findings. On the other hand, people with no pain or minimal pain have been shown to have more significant scan findings.

When might I need a scan on my back? It is important to be aware that on rare occasions serious conditions affecting the spine do require a scan and immediate medical review. If you do notice any unusual symptoms alongside your back pain such as a new loss of bowel or bladder control, numbness or tingling in the genital area or any new problems with your sexual function, you must seek medical support immediately.



Myth 3/ Surgery is the only solution for chronic back pain

The causes of back pain are multifactorial and, as a result, there are many potential management solutions. Research strongly supports exercise and lifestyle changes, smoking cessation, pain management and psychological therapies in the effective management of chronic back pain. Surgery should only be considered if other options have been ineffective or if there is a specific, identified cause of your symptoms where surgery has been shown to be effective. Surgery is not without its risks and often does not provide a 'quick fix' to chronic pain.



Myth 4/ The discs in my spine are vulnerable and prone to injury

Discs often get a bad rep when it comes to back pain but actually spinal discs are really robust and adaptable and we can actually make them stronger through regular movement in all directions and even by lifting. Disc injuries have also been shown to occur more often in those who don't exercise than in those who do. Your physiotherapist, MSK clinician or rehabilitation therapist can support you with your rehabilitation and make sure you have a programme suitable for you.



Top tips for managing lower back pain

1/ Find what works best for you

There is no 'one size fits all' for managing back pain, but we do know that keeping and staying active plays an important role. The key is to find out what type of movement and exercise works for you. For example, if you enjoy pilates then this is a great option for you and has been shown to have a beneficial effect on back pain. If you prefer the social aspect of exercise, then group classes or walking groups are also effective.

2/ Think about wider lifestyle factors that can impact pain

Looking at wider lifestyle factors can help to reduce back pain. Are you getting enough sleep, staying hydrated, eating well and keeping mentally healthy? These are all things that can trigger or exemplify back pain.

3/ Factor regular movement breaks into your day

Many people spend at least eight hours a day at work so it's important to look after your back during this time. The best way to do this is to factor in regular breaks to stand up, move around, and squeeze in some exercises such as squats or stretches between meetings. If time runs away from you, stick reminders in your diary or phone every 30 mins or so to move.

4/ Ensure your work setup is right for you

If you work in a static job, whether seated or standing, ensure your work set-up is correct for you - a poor desk setup can be uncomfortable especially if you are sitting there for a long time. At a minimum, try to have your computer screen at eye level in front of you and your chair directly facing it. If you're working from a laptop, use a second screen at eye level to avoid hunching over the desk. Plus, have your mouse and keyboard within easy reach so that you don't have to stretch to use them.



What if back pain doesn't resolve naturally over time?

Reassuringly, most episodes of back pain will resolve naturally over time. For those stubborn episodes that don't resolve as quickly as you would have hoped, MSK experts such as physiotherapists, MSK clinicians and rehabilitation specialists can support you with your recovery by providing tailored programmes consisting of advice, coaching, and tailored exercise programmes, with your goals at the core.



Making People Better podcast series

Back Pain: Prevention, Causes and Management Strategies

Ever find yourself clutching at your lower back, wondering if your spine secretly despises you? Let's unravel that mystery with the help of Karen Beattie shed light on back pain's complex relationship with sleep, diet, and mental health.

[Listen here](#)



How to support someone who has cancer

It's not always easy to know how to support a loved one who's been diagnosed with cancer. But even small gestures can make a significant difference to someone who's received a cancer diagnosis or is undergoing treatment.



Practical ways to help

A cancer diagnosis, treatment and side effects can be very incredibly difficult and exhausting. Someone who's going through this may struggle to manage day-to-day life, including completing 'normal' activities and jobs.

Instead of being vague in an offer of support, which can feel overwhelming to the individual, suggest specific tasks you can pick up e.g. preparing meals, collecting their kids from school or doing a food shop.

Emotional ways to help

Knowing what to say to someone with a cancer diagnosis can be tricky. One of the most crucial ways to support someone is simply by being present and allowing them to express their feelings.

- **Show that you're actively listening:** Make eye contact, nod, and respond calmly.
- **Confirm your understanding:** Use phrases like, "Do you mean that...?" or "I think you mean... Have I understood that correctly?"
- **Encourage them to share:** Ask, "How did that make you feel?"
- **Don't interrupt them:** Resist the urge to jump in with suggestions. Let them talk at their own pace, allowing for silences.
- **Discuss everyday topics:** Sometimes, people prefer to talk about things other than cancer to bring a sense of normalcy and avoid feeling consumed by the illness.

If they don't feel like talking, here are other ways to offer emotional support. These gestures, though small, can have a profound impact on someone navigating their journey with cancer:

- **Watch a show or movie together:** Even 30 mins of shared time can help them feel less alone.
- **Send a text message:** Let them know you're thinking of them and that you're there when they need you.
- **Write a card or send a gift:** A note of encouragement can be a comforting surprise.



Challenge of the month: Step away from your phone for an hour

Taking a break from your phone for an hour a day can help to reduce stress, calm the mind and promote better sleep. It also allows us the opportunity to develop deeper personal connections with those around us, which can improve mental and emotional wellbeing.

So, this month we challenge you to put your phone out of sight for an hour once a week (and more if you can manage it). Take note of how you feel and try to incorporate it into your daily routine.

Contact us



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