

Looking after your health

What does it mean to look after your health?

When we talk about looking after your health, there are three components – physical health, mental health and social health. In this post, we are mainly talking about how physical health can impact mental health and vice-versa. Your physical health and mental health are connected - looking after one looks after the other.

Why is it important to look after your health?

On the one hand, psychological wellbeing can reduce the risk of heart attacks⁽⁷⁾ and strokes.⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand, something as straight-forward as maintaining a healthy diet, and hence improving your physical health, can positively impact your mood.⁽¹⁾

Any form of self-care can help improve your health. We're sure you've heard these tips several times before and have definitely attempted to make these changes. It can be disheartening when the results are transient when we're looking for long-term change. Before we dive in and to tell you what you should and should not try to do, we're going to help you turn these tips into habits that are long-lasting.

How can you look after your health?

Habit formation⁽²⁾ involves simply repeating any health-promoting behaviour at a specific time each day or after a specific cue can increase your likelihood of automatically engaging in the behaviours, even if this behaviour is skipped on some days. It's important to start out with simple behaviours (eg: taking a walk everyday after dinner) than more complex behaviours/routines (eg: going to the gym at 5am everyday). Here are 4 simple steps towards forming a health-promoting habit:

1. Set a goal for yourself - what do you want to achieve in terms of your health?
2. Begin with a simple behaviour/routine that is easy to implement into your current routine
3. Consistency is key - choose a time and place for the behaviour and stick to it as far as possible. This will help you associate certain cues with the desired behaviour, making the action automatic
4. Begin to add to this behaviour and slowly increase it's complexity until you're able to do it automatically without much thought

Exercising

Exercising can reduce your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes. It also improves your brain's health by releasing chemicals that leave you feeling happier and more relaxed. Whether it's something as simple as taking an hour-long walk every evening or regular visits to the gym - it's important to pick an activity you actually enjoy doing as it will be easier to form into a habit. Staying active, in whatever way shape or form, is important to maintain your general health and wellbeing.

Eating well⁽¹⁾⁽⁵⁾⁽⁹⁾

A well balanced diet has an effect on the development and prevention of a myriad of mental health conditions, including depression and dementia. The food we eat can affect our stress levels, and not eating enough food for your body makes it tougher to cope with stressful situations which can negatively impact your mood. Your mood can also be affected by unhealthy eating, making you feel more lethargic and unmotivated. It's most important to eat right for the long-term benefits rather than trying to diet for its short term effects. Junk food does have a relation to depression, anxiety and lack of sleep satisfaction. This doesn't mean you have to cut your favourite chocolates out of your diet, but instead be mindful of how often and how much of it you are consuming. Additionally, it's important to stay hydrated and this can impact your energy levels and mood. Keeping a large bottle of water with you at all times or using an app that tracks and reminds you to drink water can be helpful towards forming this habit.

Healthy food that tastes good is available too! Various websites and videos are available for healthy cooking which can be scrumptious as well.

Being in nature⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾

Simply spending time outdoors, in nature, can positively impact your mood, sense of connectedness and brain health. This can be done in any way that suits you, from taking a walk in a park to picking up a hobby like gardening which can reduce your cortisol levels.

Not using/abusing substances

Substance use, especially alcohol, can negatively impact your health leading to heart disease, high blood pressure, liver issues and stroke. Additionally, it can affect your mental health and social connections. It's important to be mindful about your alcohol consumption and be mindful of the substances you are consuming as it can have short and long-term negative effects on your health.

Sleeping well⁽⁶⁾

Healthy sleep habits are very important towards making sure you stay mentally and physically healthy. According to the CDC, adolescents need between 8 to 10 hours of sleep on a daily basis. Practising good sleep hygiene can help towards making healthy sleep habitual. This involves:

- Having a fixed sleep schedule - waking up and falling asleep at the same time everyday. This is important as it normalises our circadian rhythm
- Try not to nap during the day as it can affect your sleep schedule at night
- Have a consistent bedtime routine to prepare your brain to fall asleep. Things like having device-free time before bed, a skincare routine, mindfulness practices and other things that can help you wind down
- Making sure you're comfortable in the space you're sleeping in - make sure it's lit appropriately, at your desired temperature and without the distraction of loud noises that can hinder your ability to fall asleep
- Make sure your daytime habits support your sleep schedule. Getting plenty of sunlight, limiting caffeine and alcohol intake, giving your food enough time to digest and staying active can also contribute to getting a good night's sleep

Spirituality⁽¹¹⁾

Studies show that being spiritual can help in coping with illness, stressors and pain. Being spiritual doesn't necessarily mean being religious. It also extends into being more in touch with one's spirit, which can be achieved in numerous ways such as meditation and prayer.

Managing stress

Keeping your stress at bay has been shown to be beneficial to your health as well. Some ways you can do this include accepting that there are events that you cannot control, seeking social support and making time for hobbies and interests.

Being socially connected⁽¹²⁾⁽¹³⁾

Being socially connected has been shown to help out with benefits such as lowering risk for depression and anxiety and getting better sleep. You can get more connected by reducing screen time, learning how to manage conflict and getting to know yourself better

Having a sense of purpose⁽¹⁴⁾

Having a sense of purpose is associated with more physical activity, enhanced sleep and reducing smoking. Attaining a sense of purpose can be done by reading, cultivating gratitude and finding and building a sense of community.

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