

Information Sheet

HEALTHY, BALANCED LIFESTYLE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Research evidence has demonstrated that a healthy, balanced lifestyle provides a solid foundation for physical and psychological wellbeing. For many people with busy lives and a range of work, study, family, parenting or other commitments, it is easy for the various elements of a healthy lifestyle to receive less than optimal attention. Many aspects of mental health (including mood, anxiety and stress levels) may be negatively affected by imbalances in lifestyle. Functioning in interpersonal, academic, work and other life domains may also be compromised when basic lifestyle needs are not adequately attended to. Each of the following five lifestyle areas makes an important contribution to overall mental health and wellbeing:

Sleep – aim for sleep of adequate duration (on average 7 to 9 hours each night) and quality (falling asleep without difficulty and having a mostly undisturbed sleep). This may be promoted by: having regular times to go to bed and wake up each day; eliminating the use of backlit devices at least one hour before bed; eliminating caffeine and alcohol consumption in the hours before bedtime; engaging in a calming bedtime routine (drinking a warm non-caffeinated drink, quiet reading, mindfulness meditation); ensuring the sleep environment is conducive to sleep (e.g., cool, dark, quiet); avoiding activities that raise the body temperature (e.g., exercise, hot baths) for two hours before bedtime; eliminating clock watching.

Nutrition – current research indicates that good nutrition is essential for our mental health. Optimum daily nutrition involves eating whole, unprocessed foods from a variety of food groups and sources, including fresh vegetables and fruit, lean protein, and food containing healthy fats (e.g., nuts, eggs and avocado); drinking plenty of water; limiting caffeine

(including energy drinks) and alcohol intake; limiting intake of processed and takeaway foods which are highly refined and often contain added salt and sugar, and high saturated and transfat content.

Exercise – aim to be physically active on most days of the week with a mix of moderate and more vigorous-intensity activity, including muscle strengthening activities on at least 2 days of the week. This may include walking, running, swimming, cycling, playing a team sport, working out at the gym, dancing or many other forms of sustained physical activity. Exercising in the sunlight for at least part of the time is also very helpful for mental health (*don't forget the sunscreen!*).

Relaxing, fun activities – take some regular time each day away from study, work, domestic and other commitments to engage in relaxing or fun activities you enjoy, such as playing sport, reading, art and craft activities, mindfulness meditation, listening to music, bushwalking, taking a bath, or other hobbies or interests.

Social Networks – make regular time to connect and interact meaningfully with family, friends and other social contacts, such as engaging in a group interest, a community activity or volunteering.

Making effective, lasting changes

On identifying areas that may benefit from lifestyle modification, plan and implement small, specific and measurable changes. Regularly review the changes made and problem-solve to overcome obstacles encountered in following through with your plans. Learn from lapses in implementing plans to change lifestyle behaviours. Remind yourself of the benefits of improving lifestyle balance and reward yourself for your efforts. This will help to maintain your motivation to build and sustain a healthy, balanced lifestyle.