Brightening young futures

Believe in children Barnardo's

Understanding Lifestyle and Mental Health

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What is this pack for?

It can often be overlooked that our lifestyle choices and physical health can have a massive effect on our mental health and emotional wellbeing. Whilst therapies and coping strategies are always helpful they can be limited if our lifestyle habits are not particularly healthy.

Making changes in sleep, diet and exercise can be instrumental in both improving our emotional wellbeing but also in preventing future mental ill-health.

This pack aims to provide information on how different lifestyle aspects can impact on our minds and to offer advice on how to make simple changes in order to feel happier and healthier both mentally and physically.

Mental Health's Affect on Physical Health

Having issues around mental health and emotional health often have lots of knock on effects on our physical health;

- **Stress** - Stress is one of the common causes of low mood and anxiety in particular. Stress itself can make our immune systems less effective and so cause us to get poorly more often. Long term stress can eventually effect our heart as well.

- **Motivation** - Often when we feel low we have very little motivation to take care of ourselves and are far more likely to call for a takeaway, put things off, not go out or lounge on the sofa. Whilst on occasion this is ok, if we do it too often it can lead to extra issues such as issues around blood pressure, weight gain, feeling tired, not getting enough nourishment, getting overwhelmed by tasks that have been put off or feeling isolated.

- **Side Effects** - Sometimes medications may be prescribed and whilst these help our emotional wellbeing they can have side effects that are not so helpful.

- **Isolation** - Often with feeling low or anxious we can feel like being on our own and not spending time with friends and family, by not socialising we are more likely to miss out on support and help.

- **Sleep** - Often an effect of our physical health with mental health is on our sleep, feeling low can make us feel like sleeping a lot more which can be bad for our help. On the other hand, issues around anxiety or anger may cause us to be hyperactive and then we cannot get enough sleep which is also bad for us.

- **Diet** - Feeling low can often cause us to 'comfort eat' which again in moderation is ok but if we feel low for a long period of time we can end up with issues around weight gain, high blood pressure, poor skin and blood sugar issues. Others may under-eat which can leave us tired, malnourished and can cause other health problems.

- **Physical Appearance** - As a result of many of the other effects on the our physical health we can end up with changes in physical appearance such as poor skin, weight gain, weight loss, duller hair and paler skin.

Physical Health's Affect on Mental Health

The relationship between mental health and physical health works both ways and so how we are physically can affect us emotionally and mentally.

If we feel physically unwell this can cause us to feel angry, low in mood or to feel worried about what the illness is, whether it will interrupt with school or friendships and whether it is something serious or long term.

Long term conditions can be even more stressful and can offer cause emotional distress. Conditions may cause us to not be able to do things that others can do or make us feel different which can be frustrating, confusing and upsetting.

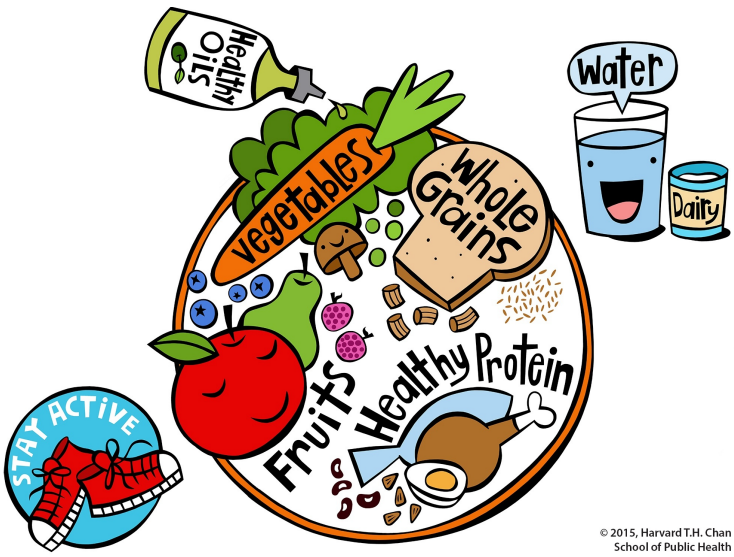
Lifestyle choices are also a big part of how well our mental health is and there are 3 areas in particular that this booklet will look at; **diet, physical activity and sleep**.

Diet

What we put in our bodies has a huge impact on what goes on for us emotionally and so being aware of how your diet might impact on your mental health may be really helpful in knowing where to make changes;

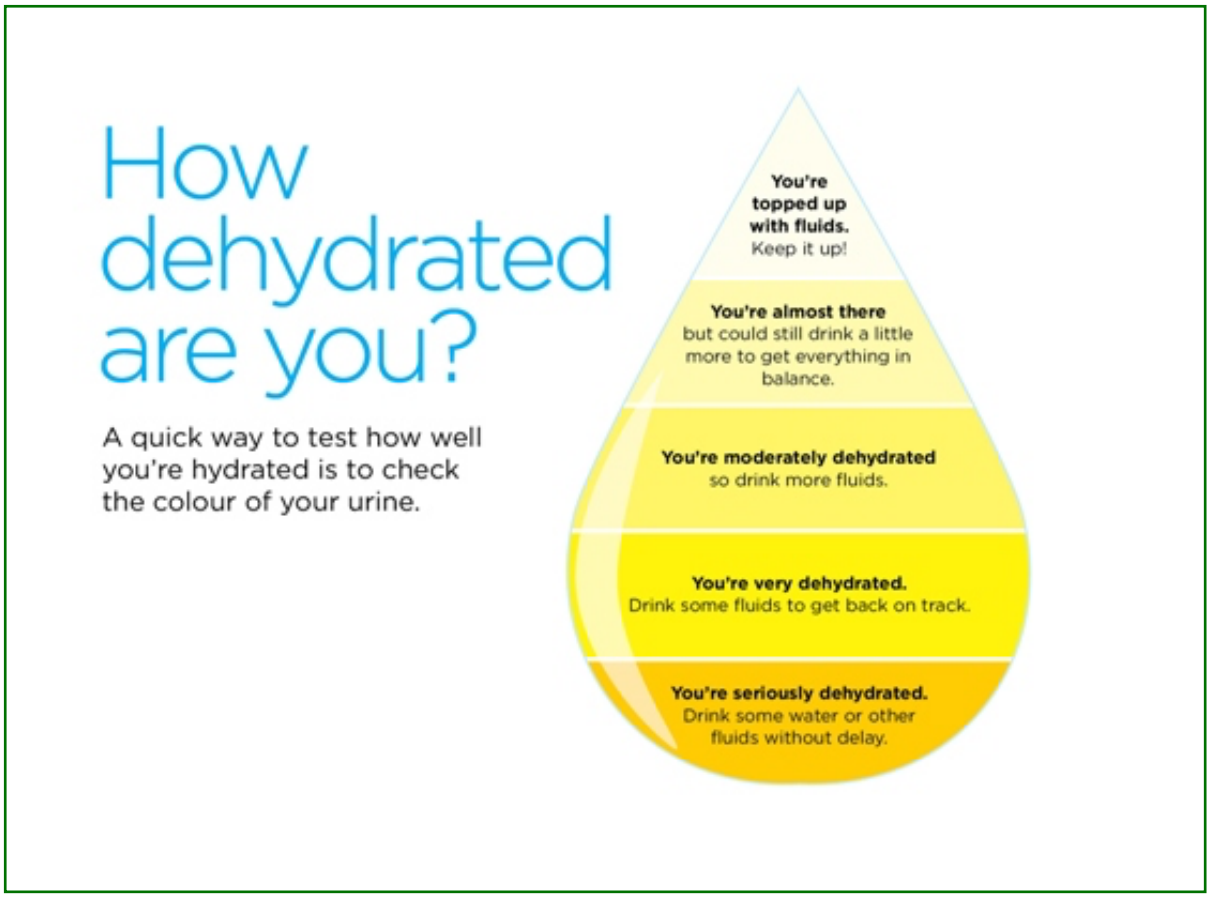
Variety - It is really important to eat a variety of food in order to make sure we get all the nutrients and vitamins that we need. Meals should have a balance of protein, healthy carbohydrates and healthy fats. If we don't vary our diets then we can become deficient in important vitamins that help to keep us feeling healthy and happy.

Eating regularly also keeps our sugar levels steady which helps us with our energy and concentration. Unsteady blood sugars can make us feel uneasy, anxious and irritable. A balanced diet should look something like this;



Regular eating - Eating 3 meals a day with one or two snacks or eating 4 or 5 smaller meals will help our brains as they need a steady and consistent flow of fuel in order to be able to work effectively. When we eat on an irregular basis we can struggle with poor attention/concentration, irritability and feeling low or moody. Also by skipping meals we can end up eating too much later or not enough overall which makes our bodies struggle to understand the signals of being full or hungry.

Stay Hydrated - Not drinking enough water can make it difficult to concentrate or think clearly which are also quite common features of feeling anxious so by making sure we have had enough water will help with this. Dehydration also causes headaches, constipation, tiredness, mood changes, cognitive (thought) impairment and memory loss.



(Image from https://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/directory/h/hydration)

How much should I drink?

- Most people need to drink around 2 litres of water a day which is about 8-10 glasses
- Keep in mind though that other drinks also contain water and so do a lot of fruit and vegetables!

What should I drink?

- Water
- Coconut water
- Fruit juices and smoothies (although watch out for lots of sugar!)
- Milk (Semi-Skimmed and Skimmed)
- Tea and Coffee (Yes these do count but drink in moderation as these contain caffeine)

Physical Activity

It is no secret that being physically active is good for us; as well as being positive for our bodies it is also really good in helping improve our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

So what do we mean by being physically active? Activity can be split into three categories;

1. Physical Activity - any movement we do on a day to day basis.
2. Exercise - activities that we do to specifically for fitness.
3. Sport - activities that we usually have a competitive element, can be done in a team or alone but is in general a bit more formal than exercise for example football, tennis, badminton etc.

Benefits of Physical Activity

Physical Benefits:

- Reduces the risk of health issues and diseases.
- More energy - this is especially helpful in issues such as depression as energy becomes very low and we can become withdrawn.
- Improved sleep - poor sleep can make mental health issues significantly worse as we will discuss later.
- Healthier weight - this can have a knock on effect on our self-esteem and how we feel about ourselves.

Social Benefits:

- Being active in particular going out to exercise or play sport can be really good for our social lives and help us connect with new people, make friends and have common interests.

Psychological benefits:

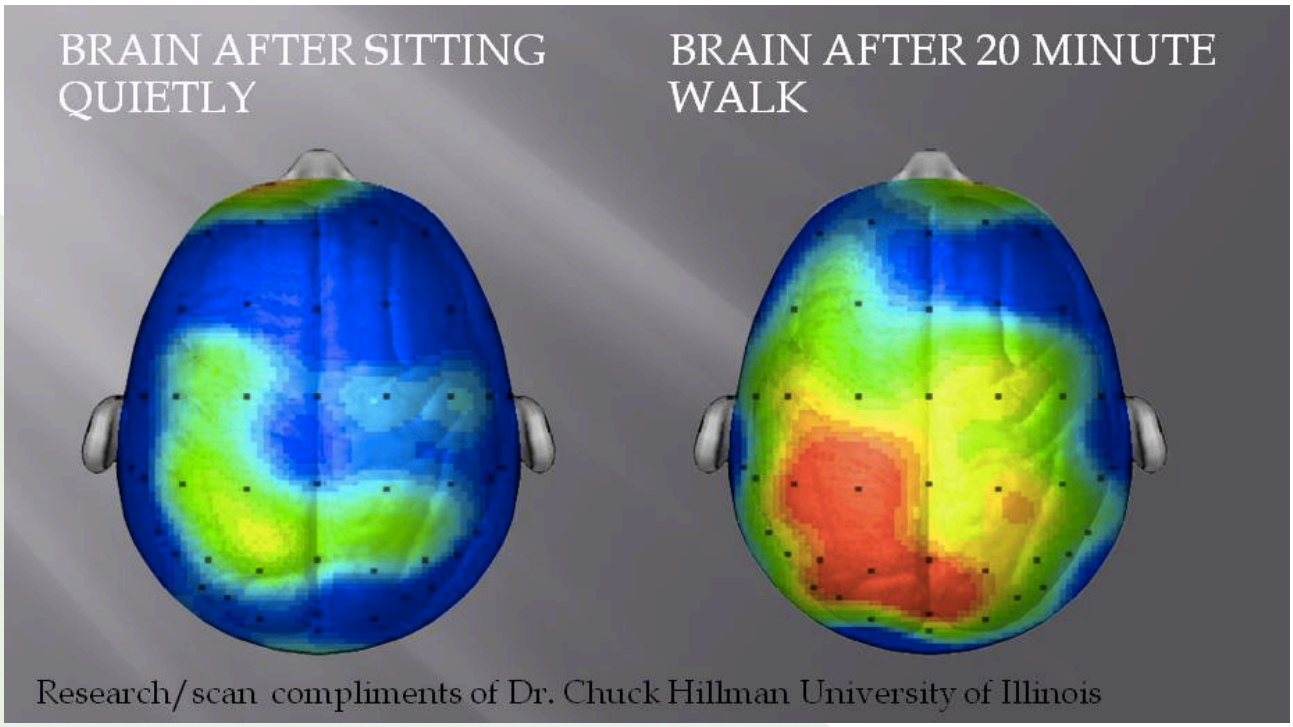
- Being active is scientifically proven to improve mood, lower anxiety and lower stress and here is why;

You may have heard the line 'exercise is good because it releases endorphins', but what does this really mean?

When we start exercising our brains recognise that this is a moment of stress and so our heart pressure increases and our bodies go into 'fight or flight' mode (our survival instinct). Our brain in response releases proteins that protects itself and acts as a reset switch; this is why we often feel more at ease after exercise!

At the same time, other chemicals called endorphins are also releases and their job is to reduce discomfort of exercise, block pain and can cause a feeling of euphoria/happiness.

Essentially, there's a lot going on in our brains when we exercise as we can see in the image below!



Daily Routine

Having a daily routine is something that is often overlooked but it can be vital for keeping us grounded, keeping our mood stable and managing anxiety.

Making sure we do even basic tasks like getting dressed or showering can make differences in how we feel emotionally. Making sure your day is filled with some level of enjoyment, a sense of achievement and a closeness to others is key to improving mood in particular.

By maintaining a routine it keeps energy levels up and adds rhythm into daily life, this can reduce spending time worrying, ruminating and focusing on negative thoughts.

Sleep

There is a close relationship between sleep and emotional wellbeing. Often having issues with mood and anxiety can impact on our sleep and poor sleep can have a negative impact on our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Sleep problems can lead to;
- Negative thoughts
- Low mood
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Feeling withdrawn
- Irrational thoughts
- Paranoia
- Changes in diet/appetite/eating habits

Why is sleep important?

Whilst we tend to think that sleep is a time for our minds and bodies to shut down, our brains are actually working very hard during sleep. Sleep is a period of time where a lot of processing, strengthening and restoration occurs (think of it as your brain resetting!).

One the vital roles of sleep is to process our memories and all the information we have taken in throughout our day. Overnight our brains 'sort' pieces of information and transfer short-term memories into stronger long-term memories. Sleep also helps our bodies as during sleep our bodies restore and rejuvenate, repair tissue, grow muscle and balance hormones.

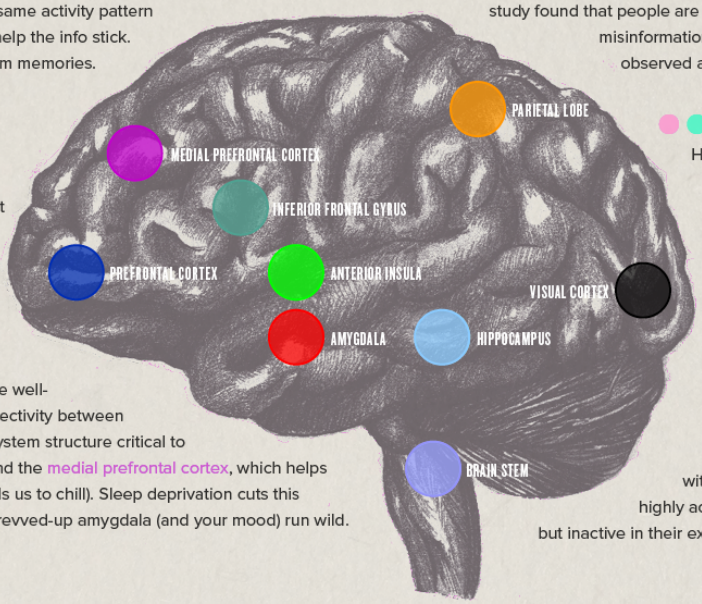
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR BRAIN DOESN'T SLEEP?

LOST MEMORIES

The hippocampus, a moon-shaped structure in the temporal lobe, exhibits a distinct pattern of neural activity when the waking mind encodes (learns) new information. Scientists believe our brain later "replays" the same activity pattern while we're sleeping to help the info stick. Lose sleep, lose long-term memories.

ANGER

Sleep loss primes us to focus on negative experiences, misinterpret facial expressions and pick fights. Emotional volatility may partly be a product of interrupted communication between brain regions. FMRI of the well-rested brain shows connectivity between the amygdala, a limbic system structure critical to emotional processing, and the medial prefrontal cortex, which helps regulate feelings (i.e., tells us to chill). Sleep deprivation cuts this connection, letting your revved-up amygdala (and your mood) run wild.



IMPAIRED WIT

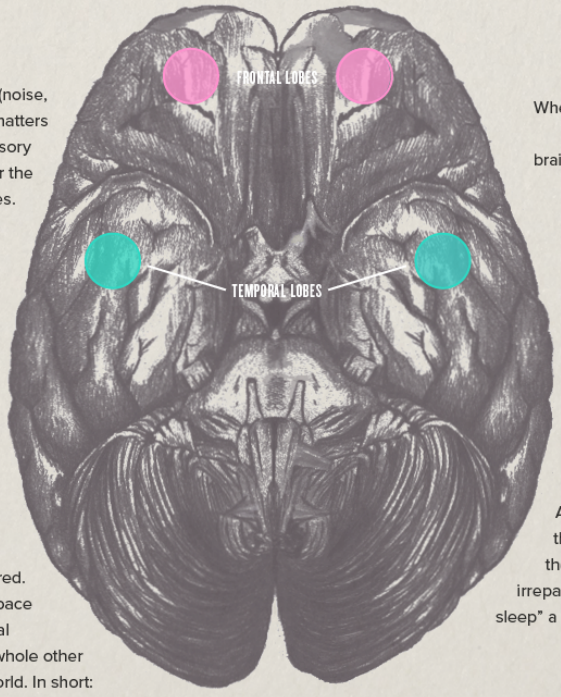
When you skimp on sleep, the clever commentary may not flow so easily. Sleep loss affects cognitive processes like divergent thinking, which helps us switch topics nimbly during conversation. Scientists found that activity in the inferior frontal gyrus increases when sleep-deprived people tried to list uses for different objects, suggesting the brain draws on divergent thinking to compensate for strained cognitive functioning.

HALLUCINATIONS

The well-rested brain filters stimuli (noise, light, smell, etc.) to separate what matters from what doesn't and prevent sensory overload. When the brain can't filter the information coming in, chaos ensues. After pulling an all-nighter, people may begin to anticipate things that aren't there, including objects.

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

We all lose focus now and then, but brain activity linked to attention lapses changes when people sacrifice sleep. After a good night's rest, these lapses correspond to altered thalamus function and less-active frontal and parietal networks, which basically means we tune out when we're bored. But when sleep-deprived people space out, they also exhibit impaired visual sensory processing, suggesting a whole other level of disengagement with the world. In short: Losing sleep turns you into Phoebe from Friends.



FALSE MEMORIES

The sleep-starved brain may fail to encode memories successfully in the first place, thanks to altered function in the hippocampus, as well as prefrontal cortex and parietal lobe regions. One study found that people are more likely to incorporate misinformation into memories of events observed after a night without sleep.

CEREBRAL SHRINKAGE

Healthy adults getting poor sleep lose volume in the frontal, temporal and parietal lobes, one study showed. Researchers don't yet understand if sleep loss causes shrinkage or vice versa.

SLURRED SPEECH

The temporal lobe, the brain region associated with language processing, is highly active in well-rested people but inactive in their exhausted and enunciation-challenged counterparts.

CRONUT BINGES

Sleep loss corresponds with decreased activity in the frontal lobe, which controls decision-making, and more activity in the amygdala, a key player in fear detection. Together, these neural changes create a brain mechanism that dulls judgment and ratchets up desire — the ideal mind-state for scarfing down fistfuls of bacon.

RISKY DECISIONS

When sleep-deprived people prepare to make economic decisions, the brain's reward center in the prefrontal cortex lights up, suggesting they expect to win (e.g., make money). But when risky choices don't pan out, people's brain activity decreases in the region related to punishment and aversion (the anterior insula), suggesting they don't care about losing money as much as they would on a good night's sleep.

BRAIN DAMAGE

Add all-nighters to the list of things that kill brain cells — in this case, in the brain stem. The damage may be irreparable, making "catching up on lost sleep" a poor excuse for snoozing till noon on the weekends.

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Sources for infographic: Research from The Journal of Neuroscience, International Scholarly Research Notes, Experimental Brain Research, Psychological Bulletin, UC Berkeley Walker Sleep Lab, PNAS, International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health, The Centers of Disease and Prevention, SLEEP, PLOS One, Psychological Science, Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, NeuroImage

How to Improve Sleep

Relaxing before bed:

Turning your brain off before trying to sleep is important for a restful nights sleep so having a relaxation routine can help you wind down;

- Relaxing activities - reading, listening to music, colouring
- Breathing exercises
- Muscle relaxation
- Relaxation apps

Switch electronic devices off:

Electronic devices can trick your brain into thinking its day time so be sure to switch off around an hour before bedtime.

Think about your environment:

Dark, quiet and cool environments promote sleep so consider what your bedroom looks like and feels like. If it is too hot, uncomfortable or noisy this will disturb sleep!

Sleep Diary:

If you are struggling to figure out what is affecting your sleep then keeping a sleep diary can help you notice any habits or patterns that may help you understand where the problem is or what is affecting your sleep.

Sleep Diary

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Complete in the MORNING							
I went to bed last night at (time)							
I got up this morning at (time)							
I slept for a total of (hours)							
I woke up during the night (# times)							
Complete in the EVENING							
Number of caffeinated drinks today							
Time of last caffeinated drink							
Exercise completed today (minutes)							
What I did in the hour before I fell asleep							
Mood today? (0=awful, 10=great)							

PSYCHOLOGYTOOLS

Diet and Medications:

Consider what you are eating and drinking within the few hours before bed; if you are consuming sugar or caffeine in particular this will disturb sleep. Also check with you if you are taking any medications and some can affect sleep.

Sleep Routines:

Think about your routine in relation to sleep;

- Napping in the day will throw your sleep cycle out and cause issues in trying to sleep at night so however tired you may be try to resist!
- Try to have a set bedtime routine to help get your brain and body used to knowing when it is time to wind down and sleep.