

Putting your wellbeing first: Steps you can take



Children are wonderful spirit-lifters. Whether they're making you laugh, keeping you extra busy or pretty much forcing you to go outdoors. But as people who work or live with young children, the pressures you face can often take a toll on your wellbeing.

You may feel a constant added pressure to look happy, even if you don't feel it, in order to protect them, and this can only add to your stress levels. We believe, it would make more sense to look after yourself in order to be best equipped to helping them.

Here are some basic steps that you can take to put your wellbeing first and tried to give you a little insight into why these steps might work wonders.

Steps you can take:

Go for a walk. It sounds so simple however serotonin refers to a chemical in our brains which is linked to happiness and wellbeing. Low mood is linked to low serotonin levels in the body, which could be boosted by exercise and sunlight. Although we don't always get the chance, make time! Get outdoors and go for a walk this Sunday. Alone, or with the children - we'll let you decide. We recently talked about how important it is for early years children to spend as much time outdoors in winter as they do in summer so this is your perfect opportunity! The fresh air and daylight will certainly do you good. It will also be a great opportunity to clear your head, think about the weeks and months ahead and get some exercise in at the same time.

Talk to your friends, colleagues and family. They're most likely going through a lot of the same life related issues as you, most of the time. In fact, it can be quite comforting to reach out and speak to people in a similar boat. Give them a call and ask how they're doing, laugh about things, anything, and listen. As for your colleagues, they can most likely relate to pretty much every worry or stress you go

through, so turn to them for a chat. Drop them a call and come up with some ways to lift the mood, or some activities for you and the children.

Eat well. Our diets can affect so many different things! From mood swings and tiredness to energised and positive, the food we choose to eat can play a huge part in how we're feeling within ourselves. Healthy foods are linked to happiness and wellbeing, with sweet potatoes, bananas and green vegetables known to actually boost your mood and release energy. Regular meals, five-a-day and plenty of fluids are encouraged to maintain positive thinking and a healthy mind, even in the trickiest of circumstances. You can even use this as an opportunity to teach about healthy food. Create colourful fruit salads with the children or do some sorting exercises with vegetables and fruits.

Plan. It's good to do some planning. It gives you some focus and encouragement, as well as helping you to feel more organised. It doesn't have to be intense planning, either, you could plan what you're going to eat for dinner next week or to plan some of the things you'd like to try out with the children. Have a look on Instagram or Pinterest for some inspiration, there's lots on there and it's fun to scroll!

Have a clear out. If there's ever a perfect time for a clear out - it's now. Have a deep clean, sort through the cupboards, and throw away all the stuff you've not even looked at for months! Children could help with this too. If you feel too lazy, put some music on and have a dance whilst you do it. You'll feel great afterwards.

Most importantly, think positively. Whether you've been down in the dumps for a day, week, month or whole year, it's time to look on the bright side. We're not saying force yourself to feel happy but take more time to appreciate things that you're grateful for. Writing a list of all the things you feel happy to have, or all the things you love, is a great start.

We often associate working out with getting fitter and leaner, but the benefits of exercise can be even greater for our brains and our mental state. It's becoming more apparent to more of us just how much our mental health is affected by exercise and many of us are taking steps to improve our physical fitness for this reason, or at least trying to.

So, before we get into it, what are the facts?

- Running for 15 minutes or walking for 1 hour can reduce the risk of depression by 26%
- People who exercise daily tend to have between 1-2 fewer 'bad days' each month than those who don't

Why is this the case?

Well, it's mainly down to the 'happy chemicals' our brains release when we exercise - like endorphins, which relieve pain and give positive feelings of enjoyment. Endorphins are one of the many chemicals in our brains which determine how we think and feel about situations. When these are realised during exercise, they trigger other chemicals within the body which give us the energy and determination to get through the physical activity at hand, and therefore improving our general mood and wellbeing. These chemicals include Dopamine, Norepinephrine, Serotonin and Adrenaline - Serotonin being the main chemical which is targeted by antidepressants.

What should I do?

Enough of the science behind exercise and mental health - we all know we need to do more. But because our lives can be so busy and stressful, it's difficult to make time or even think about making time for our personal wellbeing. But it's so important. We can't run on empty, and the more we feed our minds, the better they'll perform for us in our day-to-day lives.

Also, don't be put off by the words 'workout' or 'exercise'. People tend to associate both with heavy weightlifting activities in the gym or running a marathon after work. We know that isn't realistic when you work full-time and/or have children to look after, but as long as you're getting in 15-30 minutes a day of heart-pumping activities, it's better than nothing at all. Here's some exercise activities you could try:

- Dance
- Gardening
- Keep fit home videos
- Yoga
- Walking or jogging

It's also very smart to start off small and do more when you feel like it. Exercise can be a daunting thought when you haven't done any for so long, so just take baby-steps and do things you enjoy.

How will this help me in my day-to-day life?

As I'm sure you're aware by now, there seems to be a strong correlation between exercise and mental health. But as well as lowering the chances of depression, exercise can provide several emotional benefits. Here are some to consider:

More energy. Regular exercise should give you more motivation to 'get up and go'. The more exercise you do, the more energy you'll build up, and therefore be able to do more exercise! This is how people raise their tolerance levels when it comes to working out, so start off small and keep growing.

Improved sleep. Even short periods of exercise in the mornings or afternoons can improve your sleep and sleeping pattern massively. Releasing energy will allow your body to relax better at night-time. Or if you only have time to exercise in the evenings, try relaxing activities such as yoga or stretching.

Sharper memory & thinking. As well as endorphins making you feel happier, they also improve concentration and help you to feel more mentally sharp. This will allow you to get things done more efficiently and quickly, so if you feel as though there's no time for exercise because of workload, make time, and your workload will feel much easier to get through!

Higher self-esteem. Exercising regularly can help you to feel more powerful and strong, and therefore building up your self-esteem. By meeting regular exercise goals, you may start to feel a sense of achievement, and even feel better about your over-all appearance. These things will improve your self-worth and help you to feel more positively about yourself, and the people and things around you.

Anything is better than nothing

If you're still not convinced, then just a few minutes per day of exercise is still better than nothing at all. If you don't feel up to exercising or simply have too much on, do something as simple as going for a walk outdoors. Fill your lungs with fresh air and try to take some minutes away from everything you have on your mind. You don't have to suffer and force yourself into intense exercise routines.

If you're unsure how you feel and think you need some more guidance on what to do in order to improve your mental health and wellbeing in general, you can take a short quiz here <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/how-are-you-quiz/>, which will give you a score and recommend some tips to improve your lifestyle and mental health. For more information on how exercise can help lower your risk of depression, see the NHS website.

<https://www.nhs.uk/news/mental-health/regular-exercise-may-help-lower-your-risk-depression/>

This article was adapted from the Hope education Blog.