



LIFESTYLE MEDICINE RESOURCE · JUNE 2026

Mental Health Reset

Everyday Strategies from Lifestyle Medicine
An introductory guide to evidence-informed wellbeing



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PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE

Why Lifestyle Matters

Mental health is a cornerstone of well-being, but it's not just about mental health problems. It's shaped by how we live, connect, eat, move, and sleep. This guide explores how everyday lifestyle choices can meaningfully impact our mental well-being, both for people with mental health conditions and for everyone seeking to thrive.

"Mental health conditions are among the leading causes of disability worldwide."

The World Health Organization, the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health, and national bodies such as the NHMRC have called for increased focus on mental health prevention and promotion.

There is a growing body of evidence that lifestyle factors, including nutrition, movement, sleep, connection, purpose, and access to nature - significantly shape our mental and emotional health.

THIS RESOURCE AIMS TO

Highlight that lifestyle is an essential component for boosting mental health, and give a brief overview of the evidence-informed reasons why altering lifestyle may improve health and well-being for individuals and communities.

TWO EMERGING DISCIPLINES

Lifestyle Medicine & Lifestyle Psychiatry

Lifestyle factors such as sleep, nutrition, movement, and connection can powerfully shape our mental health. **Lifestyle Medicine** and **Lifestyle Psychiatry** are the disciplines that translate this evidence into practice, placing everyday behaviours and social context at the centre of care, not as a replacement for traditional treatment, but as essential complements to it.

While conventional psychiatry often focuses on diagnosis and medication, these frameworks offer a broader, more human lens.

Lifestyle Medicine

Addresses physical and mental health through six evidence-based pillars: nutrition, physical activity, sleep, stress management, social connection, and reducing risky substance use.

Lifestyle Psychiatry

Applies these principles specifically to mental health, integrating biological, psychological, and social mechanisms for conditions like anxiety, depression, burnout, and subclinical distress.



Nutrition



Physical Activity



Sleep



Stress Management



Social Connection



Reduce Risky Substance Use

UPDATED 2025 · NEW CORE COMPETENCY

Social Determinants of Health

Lifestyle Medicine now formally recognises that the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age profoundly shape their health, and their ability to make lifestyle changes. These social determinants of health (SDOH) are not peripheral; they are central to a truly equitable and effective approach to care.

Housing security

Income & poverty

Access to healthy food

Education

Neighbourhood safety

Discrimination

Health literacy

Transport access

BODY & BRAIN HEALTH

Physical Foundations of Wellbeing

Movement, nutrition, sleep, and sunlight shape brain chemistry, hormonal balance, and physical resilience. These are among the most evidence-supported lifestyle pillars for mental health.



Move Your Body Daily

Aim for 30+ minutes of moderate activity most days. Movement regulates mood, reduces anxiety, and boosts BDNF and endorphins. Even short bouts count.



Eat Whole, Fibre-Rich Foods

Focus on vegetables, whole grains, legumes, healthy fats, and lean protein. The Mediterranean diet links to lower depression rates. Fibre and fermented foods support the gut-brain axis.



Prioritise Sleep Hygiene

Aim for 7–9 hours. Keep consistent bed/wake times. Reduce screens and caffeine before bed. Good sleep regulates stress hormones and stabilises mood.



Get Sunlight & Time Outdoors

15–30 minutes of morning sunlight resets your circadian rhythm and supports vitamin D. Green and blue spaces reduce mental fatigue and cortisol.

ALSO IMPORTANT

Reduce or moderate drug use (including alcohol and nicotine). These substances can disrupt mood regulation, sleep quality, and emotional resilience. While they may seem like short-term stress relievers, they increase anxiety and impair coping over time. Gradual reduction supports clearer thinking, improved mood, and long-term wellbeing.

CONNECTION & COMMUNITY

The Protective Power of Belonging

Relationships, belonging, and meaningful social engagement are essential ingredients for emotional stability and long-term well-being. Loneliness is a known risk factor for poor mental health; connection is one of the most powerful protective ones.



Connect Meaningfully

Nurture close relationships through regular check-ins, shared activities, or honest conversations. Even brief warm interactions with neighbours can build belonging.



Volunteer or Support Others

Acts of kindness, even small ones, promote purpose, positive emotions, and social networks. Helping others often helps us too.



Spend Time in Nature

Parks, gardens, or water calm the nervous system and lower cortisol. Nature promotes attention restoration and emotional regulation.



Create Digital Boundaries

Excess screen time, especially before bed, disrupts sleep and worsens mood. Set device-free times. Use grayscale screens or app limits to reduce passive scrolling.

ASKING FOR HELP IS A STRENGTH

Whether it's talking to a friend, calling a helpline, or seeing a professional, reaching out makes challenges more manageable. Most people feel relief after opening up.

MIND & MOOD

Internal Tools for Emotional Resilience

These practices help regulate emotions, strengthen self-awareness, and bring purpose to daily life, including mindfulness, values, creativity, and gratitude.

1 Practise Gratitude

Notice and appreciate small positives - a warm drink, a kind gesture, a beautiful sky. Keep a journal or pause daily to reflect. Over time, this shifts perspective and lifts mood.

2 Establish Daily Structure & Routines

Predictability reduces anxiety and decision fatigue. Create anchor points - a morning walk, a regular mealtime, an evening wind-down. These bring a sense of control even when life feels chaotic.

3 Engage in Hobbies & Creative Activities

Play, art, music, cooking, and other expressive activities foster joy, creativity, and presence. They interrupt rumination and stimulate dopamine. You don't need to be "good" at a hobby to benefit.

4 Practise Mindfulness or Meditation

Mindfulness strengthens attention, reduces reactivity, and improves emotional regulation. Try guided meditations, mindful walking, or simply noticing your breath. Even 5–10 minutes daily makes a difference.

5 Explore and Express Your Values

Knowing what matters to you helps guide meaningful choices. Reflect on moments when you felt most fulfilled: what values were present? Aligning actions with values builds psychological flexibility, resilience, and purpose.

BUILD YOUR PERSONAL TOOLKIT

Ultimately, discover strategies that help *you* regulate your emotional state. What works for one person may not work for another. Building a personal toolkit of supports helps you stay steady, even in chaotic environments.

MECHANISMS OF ACTION

Why Lifestyle Changes Actually Work

Lifestyle changes don't just make us feel better; there's a robust body of research explaining how and why they work. When we move, eat nutritiously, sleep well, connect with others, or spend time in nature, we're influencing real biological, psychological, and social processes.

BIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

- **Neurotransmitter Regulation**

Physical activity, nutrition, and sleep influence serotonin, dopamine, and GABA, brain chemicals essential for mood stability and motivation.

- **Inflammation Reduction**

Regular movement and anti-inflammatory diets reduce low-grade neuroinflammation, which is linked to depression and cognitive decline.

- **Hormonal Balance**

Good sleep and stress management balance cortisol and melatonin, supporting circadian rhythms and emotional regulation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

- **Behavioural Activation**

Taking action, even in small steps, disrupts negative thought loops, increases motivation, and builds a sense of progress.

- **Cognitive Shifts**

Practices like gratitude, routine, and nature exposure help shift attention away from rumination and support more balanced thinking.

- **Values Alignment**

Making choices based on what truly matters increases psychological flexibility and improves life satisfaction.

SOCIAL MECHANISMS

- **Connection & Support**

Loneliness is a known risk factor for poor mental health. Supportive relationships buffer stress and protect wellbeing.

- **Cultural Identity & Belonging**

Feeling connected to your culture, language, or community fosters self-worth, meaning, and social inclusion.

- **Social Determinants of Health**

The structural conditions of people's lives - poverty, discrimination, housing, access to care - significantly shape mental health outcomes. Recognising SDOH enables more realistic, equitable, and compassionate support.

- **Health Literacy**

Understanding how lifestyle affects mental health and knowing how to act on that knowledge builds confidence and a sense of control.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Evaluating Your Own Risk & Protective Factors

Understanding mental health means recognising both what can put us at risk and what can protect our well-being. Identifying your personal risk and protective factors helps you make targeted adjustments. Note that many risk factors below reflect social determinants of health; structural conditions that may require broader community or systemic support, not just individual change.

⚠ RISK FACTORS	✦ PROTECTIVE FACTORS
Social isolation or loneliness	Close relationships and people you can talk to
Living in unstable, unsafe, or overcrowded housing	Regular physical activity you enjoy
Managing a chronic health condition or long-term pain	Good quality sleep and a daily routine
High stress without supportive outlets	Eating mostly fresh, whole foods
Using alcohol, nicotine, or other substances to cope	Spending time in nature or calm environments
Lacking structure or purpose in daily life	Activities that bring meaning or purpose
Facing discrimination, racism, or social exclusion	Engaging in stress reduction practices
Struggling with past trauma or difficult early-life experiences	Knowing how to seek help and feeling confident to do so
Poverty, financial stress, or limited access to resources	Community connection and cultural belonging

A NOTE ON SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

Risk factors like housing insecurity, discrimination, or poverty are not personal failings; they are social and structural issues. Lifestyle Medicine acknowledges that individual behaviour change alone cannot overcome these barriers. Systemic advocacy and community-level support are equally important.

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Making Changes That Stick

Changing long-standing habits is challenging; consider how often New Year's resolutions go unfulfilled. But it becomes easier when there's a clear sense of direction and purpose.

It's not just about being healthy for the sake of it. It's about being healthy because it enables greater energy, resilience, and the ability to engage fully in life.

Aligning lifestyle changes with personal values and goals, whether it's maintaining strong relationships, pursuing meaningful work, or simply feeling more present and in control - makes them more sustainable and impactful.

Practical starting points:

- 1 Start small.**
Pick one habit and build from there. Consistency over intensity.
- 2 Link to values.**
Ask why this change matters to you personally, not in the abstract.
- 3 Expect setbacks.**
Lapses are part of change. Self-compassion keeps momentum going.
- 4 Seek support.**
Involve others - a friend, a practitioner, a community group.

"Small steps, honest reflection, and finding what works for you."

Whether you're a health professional, a community worker, or just figuring things out for yourself, this approach is about gradual, sustainable change.

REMEMBER

Lifestyle changes aren't a fix for bigger systemic issues. Social determinants of health shape the conditions in which healthy choices are either possible or out of reach. The goal is to support individuals where they are, while also advocating for structural change.

CONCLUSION

Final Thoughts

Maintaining good health is not just about physical well-being; it includes mental health too. Just as we adopt healthy lifestyle habits to prevent chronic physical illness, integrating these habits into daily life can also help prevent or reduce the severity of mental health challenges.

Research shows that adopting positive lifestyle changes - regular physical activity, a nutrient-rich diet, adequate sleep, and effective stress management - can play a protective role in mental well-being, potentially fending off conditions like anxiety and depression.

Lifestyle Medicine now also formally recognises that social determinants of health - poverty, inequity, housing, access to food and care - shape the conditions in which wellbeing is either achievable or out of reach. A truly effective approach holds both dimensions: supporting individuals to make changes where they can, and advocating for the structural conditions that make wellbeing accessible to all.

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