**What works: protect your mental health and prevent problems**

**Protecting our mental health is easier than you might think. We can all do it every day, and with simple activities that help us feel good, we’re better able to cope with life.**

Just like brushing your teeth every day is important for preventing physical problems, we need to take similar care of our mental health.

Each of our tips has been created to help us look after our mental health. Importantly, each one is backed up by evidence from research, including [**the Mental Health Foundation’s ground-breaking study**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/groundbreaking-study-combines-expert-views-research-evidence-and-public-opinion-generate-new-mental).

Our tips will be easier for some and harder for others. Why not give them a try and see which ones suit you best?

Trying new things can sometimes feel uncomfortable, but they usually get easier the more we practise them.

One thing to remember: none of us is perfect. We all have our limits. What’s good enough for you is great.

**1. Get closer to nature**

**We all live with worries and fears, uncertainties, losses that leave us sad and pressures that make us feel stressed. Nature can have a really calming effect on us.**

We have been living around other animals and plants for thousands of years. Some people say nature helps them feel calmer, more hopeful and less alone. Our research found that going for a walk was UK adults’ favourite way of coping with stress  
during the pandemic in 2020.

In Japan, some people do “forest bathing”, which may improve their mental health. So going to a forest or wood and experiencing the different smells, sounds and textures may really help.

To get the best out of nature’s healing effects, try tuning your senses to what’s around you – the trees, plants, birds and animals, for instance, and water such as ponds or the seashore.

Take a deep breath and see how you feel. The idea is to get connected with your natural surroundings.

[**Find out more about mental health and nature**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/nature-mental-health), including our guide [**Thriving With Nature**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/thriving-nature), produced with wildlife charity WWF.

**2. Get more from your sleep**

**Anyone who has struggled with sleep will know what a difference it makes to our bodies, minds and ability to cope with life.**

We all have times when we [**sleep**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/sleep-and-mental-health) badly, and some of us live in situations that make a good night’s sleep impossible.

For many people, sleep is often the first thing that suffers when we're struggling with our mental health.

Adults need between 7 and 9 hours' sleep a night, including enough dreaming sleep and enough deeper sleep.

If you’re struggling with your sleep, think about trying a few simple changes.

For example:

* Develop a relaxing bedtime routine to help you start winding down before you actually go to sleep
* Avoid TV and mobile screens, alcohol and caffeine before bed. This will help you fall asleep and stay asleep. You could also avoid vigorous exercise before bed.
* Go to bed and get up at around the same time every day, including weekends.

For more suggestions, try this [**guide to sleep and mental health**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/sleep-and-mental-health). It includes information about potentially helpful apps and getting professional help if self-help isn’t working for you.

**3. Keep moving**

**Our bodies and minds are connected, so looking after ourselves physically also helps us prevent problems with our mental health (it works the other way around, too).**

Moving our bodies – with sport, gardening, dancing, cycling, walking the dog, cleaning or going to the gym, for example – are great ways to improve our [**mental and physical health**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/physical-health-and-mental-health).

[**Exercise**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/how-improve-your-mental-health-using-physical-activity) releases “feel good” hormones that reduce feelings of stress and anger. It also helps us feel better about our bodies. It can improve our sleep too. If it involves other people, like being part of a team, a class or a group we see regularly, that can also boost our mental health.

We don’t have to be professional athletes, or sporty, to get [**the benefits of being physically active**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/physical-activity-and-mental-health). From walking to dancing and basketball to the gym, the best exercise is simply the one we enjoy.

**4. Eat healthy food**

**Food and drink affect our bodies, brains and mood – for good or bad.**

Sugary snacks and drinks can give us a temporary “high” or sense of comfort that can feel irresistible. But they soon leave us feeling exhausted or jittery. Caffeine in coffee, tea, or so-called energy drinks can also have this effect.

[**A balanced diet**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/diet-and-mental-health) with lots of vegetables and fruit is essential for good physical and mental health.

How we eat is also important. Having meals with other people can help to grow relationships – with family, friends, partners, and colleagues. This is really important in protecting everyone’s mental health and preventing problems.

[**Food can also get mixed up with our feelings**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/eating-disorders). Some people over-eat or under-eat when they are upset. It may help to talk to someone we trust and [**get professional support**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/get-help) if we need it.

**5. Be kind and help create a better world**

**If you have ever felt lonely, you will know how much it helps to have even a small connection with someone else.**

Exchanging a smile or friendly words can be comforting and lift our mood.

Research shows that [**being kind**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/kindness) is good for both sides. Being kind can boost our mood, help us feel more capable, strengthen our connections with others and even make us cope better with stress.

If you don’t know where to start, you could try small but meaningful acts of kindness, such as offering a smile or a few kind words to another person. You could make their day but also feel better for it - [**friendly connections with others are vital for our mental health**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/articles/what-are-health-benefits-altruism).

**6. Be curious and open-minded to new experiences**

**We can all get stuck in familiar ways, like how we spend our time and what we think about ourselves and the world.**

This can be self-fulfilling, with our expectations influencing what actually happens, for good or bad. For example, we might say to ourselves: “Things never get better” or “I’m useless” as a response to what others have said to us.

It can help to notice these thoughts and try out new ones, such as “I can change things for the better” and “there is so much I can do”.

Life can feel more interesting, lively and rewarding when we are open to trying new experiences and experimenting with how we do things.

It could be as simple as what we have for breakfast or the route we walk with the dog. It could also need some planning, like an adventure holiday. We might find a new place that it turns out we love, discover a talent we didn’t know we had or meet someone new and important.

**7. Plan things to look forward to**

**Life throws all sorts at us, and during hard times, we may feel hopeless and not have the energy to plan for the future.**

Things to look forward to, including fun activities, can help us cope with difficult situations.

Making plans for things we enjoy can increase our sense of hope, which is important for our mental health. Our plan could be for anything from small pleasures, like a cup of tea or your favourite TV programme or dance class, to a trip with family or friends, or seeing your favourite film, sports team or singer.

Whether it’s a small or a big one, the important thing is to plan it.

Decide what you’ll do, when and with who and, if needed, book it. It’s important to follow your plan – and repeat.

**8. Learn to understand and manage your feelings**

**Feeling very upset can interfere with our lives, making it hard to think clearly or work, relax, study, sleep or deal with other people.**

Many of us will know when we’re upset but not be sure what we’re feeling. Is it sadness, [**fear**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/how-overcome-anxiety-and-fear), shame, [**loneliness**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/loneliness), anger or something else? We don’t always know why we’re feeling that way.

It often helps to give our feelings our attention without judging them, without telling ourselves we’re stupid or weak to feel the way we do. It may seem strange and uncomfortable to do this. But practice and patience with ourselves will help.

Naming what we’re feeling is also likely to help. So, we can say to ourselves: “I’m feeling really irritable today but also sad.” Another helpful step can be to work out what has led to us feeling this way – might it be a disagreement or disappointment that you’ve had? Some women might find that their periods sometimes (or always) affect their moods.

Talking kindly to ourselves, in the same way, we might reassure a small child we care about, is also important. It can be very comforting. You might feel uncomfortable initially, but give it a go – it might just help.

Some people feel better if they write down their feelings in a notebook or on their phone. You might want to think about how to protect your privacy before doing this.

You could try repeating something positive about yourself a few times each day. (This is sometimes called a “mantra”. “I am on a journey, growing and developing”, for example.) Research shows this reduces negative thoughts and feelings.

Some people also feel that an activity called “[**mindfulness**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/mindfulness)” is helpful. Talking with someone else can also be helpful – and that’s our next suggestion…

Get more tips by reading our tips:

**9. Talk to someone you trust for support**

**Many of us have learned to bottle things up inside us and try to ignore painful feelings. It can take a lot of courage to tell someone else how we’re feeling or what we’re finding hard, especially if we don’t usually do that kind of thing.**

Just [**talking things through with a person we trust**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/talking-about-mental-health) can help and feel like a relief.

Use your own words. It’ll make you feel safer and less alone, and that will help protect your mental health and prevent problems.

Talking may also change how you see and feel about the situation in ways you find helpful.

Another possible benefit is that talking may strengthen your relationship with the person you speak with. This will benefit both of you and make it easier for them to turn to you when they need support themselves.

[**Information about talking with friends about your mental health**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/friendship-and-mental-health)

[**Information about talking with a health professional about how you’re feeling**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/talking-therapies)

**10. Be aware of using drugs and/or alcohol to cope with difficult feelings**

**Many of us sometimes use drugs to block out “difficult” feelings such as sadness, fear or shame.**

No one wants to feel bad; for some people, [**drugs**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/drugs-and-mental-health) and/or [**alcohol**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/alcohol-and-mental-health) offer temporary relief.

Unfortunately, they don’t stop the feelings from returning and may make things worse or create other problems, including damage to mental and physical health, relationships, work, or study.

If you think you may be using drugs or alcohol to cope with difficult feelings, it may help to notice it without beating yourself up about it. Being understanding and kind to yourself is good for your mental health.

A possible next step could be to talk with someone you trust or one of the charities that offer confidential, free information and advice, including how to reduce the harmfulness of using drugs. Have a look at [**Talk To Frank**](https://www.talktofrank.com/), for example.

You could also look for other ways of coping with painful feelings, such as getting help with the situation causing them, if possible, and finding a trusted person to talk with. This could be a friend or relative, a colleague, a person working for a charity helpline, your GP or a counsellor.

Many charities around the country offer [**low-cost or free therapy**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/talking-therapies). Find more detailed information about [**getting help with your mental health**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/get-help) from many potential sources.

Some people find it helps to go to “anonymous” meetings, such as [**Narcotics Anonymous**](https://ukna.org/), to share with others who have/had similar experiences. Some of these meetings are also now online.

**11. Try to make the most of your money and get help with problem debts**

**Money problems can be unavoidable, and we may have no choice about being in debt.**

Fears about paying [**debts**](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/debt-and-mental-health), bills and essentials such as food and electricity can be very stressful. If we feel responsible for sending money back home or are the only earner in our household, we may feel burdened and isolated.

Feelings like this can make it harder to cope with everything, including the money problems themselves.

There are things we can do to help prevent financial problems causing issues with our mental health.

We might feel ashamed of what we’re going through, which may make it harder to tell anyone, leaving us feeling alone with it. The truth is, we’re never alone with money problems. Research shows they are one of the most common and serious sources of stress for many people.

Even if our finances are impossible to change, sharing our fears with another person who’s not involved and who you trust is likely to help us feel less alone and overwhelmed. This may help us to see new ways forward.

If we are struggling financially, including with debt, it can be helpful to talk about it with an expert at a charity that offers free money advice. They are very experienced with what can go wrong with people’s finances and what may help.

It can be really helpful to ask for help before any debt becomes unmanageable. But getting help will benefit everyone.

[**Here is a list of organisations that offer free advice about financial problems**](https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/get-help/), created by the charity Money and Mental Health.

Talking with one of these free, expert advisers could also lead to you finding out about new possibilities, such as benefits you’re entitled to, your legal rights, ways to reduce the size of your debt repayments and other ways to save money.