MOVING FORCES | STAYING ACTIVE IN CIVVY STREET

Moving Forces Connect

A guide to wellbeing

GREATERSPORT

SPORT ENGLAND

THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT FUND TRUST

ARMED FORCES COVENANT

Welcome

Welcome to the Connect programme, we hope that through these six sessions you will gain a greater understanding of your wellbeing. The Connect programme has been developed with a public mental health expert and personal trainer to help you learn how your mind and body work together to create, boost and maintain your personal wellbeing.

Connect has been designed as a proactive, accessible and positive way to build better mental and physical wellbeing into your life, rather than an extra add-on to our busy lives. It is a flexible programme which can be undertaken as an individual or as a family. We hope that it introduces you to some new positive habits that you can embed into your daily lives.

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How does it work?

The programme consists of six sessions which can be worked through in your own time and are available to download, read and watch on demand, at a time that suits you.

The six sessions include videos which guide you through the introduction to the programme and the five individual themes, providing more information about our mental wellbeing and a physical workout to compliment this. This toolkit is designed to support each video session, providing further information, reading and links if you would like to learn more.

Here are five everyday ways to help you achieve and maintain your wellbeing.

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Session 1

An introduction to wellbeing

Watch the session video here

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What is wellbeing?

Your wellbeing comes from how you feel about yourself and your life, such as whether things are going well for you and how you cope with stressful events. Your wellbeing does not always stay the same. It changes over time, and is influenced by every aspect of your life, from close friendships and a feeling of belonging to a sense of purpose.

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Wellbeing - it’s a personal thing

Wellbeing is hard to define and is different for every one of us. It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what it means to you. Here are some questions to help you explore what wellbeing means to you.

- How do you currently feel about your life?
- If you had better wellbeing how would this change what you do?
- If you had better wellbeing how would this change how you feel?
- If you had better wellbeing how would this change how you think?
- If you had better wellbeing how would this impact on people around you?

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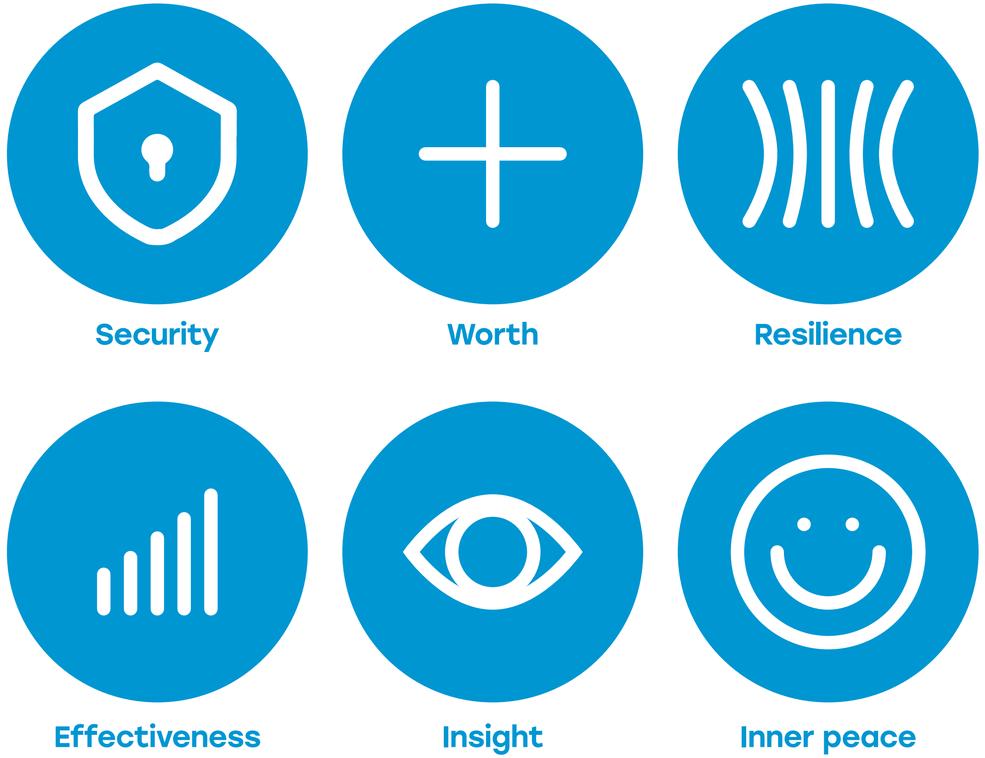
How do we learn the skills of wellbeing?

The only way to gain any skill is through regular practice.

Wellbeing practices are designed to train your mind in a way that supports positive qualities and decreases negative ones. These practices, such as thoughts, words or actions, are all designed to support and increase your sense of:



Fundamentally, wellbeing is no different than, for example, learning to play the guitar. It is a skill so, if we practise wellbeing, we will get better at it.

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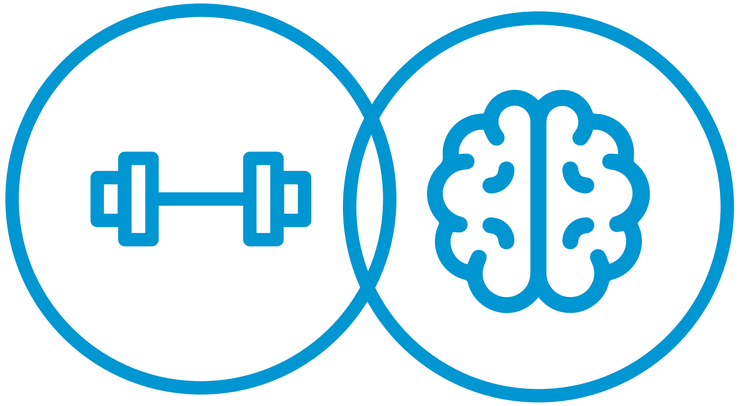
The law of little things

Wellbeing practices do not have to be big, difficult things to have a positive impact. Remember, changes in the brain are made slowly, based on your mental activity. This means that, while lots of little things can wear you down, there are plenty of small things you can do to get you to a better place.

Exercising your brain is just like physical activity. You won't notice much difference if it's only worked on occasionally but, over time, you'll see changes - even if you only do a little each day.



Why does regular wellbeing practice matter?

It has great value: it gives us the power to change our minds and our brains.

It is an act of kindness: you are treating yourself like you matter.

It is an activity: by taking charge of your mind, you're more in control of your feelings. It increases optimism, resilience and happiness, and decreases the risk of depression.

You can't stop your brain from changing. But, through wellbeing practices, you can encourage your brain to change in ways that support and increase your sense of wellbeing.

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How do our brains work, and why are we affected by our emotions?

The brain is the organ that learns, so it's designed to be changed by your experiences. Most of our mental activity simply flows through the brain, with no lasting effects. However intense, prolonged, or repeated mental activity (especially if we're conscious of it) will leave a mark.

Day after day, your mind is building your brain. For example, if you focus on good events in your life, your outlook will be more positive. You might focus on friendships you have, kind words said to you, your good intentions and qualities, or the things you achieve every day. Your brain will be shaped by these positive thoughts, building resilience, an optimistic outlook and a sense of worth.

However, if you focus on self-criticism, worries, grumbling about others, hurt or stress, your brain will have the opposite reaction. It will develop to give you a negative outlook, making you feel vulnerable, anxious or even depressed. You may feel angry, guilty, or even find yourself focusing more on threats in your life or losses you've faced.

Therefore, our everyday experiences matter. Not just for how they feel in that moment in time, but for the lasting traces they leave in your brain. What you pay attention to really matters. Think of it a little like a spotlight, or a vacuum cleaner. It highlights what it lands on, sucking it into your brain and keeping it there – putting good, or bad, thoughts into focus.

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Moving our way to good wellbeing

Physical activity is important to our overall wellbeing and, where possible, should be included as part of our daily routine/habit, like brushing our teeth or putting our shoes on in the morning.

Regular physical activity can have the following positive benefits:

- Increase self-esteem
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Boost mood
- Improve quality of sleep
- Increase energy levels

This statement is very thought provoking and worth thinking about;

"If exercise were a pill, it would be one of the most cost-effective drugs ever invented"

Dr Nick Cavill, a health promotion consultant

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If we cast our attention back 50 years, we moved more as a result of a very different lifestyle. Cars weren't as popular, so we walked more. Technology wasn't as advanced, so our hobbies and daily chores were more physical. Moving was naturally part of our day, however in the modern world, we find ourselves increasingly stationary. This means we now have to be more conscious of our own physical activity levels to help contribute to positive well-being.

Being active doesn't have to mean playing sport or going to the gym. During this programme we'll explore how you can be more active in the comfort of your own home plus ways to move more within your everyday routine that doesn't require lots of extra time.

Research shows that even short bursts of 10 minute activities, such as a brisk walk, increases our mental alertness, energy and lifts our mood.

When starting to move more, it's important to think about what would work for you. Here are some things to consider to help you get started:

- If physical activity is new to you, it's best to build up gradually. Keeping a record of your activity will help you to see how far you've come!
- It doesn't need to be a big change; simply doing daily tasks more energetically, using the stairs instead of the lift, walking short journeys instead of driving, getting off the bus one stop earlier or joining in with your children's kick about in the garden.

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- Think about what activity would suit you best. Do you want to get back to activities you used to enjoy, be more active with a partner or child or do you want to find some ‘you-time’ to refresh and recharge?
- Think about what can most easily fit into your lifestyle; organised activities at set times like classes or groups; or activity that slots into your day, like walking to get the newspaper instead of driving.
- Could you fit movement into your work day? Could you, walk or cycle to work; walk at lunchtime; or have walking meetings?
- Get outside if you can; doing physical activity outdoors has greater positive effects on wellbeing compared to indoors.

Adults should aim to do 30 minutes of activity each day, and whilst that may sound like a lot, it’s not as daunting as it first appears. The points above should help you to get started, and within this programme we’re going to be covering some other ways, including short at-home workouts, that can help you to move more, during the programme and beyond.

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Eating our way to good wellbeing

Remember the saying “You are what you eat’? This applies to your wellbeing too.

What we eat is so important for our wellbeing. We know we feel better when we eat well but it can also affect our mood and how we think and feel. By making some small, consistent and easy changes to our daily nutrition it can make a huge impact.

Below are some resources to support you to make simple dietary changes to help improve your wellbeing.

Watch this video with 8 quick tips to manage your mood with food

Read this for more information about how food affects your mood.

Want to know more?

Watch this

Read this

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Session 2

Be a good friend to your mind and body

Watch the session video here

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To take steps to improve your own wellbeing, you have to be on your own side.

This doesn't mean that you should do wrong to others. In fact, you can only truly help others if you start by helping yourself. When you take care of yourself, you have more to offer others.

Befriending your body and mind means it gives you permission to take care of yourself. It shows you've recognised that you're worthy of feeling happy, being treated well and having as good a life as possible.

Being kind to ourselves is self-compassion. Research demonstrates that being kind and friendly to our bodies and minds is essential for our emotional wellbeing. Not only does it help us avoid the inevitable consequences of harsh, self-judgment (such as depression, anxiety and stress), it helps us have a happier and more hopeful approach to life.

Instead of mercilessly judging and criticising yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect?

Kristen Neff

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Myths about self-compassion

Self compassion is not easy for many of us, especially if we are self-critical, or think it is self-indulgent to care for ourselves. However, recent research proves many of the common myths about self-compassion that keep us trapped in relentless self-criticism are, in fact, false. Here are some of the most common myths about self-compassion, and how to overcome them:

1

Self-compassion is not self-pity

Self-compassion and self-pity are completely different things. Self-pity is feeling sorry for yourself, perhaps with a tendency to moan about your problems. Self-compassion is a great antidote. Rather than tuning out the bad things, it makes us more willing to accept the negative feelings we experience. Self-compassion helps us acknowledge difficult things and treat them kindly, so we can process them – then let go.

Research shows that self-compassionate people are less likely to get swallowed up by self-pitying thoughts, or worry about how bad things are. That's one of the reasons self-compassionate people, overall, have better mental health.

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2

Self-compassion does not mean weakness

Researchers are discovering that self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of resilience available to us. When we go through major life crises, self-compassion can be the difference in our ability to survive - and even thrive, strengthening our minds to cope with the challenges we face.

3

Self-compassion does not mean you are complacent

Perhaps the biggest barrier to self-compassion is the belief that it'll undermine our motivation to push ourselves to do better. This is a myth. It tells us that, if we don't criticise ourselves for failing to live up to our own standards, we'll give in and stop trying to achieve more.

However, research now reveals self-compassion is a far more effective force for personal motivation than self-punishment. If we can acknowledge our failures with kindness ('I really messed up when I got so mad at her, but I was stressed, and I guess all people overreact sometimes') rather than judgment ('I can't believe I said that: I'm such a horrible, mean person') it's much easier to see ourselves clearly.

When we stop judging ourselves so harshly, we connect with the parts of ourselves that, naturally, want us to be as happy and healthy as possible. This is self-compassion, and provides the encouragement and support to do our best, and try again if we have to.

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4

Self-compassion does not mean you are self-absorbed

Self-compassion is not about trying to ‘be better’ than others (for example, to be more successful or attractive). If we consider our self-worth by comparing ourselves to others, we will always feel vulnerable. We may excel at some things, but in other areas there will be someone who is ‘better’.

If we are self-compassionate, we don’t have the constant pressure of needing to be ‘better than others’ in order to feel good about ourselves. Instead, our self-evaluation is based on realising that no one is perfect, and that’s OK.

5

Self-compassion is not selfish

People often think self-compassion is a selfish way to behave. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. Think about the times you’ve been lost in self-criticism: are you focused on yourself or others? Do you have more or less energy to give to others?

When we’re absorbed in self-judgment, we have little capacity left to think about anything else. However, when we are kind and nurturing to ourselves many of our emotional needs are met, leaving us in a better position to focus on others.

Self-compassion is central to good mental health. Just like all good habits, it can be enhanced through learning and practice.

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Home practice

Explore how self-compassion could work for your wellbeing.

Exercise 1:

How would you treat a friend?

Take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about themselves or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Write down what you typically do and say and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.
2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Write down what you typically do and say and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. Write down what factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently.
4. Write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way as you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.
5. Over the coming week, why not try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens?

Want to know more?

Read more research about self-compassion here

Explore more self-compassion exercises here

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Session 3

Get to know yourself and put your strengths to daily use

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Just as exercise builds your physical strength, mind practice builds your inner strength. Both things are, of course, related. Mental strength draws on physical strength, which is fuelled by regular physical activity, eating well, sleeping well, limiting alcohol intake, and addressing and resolving any health problems.

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Developing our strength of character

We all have our own personal strengths, such as individual skills, talents, interests, and resources. We also all have character strengths: a unique collection of personal abilities, like bravery, honesty and forgiveness. These are also incredibly important: they reflect the 'real you'. Character strengths can be thought of as the way we express our values and strive towards those we find most meaningful.

Many of our characteristics protect us against mental illness (such as courage, optimism, interpersonal skills, work ethic, honesty and perseverance). They can shield us against mental health problems, as well as having a positive effect on our overall health and wellbeing.

Every individual has all 24 character strengths (see next page) in different degrees, giving each person a unique character strength profile.

Psychologists tell us that how we feel and act, both over the course of our lives and in specific relationships and situations, is determined by three factors:

1. The challenges we face
2. The vulnerabilities these challenges affect
3. The strengths you have for meeting challenges and protecting your vulnerabilities.

For example, the challenge of a critical boss would be harder if you were vulnerable to anxiety. However, calling on inner strengths of self-soothing and feeling respected by others would be a great coping strategy.

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VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtue of Wisdom

Creativity
Original, adaptive, ingenuity, seeing and doing things in different ways

Curiosity
Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience

Judgement
Critical thinking, through all sides, not jumping to conclusions

Love of Learning
Mastering new skills & topics, systematically adding to knowledge

Perspective
Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view

Virtue of Courage

Bravery
Valor, not shrinking from threat or challenge, facing fears, speaking up for what's right

Perseverance
Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles

Honesty
Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity

Zest
Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigour, energy, not doing things half-heartedly

Virtue of Humanity

Love
Both loving and being loved, valuing close relations with others, genuine warmth

Kindness
Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others

Social intelligence
Aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and others, knows what makes others tick

Virtue of Justice

Teamwork
Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty contributing to a group effort

Fairness
Adhering to principles of justice, not allowing feelings to bias decisions about others

Leadership
Organizing group activates to get things done, positively influencing others

Virtue of Temperance

Forgiveness
Mercy, accepting others' shortcomings, giving people a second chance, letting go of hurt

Humility
Modesty, letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves

Prudence
Careful about one's choices, cautious, not taking undue risks

Self-Regulation
Self-control, disciplined, managing impulses, emotions, and vices

Virtue of Trancendance

Appreciation of beauty & excellence
Awe and wonder for beauty, admiration for skill and moral greatness

Gratitude
Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed

Hope
Optimism, positive future-mindedness, expecting the best & working to achieve it

Humour
Playfulness, bringing smiles to others, light-hearted - seeing the lighter side

Spirituality
Connecting with the sacred, purpose, meaning, faith, religiousness

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The benefits of understanding our strengths

1 Builds your self-awareness

A good level of self-awareness helps you to play to your strengths and also seek support in situations that might be difficult. When you spend time identifying, and reflecting on, your strengths and weaknesses, you can consider the various situations where you would shine, or where you would find things more challenging.

2 Helps you understand other perspectives

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses helps you to understand others, increasing your capacity for empathy. Greater self-awareness increases your confidence in your abilities, meaning you're less likely to be self-seeking or self-gratifying. This gives you the time to listen to others and understand their perspectives.

3 Allows you to identify areas for improvement

We might know which areas we need to improve on, but never actually go one step further to proactively make the changes we need. Sitting, reflecting, and creative problem solving your strengths and weaknesses can motivate you to pursue improvements. The process of writing these things down can help you identify the small actions that can create the positive changes you might want to see.

4 Increases your positive self-talk and vocabulary

Another benefit of actively writing down your strengths is that it allows you to flex your vocabulary muscles and develop the language needed to talk positively about yourself. Self-talk is vital for our overall feelings of happiness, and positive self-talk has been linked to effective positive mental and behavioural changes.

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Home practice

Applying character strengths in your daily life

1. Arm yourself with knowledge. Take the VIA Strengths Survey to get a picture of where your strengths lie: visit viacharacter.org to access the survey.

2. Once you have a picture of your strengths, look at the various areas of your life (work, relationships, studies, spirituality). You'll be able to identify where some of these strengths are already part of your life. For example, if several of the character strengths under the virtue of wisdom and knowledge really stand out to you, it may be the case that you've been drawn to a job that taps into these strengths. Where the strengths align with part of your life, learn to nurture them and build on them.

3. If you can't recognise a character strength in your daily life, consider how you can start to develop them by drawing on parts of your life where they might feature. Some ideas of how you might achieve this can be found again on the VIA Character website.

4. Approach the process of using your character strengths not as fixed exercise. Instead, view it as a lifelong process that will help you gain greater satisfaction, meaning, and purpose.

Want to know more?

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Take notice of and hold on to the positives in your everyday life

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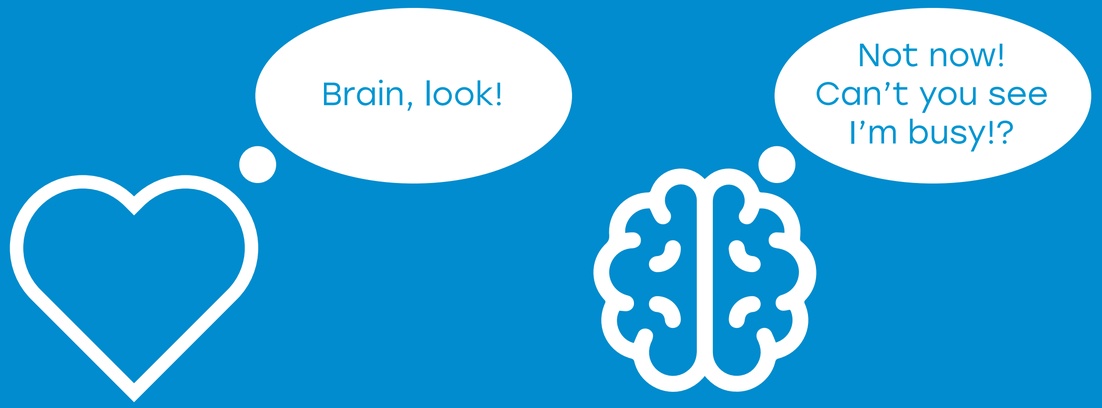
Our brains are wired to focus more on negative emotions. As we've evolved, it's these emotions that have helped us to survive: anger motivated us to problem-solve, anxiety to keep ourselves safe, and sadness to help us seek out relationships. As a result, we have to make more effort to focus on positive emotions in order to improve our wellbeing.



For a while, it was thought that positive emotions only had short-term benefits on our lives. However, now we know that they have a long-lasting effect on our personal growth and development. Emotions such as enjoyment, happiness, joy and anticipation broaden our awareness and encourage exploratory thoughts and actions that, over time, broaden our stock behaviours and build skills and resources.

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How do positive emotions support our wellbeing?

Positive emotions broaden our thoughts and actions

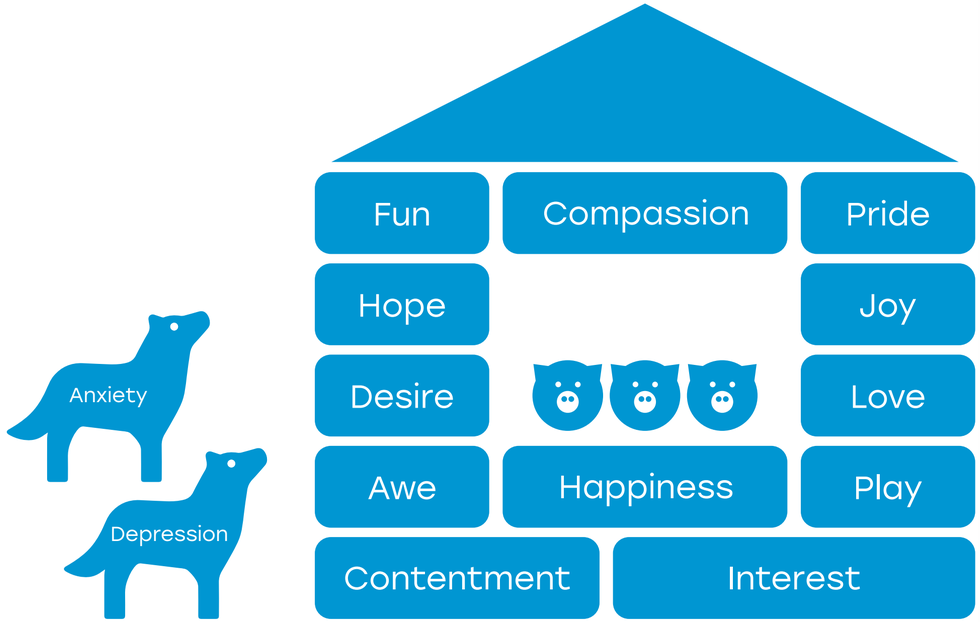
Positive thinking allows us to build on our positive experiences and, in turn, create more of them. When we are experiencing positive emotions, like joy or interest, we are more likely to be creative, see opportunities, be open to relationships with others, to play, to be more flexible and open-minded.

Positive emotions undo negative emotions

It's hard to experience both positive and negative emotions simultaneously. Therefore, if we focus on the positive feelings we're having at times when negative emotions might be more dominant, we can help prevent negative feelings taking over. For example, thinking about the joy and contentment in our lives when we feel stressed can help reduce the feeling of overwhelm.

Positive emotions enhance resilience

Enjoyment, playfulness, contentment, satisfaction, friendship, love and affection all enhance resilience and our ability to cope. In contrast, negative emotions make handling situations harder. Positive emotions can bring positive meanings to negative events, helping us to overcome the challenges of an unpleasant event more quickly and easily.



As negative emotions can create downward spirals of depression, positive emotions work towards our improved emotional wellbeing and transform us into better versions of ourselves.

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Focusing on the positive: Gratitude journal

It's easy to take the good things and people in our lives for granted. However, research suggests that consciously giving thanks for them can have profound effects on our wellbeing and relationships. This exercise helps you develop a greater appreciation for the good in your life. In fact, people who routinely express gratitude enjoy better health and greater happiness.

There's no wrong way to keep a gratitude journal, but here's a guide to get you started.

To begin, write down up to five things for which you feel grateful. The physical record is important: don't just do this exercise in your head. The things you list can be big ('My sister gave birth to a healthy baby boy') or small ('I had a tasty sandwich for lunch'). It doesn't matter: the goal of the exercise is to remember a good event, experience, person, or thing, then enjoy the good emotions that come with it.

As you write, here are nine important tips:

1. **Be as specific as possible**
   Precise details help you feel more appreciative. 'I'm grateful that my co-workers brought me soup when I was sick on Tuesday' will be more effective than 'I'm grateful for my co-workers'.

2. **Go for depth over breadth**
   Exploring one event in detail is more beneficial than a superficial list of many things.

3. **Get personal**
   Focus on people you're grateful for: it has more of an impact than focusing on things.

4. **Try subtraction, not just addition.**
   Consider what your life would be like without certain people or things, rather than just tallying up all the good stuff. Be grateful for the negative outcomes you avoided, escaped, prevented, or turned into something positive. Try not to take that good fortune for granted.

5. **See good things as 'gifts'**
   Thinking of the good things in your life as gifts stops you from taking them for granted.

6. **Savour surprises**
   Try to record events that were unexpected or surprising, as these tend to produce stronger levels of gratitude.

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Focusing on the positive: Gratitude journal

7. **Revise if you repeat**
Writing about some of the same people and things is OK but focus in on a different aspect in detail.

8. **Write regularly**
It doesn't matter whether you write every other day or once a week, as long as you find a regular time and commit to it. But;

9. **Don't overdo it**
Evidence suggests writing occasionally (one to three times per week) is more beneficial than daily journaling. That might be because we adapt to positive events, so their effects soon fade. That's why it helps to savour surprises.

From: Greater Good In Action, 2020

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Session 5

Find ways to engage, be curious and keep learning in your everyday life

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Research shows learning helps improve and maintain our wellbeing. It can boost self-confidence and self-esteem, help build a sense of purpose, and encourage connections with others. People who engage in learning report feeling better about themselves, with a greater ability to cope with stress and sense of purpose and hope.

Some scientists think that setting goals, and working towards them, plays an important role in the way learning influences wellbeing. Setting targets, and hitting them, creates positive feelings of accomplishment and achievement, as well as motivating us to do more.

One of the most important motivations for learning is curiosity. Curiosity is our strong desire to learn or know something.

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What are the benefits of curiosity to our wellbeing?

Curiosity helps us survive

The urge to explore and seek new things helps us remain vigilant. Gaining knowledge about our constantly-changing environment may be why our brains evolved to release dopamine and other feel-good chemicals when we encounter new things.

Curious people are happier

Research has shown curiosity to be associated with higher levels of positive emotions, more satisfaction with life, lower levels of anxiety, and greater psychological wellbeing. Of course, people who are already happy often tend to be more curious. However, as novelty makes us feel good, it seems likely that this works both ways, and new experiences increase our happiness.

Curiosity boosts achievement

Studies reveal that curiosity leads to more enjoyment and participation in school, and higher academic achievement, as well as greater learning, engagement and performance at work. It may seem like common sense, but when we are more curious about and interested in what we are doing, it's easier to get involved, put effort in, and do well.

Curiosity can expand our empathy

When we are curious about others and talk to people outside our usual social circle, we become better able to understand those with lives, experiences, and world views different to our own. Next time you have the chance to talk with someone new, especially someone who may be quite different to you, try engaging with them on a personal level (respectfully, of course) and showing them that you are interested in what they have to say.

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Home practice

Practice putting curiosity to work in your everyday life

Life Skills That Matter have created a helpful four step activity to help you to practice being curious.

Give it a go here

If you are finding the idea of learning and curiosity difficult, it helps to understand your mindset and how it can help you. Your mindset is the sum of your thoughts and beliefs that determine how you make sense of yourself, your immediate environment, and the world. What mindset you have has a strong influence on your behaviours and can govern whether or not you pursue (and therefore accomplish) your goals.

Psychologists believe we have two mindsets: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. If you have a fixed mindset, you assume that your in-built characteristics can't be changed. However, if you have a growth mindset, you seek out challenges and view failure as a chance to learn. A growth mindset, therefore, builds curiosity, develops character, and boosts wellbeing.

Home practice: What is your mindset?

Find out what your mindset is by taking a short quiz from Positivity Guides.

Take the quiz here

Want to know more?

Watch this

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Build relaxation into your everyday life

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Remember the negativity bias we learnt earlier? Our brains are more focused on negative outcomes: it's the awareness of trouble that kept our ancestors alive but causes poor wellbeing in the modern world.

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Fight or flight – how stress affects your body

Fight or flight is the way our bodies respond to feelings of stress. You might recognise this as the adrenaline you feel when faced with a stressful situation. It's known as the sympathetic nervous system, which connects our brain and internal organs using spinal nerves. It is this system that causes our bodies to feel the physical effects of stress.

Your body goes through a number of changes when in fight or flight mode. For example:

- **Your heart rate increases**
- **Your pupils dilate**
- **Your muscles contract**
- **You produce less saliva**
- **The bronchial tubes in your lungs widen**
- **Your stomach stops your digestive system from working properly**

Our human stress response is designed to protect us from danger. Fight or flight prepares our bodies for action and makes us feel ready for a physical challenge (fight) or prepare to retreat or run away (flight).

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The system evolved to protect us from real physical harm, such as dangerous animals. Our threats may have changed over time, but our bodies still have the same responses to stress, triggered by the ordinary stresses we face on a daily basis. These might be things like work deadlines, phones pinging, problems with co-workers or partners, or simply being pulled in too many directions.

When we feel this stress, other systems in our body, like digestion and our immune system, are given much lower priority. In fight or flight mode, your body makes more energy available for your muscles and your heart rate increases.

Therefore, when we experience stress, other parts of our body are not working as well as they should. Even though stress is something we all understand, and everyone experiences, our bodies deal with stress so badly that it can even lead to significant illness and long-term health problems. These include high blood pressure; heart disease; cancer; strokes; obesity, and insomnia: medical conditions that relate to, or are directly influenced by, our bodies' experiences of high stress.

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Rest and restore – how our bodies save energy and relax

The rest and restore system is designed to slow our bodies down. It saves our energy, and is there to help us after a stressful period. It's known as the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls our bodies and helps them to relax when we're resting.

In rest and restore mode, your body goes through the following changes:

- **Your saliva increases**
- **Your heart rate drops**
- **Your muscles relax**
- **The pupils in your eyes narrow**
- **Digestive enzymes are released**
- **The bronchial tubes in your lungs become narrower**
- **You need to empty your bladder more often.**

Rest and restore feelings happen more slowly than fight or flight reactions. This is because the rest and restore feelings we experience are designed to rebalance our bodies after we've experienced stress. They are the feelings responsible for maintaining our body's systems, so our heart rate slows and our breathing calms down. As we don't need to run, fight or hide, our body

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sends blood to our organs and away from our muscles. We digest our food. We make hormones. We repair our muscles. We build strength. Our body is in a state of relaxation, and this relaxation helps the body heal. It restores a state of calm and balance, and allows our bodies to relax and repair.

Rest is a natural need. However, our fight or flight instinct often takes over, with our bodies feeling the negative effects of stress and not the positive effects of rest. The feelings caused by both nervous systems are automatic reactions that happen in our bodies. Therefore, to support our wellbeing, we need to develop the habit of making relaxation part of our daily lives.

The rest and restore system and wellbeing

When our rest and restore system kicks in, it produces a calm and relaxed feeling in both our mind and body. It lifts our mood, strengthens our immune system, and reduces our blood pressure. You can learn to use the rest and restore feelings to immediately reduce a sense of anxiety and stress with a number of different tools and techniques.

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Ways to build relaxation into your everyday life

Curiosity helps us survive

Every Mind Matters have some helpful resources to read and watch here

Read or listen to one of the self-help guides here (scroll down to find the stress booklet)

Make relaxation a habit

A five-step process from Psychology Today to help you feel more relaxed

Audio relaxation techniques are available in both male and female voices here

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness helps you train your mind so you can respond better to the challenges you face.

Find free podcasts and meditation sessions to learn more about mindfulness at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre

Take a free Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance course.

Read this to learn seven benefits of mindfulness.

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Find your flow

Flow describes the moments when you're completely absorbed in a challenging, but doable, task. Flow is one of life's highly enjoyable states. It's when you find yourself completely present in the moment, and it helps you be more creative, productive, and happy.

Find out more about what flow is and how to develop it here

Psychology Today has a three-step process to help you when you're 'Finding Your Flow'

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Physical activity that helps you rest and restore

Yoga

There are few types of physical exercise that can relax us quite like yoga can. Unlike most forms of exercise, yoga is not physically demanding, so is often considered very calming. According to research, regular yoga significantly decreases our stress hormones to have an overall positive effect on how our bodies rest and restore.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing is a hugely effective activity you can do to help your body relax. When you're stressed, your heart rate and breathing rapidly increase as the fight or flight feeling takes over. Deep breathing helps convince your body there is no immediate danger and allows the rest and restore feeling take control. Try alternating between breathing in for a count of two seconds, holding your breath for six seconds, and then releasing the breath over the course of seven seconds.

Meditation

Meditation is an incredibly helpful, restful activity. Unlike deep breathing, which focuses on the rate at which you are taking breaths, meditation clears your mind of all thoughts or feelings for a short period of time. Meditation can be a very effective method for relieving stress and improving your ability to rest and relax.

Light jogging/Walking outdoors

You may be surprised, but light jogging and/or walking really helps you to rest and restore. Most forms of running are very intense and will typically put your fight or flight system to work. However, research has shown that light jogging helps your rest and restore system to respond positively.

Of course, increasing the intensity of your physical activity typically leads to improved overall cardiovascular fitness. However, if you are suffering from chronic stress or overtraining, and need to focus on the way you rest and restore your body, low-intensity jogs or walks may be beneficial.

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Maintaining positive mental wellbeing is something we constantly work on. Here you can find some other resources to help to keep you stay positive.

10 Days of Happiness course

10 Days of Happiness is a free 10-day online coaching program which guides you through daily actions for happier living

Every Mind Matters

Expert advice and practical tips to help you look after your mental health and wellbeing

Living Life to the Full

Booklets, activities and courses designed to help you feel happier, stay calm, tackle upsetting thinking and more

Happiness lab podcasts

Dr Laurie Santos will take you through the latest scientific research and share some surprising and inspiring stories that will forever alter the way you think about happiness

The Science of Well-Being course

In this course you will engage in a series of challenges designed to increase your own happiness and build more productive habits

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