**Building blocks to better mental health**

*Vitality researchers and healthcare professionals agree: mental health is one of the most pressing global health challenges of the 21st century*

For decades, the majority of research on healthier living has focused on our physical health with good health linked to physical markers such as breathing rate, blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Now, as we begin to navigate a post-pandemic world, the spotlight is shifting to mental health as a significant component of overall health – and one that critically needs more awareness and action around the world.

Latest figures from Global Burden of Disease data[[1]](#footnote-1) show that a staggering 350(+) million people are suffering from depression globally, resulting in over 2 000 suicides each day and with up to 60% of serious mental health cases going untreated. This global data reveals that poor mental health is now a leading cause of disability – with an estimated 20% of lost healthy days due to mental health issues[[2]](#footnote-2).

“There is a need to move from crisis management to proactive prevention when it comes to lessening the burden of mental health,” says Jason Gaskell, Actuarial Researcher at Vitality Group. “The 40:40:33 model[[3]](#footnote-3) shows that only 40% of those who have a serious mental illness are being treated for it, of those, only 40% are receiving treatment of at least a minimally acceptable standard, and of those, only 33% report some improvement. While more people are being prescribed psychotropic medications than ever before[[4]](#footnote-4), there is a still a large treatment gap and on the whole we are still seeing poor outcomes. At Vitality we recognise that more needs to be done on a global scale.”

“People are aware they need to prioritise their physical health with check-ups, better nutrition and physical activity[[5]](#footnote-5),” says Dr Mosima Mabunda, Head of Wellness for Vitality South Africa. “What we don’t pay enough attention to is our emotional and psychological wellbeing.” This aligns to how the World Health Organization define ‘health’ – as a “state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing rather than just the absence of disease”.

“As healthcare professionals we’ve long realised that we need a multi-dimensional view of patient health. And the benefits of identifying, treating and managing issues around mental health cannot be minimized. Scientific and medical literature is clear: mental health is one of the most pressing concerns of our modern health landscape.”

**Healthy habits; healthy mind**

Vitality dietitian, Terry Harris, is a strong advocate for nutrition interventions as one of the key building blocks towards positive mental wellbeing. “Intervention types should differ depending on the needs of an individual and their mental health diagnosis. While major depression requires the appropriate clinical care, we know that improving diet quality can reduce depressive symptoms, confirming that healthy eating[[6]](#footnote-6) is a great line of defence to better manage mental ill health.”

Healthy diet patterns are associated with decreased risk of depression as well as symptoms of depression and the link between ‘food and mood’ is well documented. The focus is on a daily increase in eating fruit and vegetables along with choosing wholegrains, legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas), fish, lean red meat, nuts and seeds. “However,” Harris cautions, “it is not enough to just increase your intake of healthy foods. The benefits are felt when one also actively reduces their intake of unhealthy foods such as sugary drinks and foods high in added sugar (sweets chocolates, cake, biscuits), refined cereals, processed meat and highly processed or fried foods or fast food. Always consult with your doctor about what will work best for you.”

Overall, it’s about a holistic approach, concludes Harris: “We particularly want to make sure that people are aware of what they can change behaviorally to improve their mental health, such as increased exercise, better nutrition and improved sleep hygiene.”

On the topic of physical activity, Dr Seranne Motilal, Senior Health Insurance Specialist at Vitality Group adds that regular exercise is one of the best ways to improve mental wellbeing. Benefits include better self-esteem, stronger levels of resilience, being better able to manage depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“There is a wealth of information on the positive link between exercise and improved mental health,” says Dr Motilal. “Research continues to show that people who exercise regularly have better emotional wellbeing and lower rates of mental illness. Our own research shows that increasing steps just once a week, from 5 000 to 10 000, can reduce the risk of depression in some population cohorts[[7]](#footnote-7).”

“In addition, physical activity helps to reduce levels of anxiety in people with mild symptoms and may also be helpful for treating clinical anxiety[[8]](#footnote-8). Because it’s available to all, has few costs involved with it, like going for a walk, it is an empowering approach to mental health management.”

Just as physical activity helps promote better mental health, so too does sleep. Research done by Harvard Medical School in 2021[[9]](#footnote-9) shows that poor sleep or sleep deprivation adversely affects our psychological state. Moreover, this research suggests that those with mental health problems are more likely to have insomnia or other sleep disorders. Christine Brophy, VP of Behavior Change at Vitality Group says that sleep is a key component to holistic health. “Our Vitality wellness program is continuously expanding with health education content, interventions and incentives that help individuals build sleep hygiene routines that promote good quality sleep,” she says.

“About half of us are kept awake by stress and 1 in 3 people experience insomnia. Seven to nine hours of sleep a night is recommended[[10]](#footnote-10) for optimal health but this isn’t always easy to achieve – with work being the number-one reason people cut back on sleep. Without question, this takes its toll on our mental abilities – our cognitive skills suffer, and processes linked to our decision-making become compromised.”

**Productivity versus presenteeism**

Starting in 2020, Vitality conducted a large-scale study[[11]](#footnote-11) of more than one thousand of its employees across all business units and four locations in the United Kingdom offices, focusing on their wellbeing and job capacity, and broader health and work outcomes. Automated data collection using Microsoft Workplace Analytics was complemented by supplementary weekly surveys over a 5-month period. While working from home made many feel more productive – 55% of the home workers surveyed reported getting more work done – it led to an overall deterioration in work-life balance. Left unchecked, the erosion of work-life boundaries is believed to affect burnout and poor mental wellbeing in the long term.

Shaun Subel, director of the Vitality Research Institute, suggests that organizations such as Vitality play a powerful role in de-stigmatizing the topic of mental health. “While the good news is that the stigma of mental health challenges continues to decrease,” Subel says, “there is still a way to go to ensure that people are able to seek help earlier and access the right resources to better manage potential mental ill health. Global health campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness Month in May help to raise awareness of mental health issues around the world and to mobilise efforts in support of positive mental health initiatives.”

“Looking at Vitality data from the UK[[12]](#footnote-12),” he adds, “more than 57% of people are stressed about work and just over 50% of people have some type of financial worry. In addition, 35% of people report not sleeping enough and we’re seeing increasing levels of people suffering from depression and anxiety.”

In the workplace, we see this manifest through ‘presenteeism’ which is not being fully functional while at work. This negatively affects both individual and company productivity – mostly driven by poor mental health. Vitality UK data shows that 80% of presenteeism is a result of factors linked to reduced mental wellbeing with stress, anxiety, sleep deprivation and depression all contributing to lost productivity.

**Psychological ‘first aid’**

While the meaning of positive mental wellbeing varies across people and cultures, it often includes feeling you can cope with the normal stresses of life, manage uncertainty and change, engage in work productively and form and maintain good relationships.

Francois Millard, SVP of Product R&D at the Vitality Group, says that we need to recognise that mental health has a significant impact on our ability to cope with everyday activities and interactions. “It affects how we think, how we feel, and ultimately how we act. It impacts our resilience and ability to handle stress. When our mental health is compromised, stress can overwhelm us, adding to deteriorated mental health, which has knock-on effects that impact our physical health, too.”

Recognizing the signs that you may be experiencing a decline in your mental wellbeing is important. “Think about it as ‘first aid’ for your mental health,” Millard suggests. “Good first-aid practices start at home – so having an awareness ‘toolkit’ of what you may be going through is often the first bit of help we need. We must recognize that this is more difficult to do than a physical health check, mainly because people often don’t recognize the symptoms, which is a key challenge we are addressing with the rollout of our new digital mental health tools.”

Guided by behavioral economics theory, Vitality is an incentive-based wellness program that has, for nearly three decades, helped members to live healthier, rewarding lives. Impacting more that 27 million individuals across 37 markets, Millard says that Vitality’s continues to integrate mental health initiatives into the core offering of the program,

“We have identified priority pillars to help our members identify, prevent and navigate poor mental health,” adds Millard. “These incorporate our existing pillars of nutrition, physical activity, sleep, mindfulness and financial wellness. At the same time, we’re building robust data models to better predict mental health issues and the consequences thereof, which enables us to personalize guidance and interventions for our members.”

To support global efforts during Mental Health Awareness Month in May, Vitality is focusing on health promotion behaviors to enhance mental wellbeing. #LiveLifeWithVitality will highlight stress management, mindfulness and meditation, restorative sleep, financial wellbeing, the influence of technology on mental health and dealing with issues related to work/life balance and burnout. As part of the campaign, Vitality members around the world will have access to interactive mental health resources, ‘check in’ moments and health advice from global experts.

The concluding message from the experts is that Vitality is making a serious commitment to addressing the rising mental health crisis. Helping people become mentally healthier and stronger is fundamental to the Vitality business with the realization that more needs to be done to make mental health care a reality for more people worldwide.

1. Global Burden of Disease Data: United States; IHME [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  [PAHO. Mental health problems are the leading cause of disability worldwide, say experts at PAHO Directing Council side event](https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15481:mental-health-problems-are-the-leading-cause-of-disability-worldwide-say-experts-at-paho-directing-council-side-event&Itemid=72565&lang=en#:~:text=Washington%2C%20D.C.%202%20October%202019,are%20due%20to%20mental%20issues.)

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Healing. Thomas Insel, MD](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/670329/healing-by-thomas-insel-md/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [JOURNAL OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY. Psychotropic Medication Prescription Rates and Trends for New Zealand Children and Adolescents 2008–2016](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/pdf/10.1089/cap.2019.0032) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Vitality Healthy Futures Study, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jacka, F.N., O’Neil, A., Opie, R. *et al*. 2017. A randomised controlled trial of dietary improvement for adults with major depression (the ‘SMILES’ trial) [Access here.](https://rdcu.be/cLRSO) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Physical activity and the prevention of depression. Vitality working paper. 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Asmundson, G.J.G., Fetzner, M.G., et al. 2013. Let’s get physical: a contemporary review of the anxiolytic effects of exercise for anxiety and its disorders. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Harvard Health Publishing. Sleep deprivation can affect your mental health. 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Vitality Healthy Futures Study, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. MIT Sloan Management Review. Why Shifting Remote Work Behaviour Improves Wellbeing. 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Britain’s Healthiest Workplace. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)