**Habits for better mental health**

**Social media example**

The link between healthy habits and mental health is clear across 3 essential pillars that can help us to maintain a healthy mind:

👟physical activity

😴sleep

🍏healthier eating

Learn more: Link to article.

#LiveLifeWithVitality

**Article**

DID YOU KNOW that 400+ million people worldwide experience some type of mental disorder or mental health issue? And here mental health doesn’t just mean mental illness – in fact mental health is defined by the *World Health Organization* as holistic wellbeing where individuals can “cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and able to make a contribution to their community”.

Navigating the many challenges of modern life often brings with it stress and some degree of mental hardship. It’s important to know that this is normal. It’s also important to take action to manage your mental health and know when to reach out for professional support if you need it.

One of the best ways to boost your mental health is through building healthier habits, a topic that Vitality is passionate about.

**Vitality Habit Index for healthier bodies; healthier minds**

At the beginning of the year, Vitality partnered with the *London School of Economics* to publish research on what it means to form a habit and why healthy habits are so important for better health outcomes. Called the Vitality Habit Index, the findings showed that small, easy-to-achieve steps can help you to make healthier choices, not just as a once-off, but sustainably in the future too.

Research shows that almost half of our lives are shaped by habit. This means that if you can build healthy habits over time, the chance of you living a healthy, longer life is significantly greater. The link between healthy habits and mental health is clear across 3 essential pillars that can help us to maintain a healthy mind: physical activity, sleep and healthier eating.

**Next up:** we unpack each of these important pillars with tips to help you prioritise these in your life for better mental health outcomes.

1. **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**Why it’s important**

Physical activity is a powerful tool for boosting mental wellbeing. It releases brain chemicals called endorphins that act as natural pain and stress relievers and can help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

**What you need**

The recommended amount of exercise is a minimum of 150 minutes a week of light to moderate intensity exercise, or 90 minutes a week at a vigorous intensity.

**The exercise nudge you need this week**

Getting more active, more often may sometimes require a little nudge in the right direction, something to keep your motivation up and your goals in sight. An easy Vitality way to keep yourself on track is to measure your progress. Link your fitness device to the Vitality platform so that you can earn Vitality points for your workouts to help you consistently reach your goals.

1. **GOOD QUALITY SLEEP**

**Why it’s important**

In simple terms: sleep helps your brain work properly. Getting enough quality sleep can help protect your mental health and enhance your quality of life. Studies show that a good night’s rest improves problem-solving skills, helps you pay attention the next day and make better decisions. Sleep is closely connected to mental and emotional health and a lack of sleep, or poor-quality sleep, has links to depression, anxiety and some mental health illnesses like bipolar disorder.

**What you need**

The amount of sleep you need each day will change over the course of your lifetime and differs depending on age but according to the *American Academy of Sleep Medicine*, adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep every night. This also means getting good quality sleep where you fall asleep within 30 minutes, sleep soundly through the night and wake up no more than once in the night.

**The sleep nudge you need this week**

If you battle to get the right ZZZs, try go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day this week - even on weekends - and avoid electronics at least an hour before bedtime.

1. **EAT HEALTHY**

**Why it’s important**

Good food = better mood. Healthier eating is a great line of defence to better manage mental health and good nutrition is associated with decreased risk of depression and anxiety. Here, it’s important to have a balanced diet, rich in essential nutrients and minerals, not only for physical health but for mental health and wellbeing too.

**What you need**

Some recommendations for healthier eating include more fruit, vegetables, legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas), nuts and seeds, lean protein, fat free dairy, wholegrains and high fibre starchy foods. Plus, drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.

**The nutrition nudge you need this week**

If you and your family are partial to a snack during the week, choose a healthier option. Some great options here: homemade popcorn with little or no salt, fresh fruit, plain yoghurt, unsalted nuts, sugar-and-salt-free peanut butter on apple wedges, a smoothie prepared with frozen banana and plain yoghurt, veg crudités or rice cakes with mashed avo, hummus or cottage cheese. If you are tempted to choose chocolate, opt for dark chocolate with at least 70% cocoa.

Getting active, proper sleep and good nutrition are a solid foundation for a healthier mind. When you invest in them and start to build long-lasting habits to achieve health goals across these three pillars, you’re far likelier to have healthier and stronger mental health.

*For more information about Vitality’s evidence-based approach that encourages and rewards members for healthier living, visit the* [*Vitality website*](https://www.vitality.com/)*.*

**REFERENCES**

**British Journal of Sports Medicine.** 2023. [Effectiveness of physical activity interventions for improving depression, anxiety and distress: an overview of systematic reviews](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36796860/#:~:text=Conclusion%20and%20relevance%3A%20Physical%20activity,and%20people%20with%20chronic%20disease.).

**Discovery Vitality.** 2020. [5 ways to stave off mindless or emotional eating.](https://www.discovery.co.za/vitality/five-ways-to-make-and-enjoy-healthy-snacks-at-home)

**National Heart, Lunch and Blood Institute.** 2022. [How Sleep Affects Your Health](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/sleep-deprivation/health-effects)..

**Vitality.** 2024. [The Vitality Habit Index](https://www.vitalityglobal.com/documents/d/guest/gvc_files__the-habit-index-booklet_11mar2024__pdf).