

## **WHAT HAS SLEEP, DIET AND EXERCISE GOT TO DO WITH MENTAL HEALTH?**

**Well .... EVERYTHING!!!**

It turns out we can't ignore the body and expect to feel good. Consistent research identifies healthy eating patterns, regular exercise and good sleep as the three foundation pillars supporting mental health. Time invested in our physical health is an important investment in maximising mental health capacities.

So, what is it about sleep, diet and exercise that makes them so important for mental health?

Bottom line? The mind, heart and body are intimately interconnected.

### **SLEEP**

Even one night of poor sleep can leave us feeling listless, demotivated and struggling to manage the usual day to day challenges of life, let alone the more significant stresses that arise from time to time. Over even a few days the psychological symptoms of sleep deprivation are known to include mood swings, irritability, anxiety, fatigue, decreased alertness, concentration, impaired memory and judgment as well as depressive symptoms. Insufficient sleep can not only impact negatively on mood but make us more prone to accidents and mistakes. It affects hormones influencing appetite and the increased stress and lack of energy makes resistance to late night junk food cravings more challenging.

Experts say, on average, most adults need between 7-8 hours sleep a night. A good night's sleep means the events of the day can be better processed. You wake up feeling rested. Being rested helps energy levels. When energy levels are up, life's challenges are more manageable and you have increased capacity to do more of what helps you to take good care of yourself like eating better and doing exercise.

Good sleep starts with good habits. This includes a regular sleep and bedtime routine, putting your smart phone or computer aside at least an hour before going to sleep (to avoid blue light stimulation), bringing the lights down in your sleeping area and avoiding caffeine after about 3pm. For more ideas to support a healthy sleep routine, see Blog **NEED HELP COUNTING SHEEP?**

### **DIET**

Undernourished and under rested is a dangerous combination for our mental health. Multiple studies have found vitamin and mineral deficiencies inherent in a wide range of mental health presentations. When we engage in unhealthy eating patterns, we're starving our nervous system of vital nutritional elements it requires to function at maximum capacity. Then, when we hit a rocky patch, the extra strain on a compromised nervous system sets us up for impaired mental health functioning.

The research suggests that as an ideal, 5 cups of vegetables, 2 fruits, some lean protein and plenty of water (at least 6 8oz glasses a day) is a good guide. A well-balanced diet including foods from each section of the food types and plenty of leafy greens is considered optimal. Three regular meals a day including breakfast are recommended healthy habits.

Foods to eliminate or consume in moderation include sugar, sugary foods, caffeine and alcohol.

## **EXERCISE**

Exercise has long been recognised as an important component of physical health. But the research tells us that it is also vitally important in promoting positive mental health by improving mood and reducing mental health symptoms.

In whatever form you prefer, sustained cardiovascular exercise of 20 minutes or more is known to produce natural mood enhancing neurotransmitters called dopamines and endorphins. This is good news for lifting mood.

When you engage in regular exercise you are also expelling some of that stress energy that often accumulates over the course of a day. That's another tick for supporting mental health!

Exercise also helps us to get out of our thinking mind and more into our bodies. That might seem like a weird thing to say but most of the time we humans are occupied with a continuous stream of thinking activity as we contemplate problematic issues stemming from the external world or past or future worries. That's about being in our heads! Moving out of thinking and just being more in our bodies on a regular basis is helpful because it gives us some relief from all that mental busyness and just allows us to "be" in the moment. Without conscious effort, physical activity tends to pull us into our bodies through our 5 senses - what we can see, hear, smell, touch etc. As we exercise, we become more aware of the heart beating, the breath deepening, the muscles in our body working more strenuously. As our awareness moves from mind activity to observing/noticing activity in the body we become more present. Rather than being in the past or future, we are right here, right now. This move to 'being' as opposed to 'thinking' offers a reprieve from rumination, creates more balance between our 2 modes of mind and supports our mental health.

Regular physical activity also boosts our ability to get a good night's sleep because it gives the body a bit of a workout in an otherwise frequently sedentary lifestyle.

For tips on getting started please see Blog: **Help to get you started EXERCISING FOR MENTAL HEALTH**

