

Mental wellbeing, physical health and weight

Your mental wellbeing can have an impact on your physical health and weight. This resource provides information and strategies to help make positive changes.

The relationship between our mental and physical health

There is a two-way relationship between our mental and physical health. Our moods, feelings and overall mental health can influence our food choices, exercise levels and sleep quality. Similarly, these factors can affect how we feel and our overall mental health.

Living with mental ill health can make it challenging to stay in good physical health due to:

- reduced motivation and/or energy levels to engage in physical activity and meal preparation
- side effects of medications, including changes in hunger and fullness signals and increased cravings for sweet foods and beverages
- reduced motivation to seek medical and social support.



Image by Michael Poley of Poley Creative for AllGo.

Emotional eating

Using food to cope with negative emotions is common and known as 'emotional eating'. High sugar and high fat foods are often eaten during emotional eating, which can contribute to weight gain.

Emotional eating can be a barrier to reaching and maintaining a healthy weight and has been associated with higher body weight, weight gain and weight regain following weight loss.

If you think you might be using food to manage your emotions, ask your general practitioner (GP) to refer you to a psychologist specialising in emotional eating.

The impact of weight stigma and bias

People living in larger bodies are often victims of weight related negativity, bias or bullying, which can make it more difficult to adopt or maintain healthy behaviours and seek professional support.

Being discriminated against because of body weight is a risk factor for mood and anxiety disorders. In fact, regardless of **body mass index** (BMI) and other mental health risk factors, people who have been discriminated against because of their weight are 2.5 times more likely to experience a mood or anxiety disorder.

The good news is that work is being done at various levels to address weight stigma, bias and how our society talks about weight. If you have been impacted by weight stigma or bias, speak to your GP about treatment options.

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Food for a better mood

The food we eat plays a vital role in maintaining good physical and mental health. It is important to eat a range of good-quality food and include an occasional treat.

Some helpful tips include:

- eating fresh fruit and vegetables which are linked to a reduced risk of depression (aim for five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day)
- eating two to three serves of fish each week which can reduce inflammation and depression (choose oily varieties like salmon, tuna and sardines that are high in omega-3 fatty acids)
- choosing wholegrain breads and cereals that increase your fibre intake and provide a more sustained release of energy
- reducing the frequency and/or portion size of discretionary food (such as chips, chocolate and fast food that are high in fat, salt and sugar)
- limiting your alcohol intake to reduce your risk of cancer and mental health issues. If you do choose to drink alcohol, follow the recommendations in the [Australian guidelines](#).

Remember, worrying too much about what you are eating can also be bad for your mental health. If you feel overly controlled by food or out of control around food, talk to your GP or contact the [Butterfly Foundation](#) for support.

Get moving to lift your mood

Exercising regularly not only helps with reaching and maintaining a healthy weight, it can also positively impact your mental and physical health by:

- releasing natural feel-good brain chemicals
- improving the amount and quality of your sleep
- providing a distraction from negative thoughts
- providing opportunities to socialise
- providing an outlet for frustrations
- helping your body and mind relax
- increasing your fitness and energy levels.

Exercise does not have to be strenuous, structured or take a long time. Choose an activity that you enjoy and work up to at least 30 minutes of activity/movement on most days.

Adopt sustainable healthy behaviours

Rather than focusing on weight loss, try adopting sustainable healthy behaviours instead. This simple change of focus can take the pressure off your weight and have a positive impact on your health and wellbeing, regardless of whether there is a change in body weight.

Start to adopt sustainable healthy behaviours by:

- setting small, achievable goals that will help you increase your self-confidence and maintain motivation over the longer term
- doing activities that you find enjoyable, interesting, relaxing or satisfying and will be likely to sustain
- joining exercise classes or sports clubs
- planning activities with friends and family
- going for a 30-minute walk before or after work or during your lunch break
- making a plan to become more active and sticking to it as closely as possible
- eating healthy food including five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day
- getting enough sleep (adults aged 18 to 64 years should aim for seven to nine hours per night).

Create a routine for healthy behaviours

You can create a routine for sustainable healthy behaviours by:

- setting a regular bedtime and waking time to improve sleep quality
- choosing regular times to exercise doing an activity you enjoy
- planning meals in advance for the upcoming week
- having regular mealtimes, especially for breakfast. If you cannot tolerate a meal after waking, eating a mid-morning snack/meal can help avoid excessive hunger which may lead to energy dips and/or mood swings.

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Minimise stress with mindfulness and relaxation

You can work on minimising your stress levels by:

- using mindfulness and relaxation apps (such as Headspace, Calm or Smiling Mind) on your smartphone or tablet to access a variety of guided techniques and meditations
- trying gratitude journaling every morning or evening to help you focus on and appreciate the good things in your life. All you have to do is write down three things you are grateful for or three things you are looking forward to that day or the following day.

Talk to your GP for more information

If you would like more information, talk to your GP about the different options available to support your mental health, physical health and weight management.

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