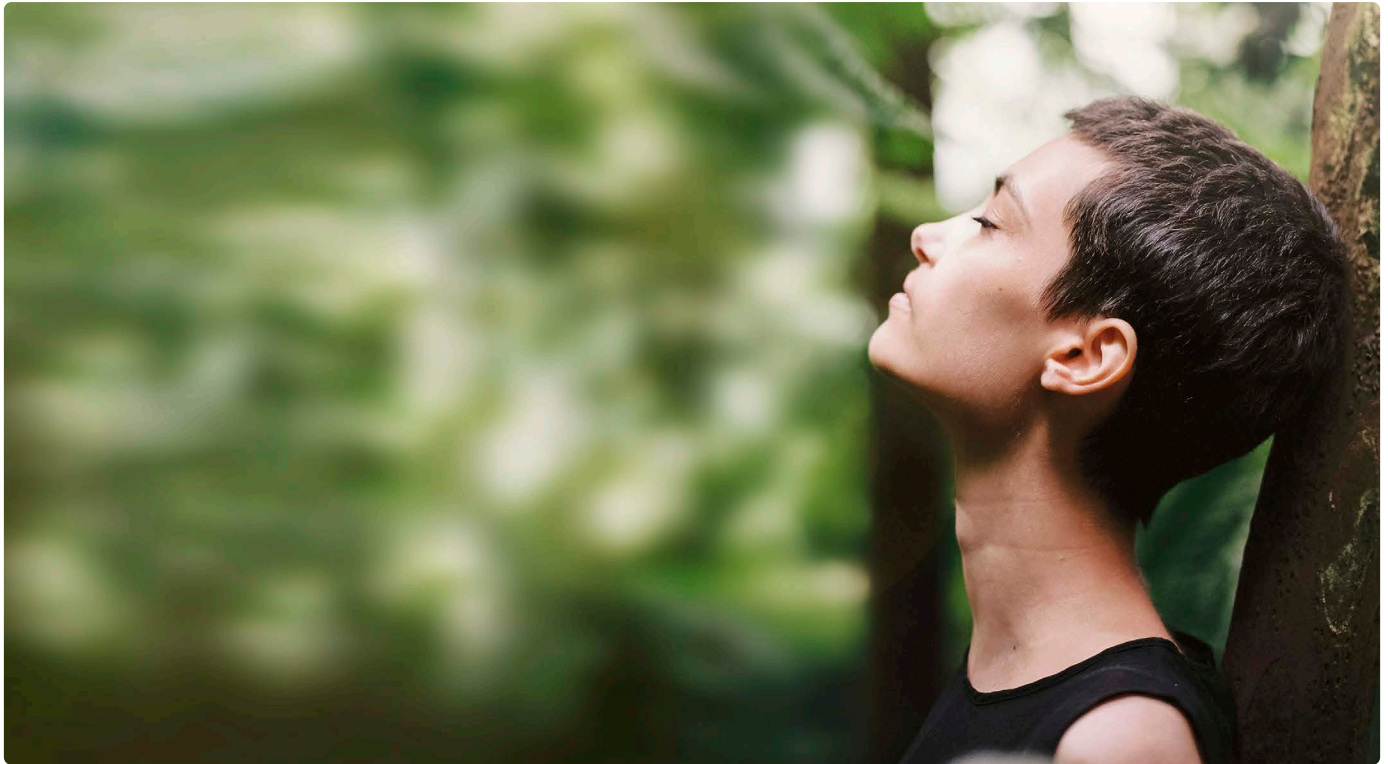


What is wellbeing and why is it important?



Wellbeing is not just the absence of disease or illness. It's a complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. Wellbeing is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction, and could be described as how you feel about yourself and your life.

Why does it matter? wellbeing is important because it:

- Adds years to life
- Is associated with positive health behaviours in adults and children (weight, smoking, alcohol/drug use)
- Improves recovery from illness
- May ultimately reduce the healthcare burden

The biopsychosocial model

A helpful model to understand our health and wellbeing is the biopsychosocial model. This model of wellness examines how the three factors – biological, psychological and social – affect our health & wellness. The BPS model stresses the interconnectedness of these factors and demonstrates the importance of maintaining wellness in all aspects of our lives.

We are all biological – we all have a level of physical health. For example a person may be living with a long term health condition such as diabetes or chronic pain. Our biology accounts for any genetic predispositions that we might have for mental or physical health issues. But that's not the whole story, we are also psychological. This accounts for how we cope, our self-esteem, but also any adverse experiences that we may have had in our lifetime. And of course, we exist in a social system – this accounts for our family situation, relationships at school, work and with our community. It's the connection between these three factors that can explain our current state of health and wellbeing. This also gives us a way of thinking about what we can do to enhance our wellbeing.

The impact of stress

At any given time, we might be facing difficulties with our health, our finances, our relationships, and our coping strategies are stretched to the limit. When we experience stress, our body is designed to respond to that threat, which is called the fight or flight response. The stresses that we are generally dealing with today do not require us to fight our way out of them, and running away is only likely to make the problem worse. When we are stressed, we are likely to be hypervigilant to threat, our heart rate will increase, along with our blood pressure and we release adrenaline. We all have cortisol in our system which regulates our immune system, digestive and endocrine systems and our reproductive system. Maintaining a good balance of cortisol, and therefore our stress levels, is necessary for our health and wellbeing. Chronic stress can mess with our cortisol levels, and this dysregulation has been observed in chronic pain conditions, cardiovascular diseases and mood disorders. This is why managing our stress is so fundamentally important.

What can we do to improve our wellbeing

So what can we do? Being able to recognise what we can control and influence is a really good place to start. If something is causing us distress, it is all too easy to ignore or avoid it.

That might help us feel a bit better in the short term, but this is not going to solve problems that do have a solution.

The following steps to wellbeing have been researched and developed by the New Economics Foundation.

● Connect

We are social animals and there is strong evidence that indicates that feeling close to and valued by other people is a fundamental human need and one that contributes to functioning well in the world. Social relationships act as a buffer against mental ill health, across all ages. Try to do something different today to make a connection - speak to a colleague instead of emailing them, make time to say hello to the new person or ask someone how their weekend was.

● Learn

Continued learning enhances self-esteem and encourages social interaction and a more active life. It benefits our wellbeing and our brain health. Setting goals, which is related to adult learning in particular, has been strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing. You could try that class you've often thought about, join a book club or do a crossword or sudoku. You might find some new connections through learning too.

● Be active

Regular physical activity is associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety. It helps to slow down age-related cognitive decline and promotes wellbeing. That doesn't mean spending hours in a gym. Being active can mean getting out for a brief walk or taking the stairs instead of a lift. Lots of gyms and instructors now offer seated exercise classes which may also provide opportunities for social interactions.

● Take notice

Taking notice means being present in the moment. Studies have shown that being aware of what is taking place in the present directly enhances your wellbeing and helps you to savour the moment. Find moments of respite from the world and to enjoy your environment - if you go for a walk, take notice of the wind in the trees, buy a plant for your desk or try out a new route to work.

● Give

Research into actions for promoting happiness shows that giving to others is associated with an increase in wellbeing as it creates a sense of rewards, feelings of purpose and self-worth and helps you to connect with others. These could be small acts of kindness towards other people - saying thank you to someone who has helped you, asking friends how they are and truly listening or helping a colleague with a work project.

The other fundamentals for managing or enhancing your wellbeing are:

- A good sleep routine can prove very helpful, particular if you have a chaotic schedule
- A well balanced diet is not only good for us physically, but can give us a sense of control and achievement
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake
- Talk to someone about your problems
- Do the things you enjoy - we are designed to feel joy and pleasure, so don't let this go

Only you can prioritise your wellbeing and it's not selfish to do so. Making changes can be difficult and feel overwhelming so if you are struggling to make the necessary changes discuss this with a friend or family member or seek help from a professional if needed.

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