

Five Ways to Wellbeing

As part of the UK Governments Foresight programme the New Economics Foundation (NEF) was asked to research ways of improving personal wellbeing, that is the things that help people to feel good and function well.

From the evidence a short list of recommendations was developed and summarised as the 5 Ways to Wellbeing. These are: Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning and Give.



The evidence about the 5 Ways to Wellbeing and why they are important...

Connect

In terms of mental wellbeing research shows:

- The most significant difference between two groups of adults between the ages of 16-64, living in the UK, one with and one without mental illness, is the degree of social participation.
- If a primary social network is defined as the total number of close relatives and friends, those with 3 or less are more likely to develop common mental health disorders.
- Happy people have stronger social relationships than less happy people and social networks promote a sense of belonging and wellbeing.
- Belonging to a social network involving communication and supportive relationships is protective of good health and positive wellbeing.

Conclusion:

The evidence indicates that feeling close to and valued by other people is a fundamental human need that contributes to functioning well. Although the composition of social networks is likely to differ between individuals and within individuals across time, giving the time to strengthen and broaden these networks is important for wellbeing.



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Connect

Connect with people around you. Not just family and friends but colleagues and neighbors; at home, work or in your local community. Meet up. Join in. Listen. Phone a friend. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.

For organisations ... increase access to peer support groups. Support people to find and participate in local community activities that help them connect.

Be active

In terms of achieving mental wellbeing regular physical activity:

- Is associated with a greater sense of wellbeing and lower levels of depression and anxiety across all age groups.
- Protects against cognitive decline in later life and against the onset of symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Provides increases in perceived self-efficacy, a sense of mastery and a perceived ability to cope, as well as detracting from negative thoughts.
- Enhances wellbeing even when carried out in very small bouts of less than 10 minutes

Conclusion:

Physical activity and exercise seem to be essential for people of all ages both as a mechanism for slowing age-related cognitive decline and for promoting wellbeing. Physical activity does not necessarily need to be particularly intense and can also have the benefit of encouraging social interaction at the same time.



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Be active

Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle... play a game... dance... do some gardening. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, choose a physical activity you enjoy and one that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

For organisations ... facilitate access to open, green spaces or woodland. Promote access to community based physical activities that help people to connect and build a social network.

Take notice

As far as mental wellbeing is concerned research has shown that:

- Being trained to be aware of sensations, thoughts and feelings for 8-12 weeks can enhance wellbeing for several years.
- Being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present is associated with positive mental states, self-regulated behaviour and heightened self knowledge.
- Heightened awareness allows an individual to make choices in line with personal values and intrinsic motivations.
- Savoring an experience can help reinstate life priorities.

Conclusion:

Reminding oneself to 'take notice' is a step towards strengthening and broadening awareness. This will enhance the process of achieving lasting behavioural change.



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Take notice

Catch sight of something different or beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

For organisations ... explore opportunities to set up mindfulness courses or training. Mindfulness has been shown to have positive effects on psychological wellbeing, both for those with a mental illness and those without.

Keep learning

Research on the theme of learning and mental wellbeing showed that:

- The continuation of learning through life enhances self-esteem, encourages social interaction and a more active life.
- Adult learning correlates with positive effects on wellbeing, reports of life satisfaction, optimism, resilience and efficacy.
- Setting and achieving goals is strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing particularly when the goals are self generated and in line with personal values.
- Teaching individuals goal setting and planning skills increases wellbeing.

Conclusion:

The activity of learning, both formal and informal, is itself very important for wellbeing and goal directed behaviour has a particular impact on an individual's wellbeing. It is important that there is recognition of the value of both types of learning and of the quality of the learning experience.



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Keep learning

Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for a course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favorite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.

For organisations ... promote or develop community based informal learning opportunities, which will help to increase social interaction. Signpost those with long term health conditions to Education Programmes for Patients (EPP).

Give

Evidence has shown that:

- Changes in the 'reward areas' of the brain suggest that social cooperation is intrinsically rewarding.
- In early life, stimulation of this part of the brain contributes to gains in cognitive and social functioning, critical for the development of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Feelings of happiness and life satisfaction have been strongly associated with active participation in social and community life.
- For older people volunteering is associated with positive affect and meaning in life while offering support to others is associated with reduced mortality rates.
- Individuals who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy.
- Committing an act of kindness once a week over a 6 week period is associated with an increase in well being.

Conclusion:

Reciprocating or 'giving back' to others promotes wellbeing for people of all ages. For adults giving and sharing are important in defining a sense of purpose in the community and a sense of self worth. Furthermore giving and sharing have the potential to lead to new and stronger relationships in the future. (Connect)



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Give

Do something nice for a friend or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out as well as in. Seeing yourself and your happiness linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates a connection with the people around you.

For organisations ... help to create opportunities for people to give something back. This includes giving something back to services. This shows a two way demonstration of giving and receiving. Build on people's assets, not just meeting needs. Explore time banking as a way of helping to 'give'.