

What Does Research into Neuroscience and Developing Well-being in Children, Young People and Adults Tell Us?

Are You Prepared to Take on the Challenge of Carrying out 12 Key Steps to Improve Your Wellbeing?

600 million people worldwide suffer from depression and anxiety. So we have to be able to acknowledge and do something about this.

There is increasing research from the field of neuroscience that provides us with insight into the messages our brain needs to enable us to develop our well-being in the following areas:

- build neuroplasticity and memory
- build well-being and vitality
- manage anxiety, mental health and worry
- build the skills of executive function (planning and executing tasks)
- maximize sleep
- build a study habit and self-control
- build memory and revision ability
- promote personal growth
- Build skills of will-power and self-compassion

In order to build the above resilience and wellbeing skills, there are some steps that need to be taken. We need to ensure that we do not spend too long feeling fragile but instead develop the skills to be robust in dealing with life changes and transitions. Learning to respond to difficult situations by getting mentally stronger is essential.

We have to learn coping skills because life events fuel anxiety, worry and loss of confidence. Natural instinct is to protect children but not at the expense of making them fragile. Adults also have to protect themselves against fragility and build their own resilience and wellbeing. The following strategies can be used by children, young people and adults.

Taking our well-being seriously and treating it as a skill means we experience more positive mood, motivation, productivity and resilience.

The top 12 strategies are listed below. Before reading these, make your own list or make a list within a family or peer group and then see if there are any surprises.

1. Sleep: At least 8 – 9 hours for teenagers is important and 7 – 8 for adults.

Symptoms of sleep deprivation include: moodiness, fatigue, irritability, depressed mood, difficulty learning new concepts, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate or a "fuzzy" head, lack of motivation, clumsiness, increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings and heightened anxiety.

The following disciplines can all aid a peaceful and restful night of sleep:

- Have fixed go to bed and get up times every day.
- Don't lay-in at weekends, you don't make up sleep loss that way.
- Have a hot bath before bed.
- Avoid all caffeine at least 6 hours before bed.
- Avoid exercise at least 4 hours before bed.
- Leave technology out of the bedroom.
- Wind down before sleep.
- Keep the bedroom dark and cool.
- Turn your bedside clock away from you so you do not see the time if you wake up accidentally in the night.
- Avoid electric blankets and hot water bottles.
- Don't nap beyond 3pm, this reduces sleep.
- Sleep in bed, don't watch TV or your iPad.

The neuroscience of why? Sleep restores memory, cleans the brain, builds the immune system, integrates our experience and fine-tunes our emotions. The importance of sleep is often underestimated and yet sleep really does matter.

2. Exercise: At least 20 minutes a day, especially in nature.

The neuroscience of why? Exercise helps memory and thinking directly and indirectly. Being in nature is a natural way of elevating mood.

3. Eat healthily: Complex carbohydrates, low refined sugar and keep hydrated.

The neuroscience of why? The brain needs nutrition and hydration to stay healthy and happy. Supporting that perspective, one research paper reviewed the results of another 16 studies and found no differences between two relatively healthy diets. People who were eating a typical Western diet of fast food, salty snacks, desserts, and soft drinks, however, became more depressed over time. But eating a classic healthy diet high in fruit and vegetables, seafood, and whole grains or a more Mediterranean diet, which includes lots of olive oil and more vegetables, meat, and dairy, both seemed to protect against depression.

4. Mindfulness: Mindfulness is present moment awareness that involves intentionally observing and allowing your experiences to be without judgement. Breathe through your nose and out through your mouth. Let your thoughts pass by like clouds in the sky and imagine your worry thoughts sitting on a cloud, floating away.

The neuroscience of why? The brain registers messages given to it. If the message is constant worry and anxiety, the brain is constantly in fight or flee mode. By staying present in the moment and as calm as possible, the brain registers this message and copes far better.

5. Mind wandering: Let the mind just wander for at least 20 minutes a day.

The neuroscience of why? The mind needs down time and mind wandering gives the brain a chance to be creative in generating ideas or problem-solving or seeing events from a different perspective.

6. Emotions: Notice them, particularly the difficult ones. Accept them, share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust.

The neuroscience of why? This gives insight into the range of emotions people experience and then get to learn that these emotions, when acknowledged, accepted and shared will not destroy us. People with higher emotional intelligence tend to have greater psychological health, are less anxious and less depressed or less burned out at work. They tend to make better decisions in life. They tend to have better-quality relationships, tend to perform better academically and in the workplace. Learning about emotions is a set of skills that really matter for people's dreams to come true.

7. Walk outside in nature: For at least 15 – 20 minutes a day.

The neuroscience of why? Green space and connecting with nature provides a sense of calm.

8. Listen to music: Sad music to feel sad, angry music to feel angry and calm music to feel calm.

The neuroscience of why? Music enables us to feel a range of emotions, acknowledge them, accept them and move on from them.

9. Practice gratitude and kindness: Express both each day. Experience gratitude by writing down three good things that happened during the day before going to bed. Do a kind deed for someone even if it is simply holding a door open for them.

The neuroscience of why? The brain registers good emotions and these are important to build happiness, resilience and wellbeing.

10. Connect meaningfully with friends and family: This involves spending time with real people instead of virtual.

The neuroscience of why? The outcome of 50 years of happiness research is that the quantity and quality of a person's social connections (friendships, relationships with family members, closeness to neighbours and so on), is so closely related to well-being and personal happiness the two can practically be equated. People with many friendships are less likely to experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem, and problems with eating and sleeping.

11. Engage in activities that are important to your life purpose: This refers to things that are important to you such as something you value doing in your life whether it be spending time with family or friends or creating a project.

The neuroscience of why? Taking part in tasks that match our values in life motivates us to do our best, achieve and feel a sense of accomplishment. All of this is important in building our mental strength and resilience.

12. Learn something new - Set yourself a challenge: Write down a specific goal for your challenge using your 'sweet spot' (a challenge that is not too easy that you will not be motivated to achieve it and a challenge that is not too hard that it is unrealistic to achieve).

Be very specific about exactly what the challenge looks like and exactly what the success will look like to you.

The neuroscience of why? Brain neuroplasticity develops as well as courage, confidence and emotional wellbeing. Courage is enormously important for dealing with life events with a sense of confidence so that you are not stuck in difficult situations or stop taking part in tasks for fear of failure.

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."

— **Winston S. Churchill**