

A GUIDE TO POSITIVE MENTAL WELLBEING

At The Heart

This guide aims to provide young adults with some insight into ways that they can improve their overall mental wellbeing.

This guide is not intended to replace therapy or any professional mental-health support, but aims to help individuals to identify a few different ways that they can support themselves to make positive changes independently.

Positive wellbeing covers a plethora of different life areas, and this guide is not exhaustive, but we hope that you find it helpful nonetheless.

For more information about At The Heart and what we do to support young adults from black and other ethnic minority groups, please visit our website at www.attheheartuk.org





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MANAGING STRESS

Stress occurs when the demands of life are perceived to be too much to cope with: coping abilities < demands of life.

Everyone experiences stress from time-to-time, but stressors are different for everyone and the stress itself can occur to differing degrees.

A certain amount of stress is a normal part of life and can be useful to motivate us and help us meet demands. It can also help to improve performance (i.e. exams, work presentation, preparing for a date/holiday). Too little stress could mean that you become too relaxed, inactive, unmotivated and bored, whereas too much stress could mean that you become anxious, panicky, irritable and experience burn-out.

Stress becomes a problem when it starts to seriously impact your quality of life. If you want to learn some ways to better manage your stress, have a look at the tips below...

1. Identify the sources of your stress: i.e. work, study, relationships, unrealistic expectations, conflict, living/working environment, physical health, mental health, feeling idle etc.
2. Figure out if there are any practical steps you can take to help reduce the amount of stress that you are experiencing. Are there any aspects of that situation that you *can* control?
3. Use problem-solving techniques to help you break down problems into smaller more manageable steps. Think of multiple solutions to your problem, make a pros and cons list for each solution, pick the best solution and create an action plan for it.
4. Having a healthy, balanced lifestyle that involves healthy eating and regular exercise can give you more energy, help you unwind and help you build resilience.
5. Be assertive - learn to say "no" and set boundaries for yourself so that you are not taking on more than you are capable of at any given time.
6. Make time for the things that make you feel good i.e. hobbies, spending time with friends and family, sports etc.
7. Schedule in some protected relaxation time to ensure you give your mind and body a break as often as possible.



SLEEP

Poor sleep has been found to have an adverse effect on concentration, memory, attention, co-ordination and mood.



Some important facts about sleep:

1. The most important thing is to get **good quality** sleep, it's not just about the number of hours you sleep.
2. The "everyone needs 8 hours of sleep" tale is a **myth**. On *average* adults tend to need 7-9 hours of sleep, but some people might need less than that if the quality of their sleep is good, and others might need more if the quality of their sleep isn't that great.
3. There are 4 stages of sleep: Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3 and REM (Rapid-Eye Movement) Sleep. A healthy sleep cycle can be described as waking up feeling **refreshed** after going through all four sleep stages 4-5 times.
4. Although it may seem like a good idea to: oversleep on weekends, take long "naps" during the day or use alcohol to help with sleep, these actions only prove to be beneficial in the short term and have actually been identified as maintaining factors for chronic sleep difficulties (because they disrupt the sleep/wake cycle).

"Fixing" your sleep can take a really long time, especially if you have chronic sleep issues, but here are some tips to help

1. Create the **optimal sleeping conditions**: limit exposure to bright lights (keep it as dark as possible), have little to no distractions, make sure you have a comfortable mattress and quality bedding, cultivate peace and quiet, have a cool room (but not cold), use essential oils like lavender to induce sleep.
2. If you're trying to adjust your wake- or bed- times, try to make gradual changes of 1-2 hours at a time. This makes sticking to a new routine more sustainable.
3. Try having a warm/hot bath or shower about an hour or two before bedtime. A shower can help to induce sleep because it helps change your body's core temperature; a drop in temperature after a bath/shower helps signal to the body that it's time for bed.
4. If you **must** have a nap during the day, the best time to do it is shortly after lunch (early afternoon) for about 20 minutes. This is because there is usually a natural dip in our levels of wakeness at around 1pm.
5. **Avoid** clock-watching! Watching the time could trigger overthinking and you may start to worry about the lack of sleep you've had, or how little time left you have before needing to wake up. If you've set an alarm for yourself, there's no need to know what time it is before it goes off.
6. Build **sleep associations**. Try to avoid using the bedroom for stressful tasks (i.e. work) if possible and only use your bed for sleep and sex (which can help to induce sleep). If you notice that you are struggling to falling asleep after about 15-20 minutes (because we aren't clock-watching we would need to guess), get out of bed and leave the room. This helps your brain to identify 'being in bed' as a cue for sleep.



7. Once you are out of bed, try to engage in un-stimulating activities like reading the dictionary or counting how many forks you have in your cutlery drawer. You'll be ready to go back to bed when you notice yourself starting to yawn or your body and/or eyelids start to feel heavy. If you get back into bed and you still can't fall asleep within 15-20 minutes, repeat the process! It might seem gruelling in the short-term but it really makes a difference to your sleep health in the long-run.

Build a night-time **routine** to help signal to your brain that it's time to get ready for bed. You can include things like hygiene practices, relaxation techniques, meditation, stretching, soothing music and/or turning electronics off at least 30 minutes to an hour before bed.

If your sleep difficulties are persistent or worsening over time, talk to your GP; there may be some underlying health issues that need to be addressed.

8. Although alcohol may make a lot of people feel drowsy, it actually decreases the *quality* of our sleep, so it is very important to avoid drinking alcohol at least 4-6 hours before bedtime. This same guidance should be applied to caffeine and nicotine. Make sure to reduce your general fluid intake closer to bedtime and avoid eating heavy meals after 8pm - if you're hungry, opt for a light, healthy snack instead.
9. Practice using the **sleep restriction** technique. Sleep Restriction increases sleep efficiency. Sleep efficiency measures the amount of time you spend asleep, compared to the total time you spend in bed.

People tend to have to use sleep restriction for an average of about 4+ consecutive weeks before feeling the benefits. This means that in order to use this technique, you need to be motivated and committed to make this change.

There are many self-help resources online that go into the details of how sleep restriction works and the steps that need to be followed. *Google*: "Sleep Restriction self-therapy" for more information.



RELAXATION

Relaxation can be defined as a state free from tension and anxiety, and often involves resting our minds and our bodies. Structured relaxation exercises target the systems in our body which cause our physiological stress reactions.

What we find relaxing can differ from person to person. Some relaxing activities might include reading, meditation, going for a walk, talking to a friend or playing games.

Relaxation can also be practiced through relaxation exercises. Structured relaxation exercises can help to turn off our stress responses, reduce our heart and breathing rates or relax tense muscles. It is important to find a type of structured relaxation that fits for you.

1. Relaxation is a skill and, like any skill, it improves with **practice**.
2. You don't need to spend hours practicing relaxation; **five minutes** a day can make a huge difference and significantly lower your stress levels.
3. To get used to using relaxation techniques, try practicing them when you are feeling calm to start with, as this will help you to be able to use them effectively during times of stress.



Here are some relaxation exercises that you may find helpful to try

- 1. Three-Minute Breathing Space:** Set a 3-minute timer for this exercise. Sit or lie in a comfortable position and start to pay attention to your breathing. Take slow, deep breaths in and out. Allow yourself to settle in the breath.

Notice how the air flows in and out of your nostrils - notice how the air may feel cooler as you breathe in, and a little warmer as you breathe out.

Bring your attention to your chest - notice how your chest and shoulders rise with every in-breath, and fall with every out-breath.

Bring your attention to the stomach area - notice how your stomach expands with every in-breath, and contracts with every out-breath.

Each time you notice your mind wander, just acknowledge that this has happened and then return your attention back to your breathing.

As your timer goes off, Push your feet into the floor and gradually bring your awareness and attention back to the room around you.



2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): Another, more active way of calming your mind is by relaxing your body. Your body or your muscles can't be tense and relaxed at the same time. PMR is a technique that helps you to mentally and physically relax by tensing and then relaxing the various muscle groups in your body.

Do not strain yourself during this exercise, just do what feels comfortable for you. If you have any problems (i.e. back injury) and are concerned that PMR might make it worse, ask your GP for advice.

This exercise starts out the same way as the Breathing Space exercise. Sit or lie in a comfortable position and start to pay attention to your breathing. Take slow, deep breaths in and out. Allow yourself to settle in the breath....

tense for 15 seconds
Curl your toes downwards

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
tense your calf muscles

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
lift your leg & tighten your thigh muscles
repeat for each leg

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
arch your back

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
pull in your belly

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
bring your shoulders to your ears

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
make a fist & tense your biceps

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
tilt your head back & tense your neck

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
lift your eyebrows as high as they can go

rest for 15 seconds

tense for 15 seconds
squeeze your lips together & tightly close your eyes

3. Visualisation: This exercise can help you to relax and focus your mind away from your racing thoughts.

Close your eyes. Allow yourself to get comfortable. Start with a few slow deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth, relaxing your body.

Using your imagination, imagine yourself walking slowly along a pleasant path. It's a beautiful day, and you feel relaxed and happy. You can feel the warmth and energy of the sunlight on your skin. Soon you come to a gate that leads you to a special place where you feel welcomed, safe, and comfortable. Push the gate open and allow yourself to enter your very own private space. Your space is filled with your favourite things. Whatever is pleasing to you can be found in this space. Perhaps there are flowers, trees, animals, birds, water, or even music.

Look around and notice what is in your private space. See all the colours and objects that are in this place. Notice how beautiful they are. Look at the various shapes and see how varied they are. Look at the ground, look at the sky, and see where they meet. Your space is calm and tranquil. Everything peacefully co-exists in this space.

As you are looking, become aware of how things might feel in this private space of yours. Begin to explore this space with your sense of touch. Perhaps some things are soft and warm, and others are smooth and cool. Simply spend some time exploring, using your sense of touch as you continue to feel at peace and comfortable. Notice what the air feels like; is it cool or warm? Is there a breeze or is it still? Take the time to feel the peace and serenity in this private space.

As you continue to explore your private space through sight and touch, become aware of the sounds that you hear in this place. The sounds are pleasing to the ear and very comforting. Perhaps it is quiet in your private space, or maybe there are a number of sounds. Some of the sounds may be very soft, while others may be louder. Relax and listen for a while and see if you can identify the different sounds there. As you're listening to the sounds, become aware of what smells you might smell. Take a deep breath in, and notice the fragrances that are present. Some of them may be familiar, whilst others may be unfamiliar. The fragrances are pleasant and soothing. Take your time and enjoy your visit to this private space, using it in whatever way that you wish. Spend the time that is necessary for you to rejuvenate and to care for yourself.

When you are ready to leave, slowly walk back towards the gate of your private space. You have enjoyed your visit and feel relaxed and content. This good feeling will remain with you throughout the day. Push the gate open and return to the path that led you to there. As you make your way back up the path to the here and now, remember that you can use your imagination to return to your private space at any time you wish. Visit it any time you would like to relax, to be comforted, or just to enjoy its beauty.

You are now ready to resume your day. Stretch gently and open your eyes, feeling refreshed and alert.

FITNESS/EXERCISE

Regular exercise has been found to have a profound effect on mental health and general wellbeing. Not only is exercise good for our bodies, it's also good for our minds.

Exercise has been found to have a positive effect on depression, generalised anxiety, social anxiety, PTSD, stress, self-esteem, memory and sleep.

Exercise has been found to reduce the levels of adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones) found in the body. It has also been found to stimulate the production of endorphins (the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators).

Even if you're not the typical athlete, you can still incorporate exercise into your day-to-day life. Here are some tips to help you with this...



1. Start with what you **already know** you're capable of doing.
2. If you haven't exercised in a while, try not to start with vigorous exercise. Start slowly and **gradually** increase the intensity as you get used to moving again.
3. Trying to do too much, too quickly can put your body under a lot of stress and cause injury - especially if you haven't worked out for a while.
4. Use your daily tasks as a way to introduce some exercise (housework, walking the dog, climbing the stairs) into your **routine**.
5. **Track** your progress as a way to motivate yourself to keep going.
6. Make it **enjoyable**. Play music, listen to a podcast, join a class, do it with friends etc...
7. Make it a part of your **routine**. Stick to the same time and days of the week.
8. Tell others about your exercise plans, so that you have someone to hold you **accountable**.
9. **Prepare** your equipment and clothes in advance so that there's less effort required closer to the time that you're ready to start.
10. If you struggle to motivate yourself, why not try the **5 minute rule**? Plan to do just 5 minutes and see how you get on. The hardest part is usually just getting started.



POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE

Media, entertainment and culture shape a lot of how we view and see ourselves. Here are a few ways you can take control over how much these elements impact your self-image:

1. Be conscious of how much time you spend on social media or watching other types of media (tv, films, youtube etc.). Choose the amount of time you want to be online or want to watch a particular programme and then switch off after that.
2. Think about the types of programmes you are watching and the content in your feeds. Cultivate more relatable feeds and switch over to things that allow you to be kinder to yourself.
3. When you are out-and-about practice being critical of the media messages and ads you see on billboards, flyers and posters. Notice the images they use and the messages they are sending out.
4. Step away from the fashion / celebrity media outlets/
5. Set aside a time of day when you don't use any media (TV, radio, magazines) or social media. Create electronic-free zones.
6. Spend time to focus on other parts of your life that give you pleasure and fulfilment.



Body Image: How we feel about our body is also very closely related to our overall levels of self worth and how we see ourselves. The key to feeling your best is to exercise regularly, eat well, take time to relax, and generally aim for a healthy lifestyle.

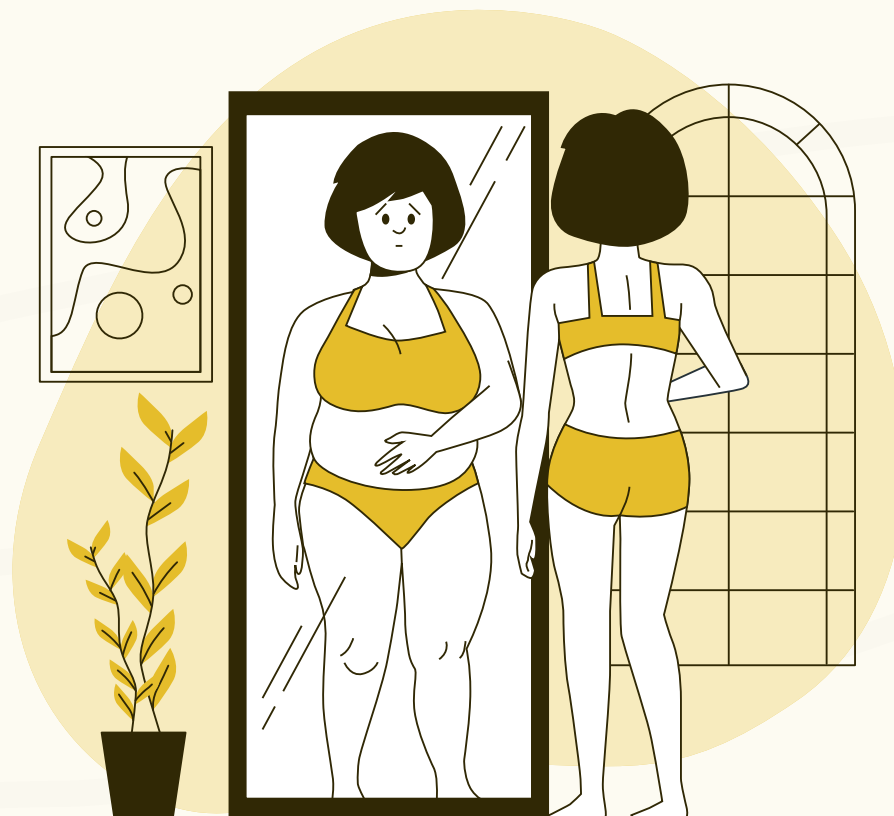
Be careful about dieting - research suggests that many diets simply do not work. Losing and gaining weight over and over again will lead to further weight gain overtime.

Depriving our bodies of certain foods inevitably leads to cravings, which we are likely to give in to. This in turn leads to guilt and a sense of failure, when in reality - the diet was unattainable to begin with.

There is more to all of us than the number on our clothing labels. Those who need to lose or gain weight for health reasons should try and separate those goals from body image. What we weigh does not make us better or worse people.

Maybe you do need to lose or gain weight for health reasons, but you can still feel good about yourself. There is more to you than the size you are.

Your body is more than just how you look. It is your health, fitness and the way you experience and communicate with the world around you. You can build a good relationship with your body by engaging in exercise and fitness activities.





Take time to love and take care of your body. Take a bath or shower, wash your hair, give yourself a massage, use body scrubs, take time to moisturise etc.

Here are some tips for how to improve your body-image for yourself:

1. Stop comparing yourself to others.
2. Wear clothes you feel good in that emphasise what you like about yourself.
3. Walk tall, straight and with pride.
4. Acknowledge and accept compliments given to you by others and actually make a note of them!
5. Make a list of all the things that you love about yourself.
6. Eat a variety of healthy foods when you feel hungry.
7. Avoid strict or fad-diets altogether.
8. Remember that exercise should be enjoyable and boost your positive feelings about yourself.

Our **self-esteem** can be described as the lens through which we see the world. It shapes *what* we see, *how* we interpret it, and what we *remember*.

People with high self-esteems believe that they are good and worthy people, and will see lots of examples of this in their daily lives. Because this is what they expect to find, they are more likely to tune in to such examples.

People with low self-esteems, however, have a bias against themselves and they naturally hone-in to any evidence that confirms their negative self-belief (also dismissing any evidence that contradicts it). With all these negative thinking patterns, someone with low self-esteem is likely to gather a lot of evidence against themselves, even when it is one-sided and unbalanced.

The first step towards improving self-esteem is to start actively noticing when your thinking is biased against yourself. As you start to see how unbalanced your 'evidence' is, you can start to explore your strengths and the alternative ways that you can see yourself that are more realistic, balanced and fair.

Working on positive self-image is an on-going process. People can make great improvements in how they feel about themselves through patience and hard work, but if it feels slow or difficult, be patient with yourself and keep going. Everybody has self-image issues from time to time but you try to get on-top of it by thinking ahead and planning for these times.

What positive steps can you take to cope?

How can you be kinder to yourself?

How can you be more forgiving towards yourself?

MANAGING NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

Negative automatic thoughts are habitual and often times we don't even notice that they're there... but they have a massive impact on our emotions and our behaviours. It is something that happens out of our awareness, but can cause immense amounts of distress. We are more likely to hone-in to these patterns of thoughts when we are feeling low, anxious or stressed, but negative automatic thoughts can also reinforce our experiences of these things too.

The first step towards managing negative automatic thoughts is to identify them:

Catastrophising

(Making a mountain out of a molehill)

This is when we blow things out of proportion and jump to the worse possible outcome.

Black & White Thinking

(All-or-nothing)

This is when we struggle to see things on a spectrum and either see things as good or bad; no in-between.

Mind-Reading

(Jumping to conclusions)

This is when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking.

Predictive Thinking

(Jumping to conclusions)

This is when we believe or act like we know what will happen in the future.

Mental Filter

This is when we only acknowledge what fits with our negative perspective and we ignore/forget the positive parts.

Personalisation

(Critical self)

This is when we place too much blame on ourselves when things go wrong.

Magnifying / Minimising

(Critical Self)

This is when we magnify others' positive attributes but minimise our own.

Labelling

(Overgeneralising)

This is when we label ourselves or others using global statements based on specific situation(s).

Overgeneralising

This is when we take an instance from the past and use it as evidence for the present or the future.

If you notice yourself having a negative automatic thought, you then want to pick **one** and take that thought to court. If you're not sure which thought to choose, pick the one with the greatest emotional-charge (also known as the hot thought).

List out the **evidence** (facts only) for and against your selected thought...

For - factual evidence that supports your negative, unhelpful thought

Against - factual evidence that does not support your negative, unhelpful thought

Then, you want to come up with a balanced, alternative thought using reason:

Look at the evidence presented. Is there an alternative way you can think about this situation? Based on the evidence, what might be a more balanced way of thinking about this?



TACKLING PERFECTIONISM

Most people evaluate their self-worth based on multiple different areas of their life i.e. relationships, personal qualities, achievements etc.

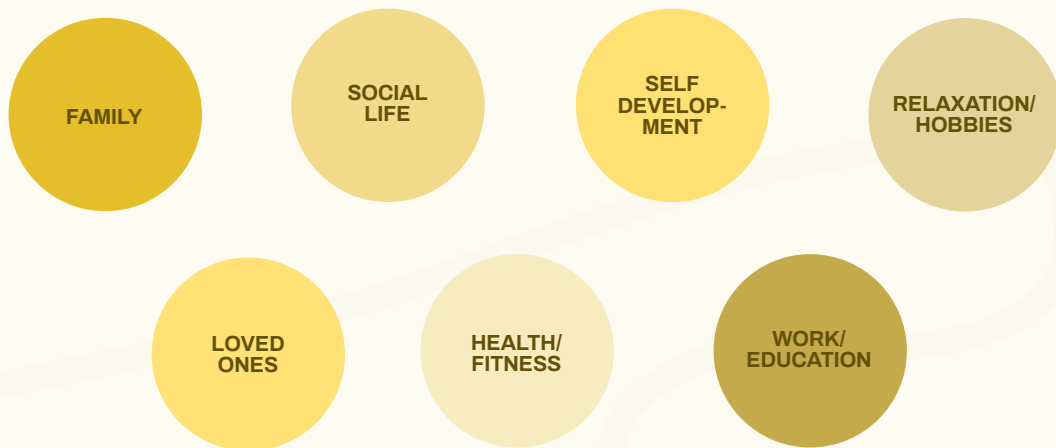
Perfectionists tend to judge their self-worth based *almost* entirely on their ability to meet their own unrealistic standards. Perfectionists overvalue what it means to "achieve" and over-time, other interests and values seem to become a lesser priority for them.

Perfectionists tend to work very hard to achieve the standards they set out for themselves and often perceive this way of life as being worthwhile because it means they are more likely to perform well.

As a result of the immense pressure perfectionists put on themselves, they often feel stressed, irritable, depressed, anxious or guilty, and are prone to thinking negatively about themselves. Even when they've managed to achieve a goal, they don't tend to feel happy for very long and tend to dismiss their success, conclude that the standard set was too low and set their standards higher for their next goal.

In order to tackle perfectionism, you may find it helpful to think about the amount of importance you place on each of the areas of your life that contribute to your self-worth.

Start to think about other ways that you can feel good about yourself. Identify the areas of your life that at some point were important to your self-worth but have become less of a priority.



Choose one area you would like to start with and then think of some activities you could engage in to help you prioritise other things.

Another tip for tackling perfectionism, is to try out some behavioural experiments. It may be helpful to first identify some of your perfectionism behaviours. Some examples of these are:

- Excessive checking
- Excessive organising
- Excessive list making
- Feeling the need to correct others
- Avoiding tasks you fear you are unable to do adequately
- Procrastinating by putting off a task
- Being indecisive
- Giving up too soon

One way to test the usefulness of a perfectionistic behaviour is to see what happens when you change the behaviour:

1. Choose one, specific goal behaviour that you would like to work on changing.
2. Break the goal down into small steps by making note of what you're going to do, when you're going to do it, where you're going to do it, and how long you're going to do it for.
3. Complete each step, one at a time, beginning with the least difficult, and working your way up.
4. Frequently repeat each step to make sure you that are comfortable with the change before you move on to the next one.

By doing this, you are likely to realise how much more time you have, and how little your performance is affected when you get rid of these behaviours.



BUILDING ROUTINE

Routine provides us with some day-to-day structure, but also gives us a better sense of control over our own time and resources.



Creating a new routine, or even trying to return to an old one, can be quite a challenge so we'll share with you some tips to help you get going...

1. If you don't already have one, get yourself some sort of planner. There are plenty of apps and online organisers to choose from, but you can also use a physical paper planner if that works better for you.
2. When building a new routine, you don't want to overwhelm yourself with too much to begin with, because a lot of change can make it more difficult to sustain.

Start by creating a skeleton for your new routine. This skeleton routine should include the bare "basics" such as: wake up time, bed time and meal times.

Tip: When you're first trying to build a wake-sleep routine, it's always easiest to keep it consistent, even on the days of the week when you may typically wake up later (i.e. the weekend).

3. Once you've gotten into the swing of things and you're ready to add more to your routine, you want to make sure that you have a good balance of activities across your week. Don't just think about the things you *need* to do (like going to work / studying).

First, identify which tasks/activities you would like to include in your new routine and then place them into one of three categories (habitual, pleasurable, necessary). If you feel like you don't have enough of a balance after doing that, try to make some adjustments so that you do. Not having a balance between the three types of activity could lead to increased levels of stress.

4. When you want to start adding your habitual, pleasurable and necessary tasks into your routine, make sure that it is a gradual process and that you are only adding a few new tasks at a time. This way, you feel like there is always room to change things around if more adjustments need to be made.
5. Don't feel that you need to plan everything by the millisecond. You want things to be flexible enough so that there's room for spontaneity and so that things don't feel rigid and predictable all the time.

Below is an example of how you might use the tips to build a routine.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Morning	07:00 Wake up Workout, Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast 09:00 Start Work	07:00 Wake up Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast 09:00 Start Work	07:00 Wake up Workout, Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast 09:00 Start Work	07:00 Wake up Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast 09:00 Start Work	07:00 Wake up Workout, Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast 09:00 Start Work	07:00 Wake up Have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast Meditate 10:30 French Lesson	07:00 Wake up Workout, Have a shower, get dressed have breakfast Plan my week
Afternoon	12:30 Lunch Break make sure I stretch my legs for 10 mins before I start working again 13:30 Back to work	12:30 Lunch Break make sure I stretch my legs for 10 mins before I start working again 13:30 Back to work	12:30 Lunch Break make sure I stretch my legs for 10 mins before I start working again 13:30 Back to work	12:30 Lunch Break make sure I stretch my legs for 10 mins before I start working again 13:30 Back to work	12:30 Lunch Break make sure I stretch my legs for 10 mins before I start working again 13:30 Back to work	12:30 Lunch Break Have Lunch Relax/Socialise/Life Admin ↓	Meal Prep Have Lunch Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin ↓
Evening	17:00 Finish Work Go for a walk Make dinner Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin	17:00 Finish Work Go for a walk Make dinner Practice my French Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin	17:00 Finish Work Go for a walk Make dinner Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin	17:00 Finish Work Go for a walk Make dinner Practice my French Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin	17:00 Finish Work Go for a walk Make dinner Relax/Socialise/ Life Admin	17:00 Finish Work ↓ Make dinner / Order Out Relax/Socialise	17:00 Finish Work ↓ Make dinner / Order Out Relax/Socialise
Night	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed	22:00 Start getting ready to go to bed Meditate 22:45 Go to bed



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If you would like to tell us what you think about this booklet please get in touch.

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If you are a mental health professional you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

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