

Understanding Your Mental Wellbeing

A Brief Introduction to the Science of Mental Wellbeing

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YOUR SIGNS OF POOR MENTAL WELLBEING

"If you listen to your body when it whispers, you won't have to hear it scream."

An important first step in improving your mental health is developing a clear understanding of your signs of poor mental wellbeing. The impact of the changes you make will become clearer if you have a decent understanding of how poor mental wellbeing impacts your mind, body and behaviour. You can track your signs and determine your progress.

Developing awareness of your signs also puts you in a better position to notice when your mental wellbeing is deteriorating in future, allowing you to take quicker and more effective action to feel better.

Many people are so fixated on what's causing their distress, and not on how it's impacting them. This can lead to rising levels of poor mental wellbeing that creep up on us in slow and insidious ways. We also believe that focusing on your signs is much more helpful than focusing on diagnostic labels (read more about our views on our flawed mental health system [here](#)).

So, first: review the following page and use the boxes below to create an overview of your personal signs of poor mental wellbeing:

MIND

BODY

BEHAVIOUR



SIGNS OF POOR MENTAL WELLBEING

MIND	BODY	BEHAVIOUR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Low mood and tearfulness » Numbness and emptiness » Hopelessness » Uninterest in life » Feelings of inferiority and worthlessness » Feeling as though there's a barrier between you and others – like you're an outsider or alien » Losing your sense of humour » Irritability » Impatience » Frustration » Mood swings » Memory issues » Finding it difficult to communicate » Racing thoughts » Worry » Fear and a sense of dread » Anger » Loneliness » Guilt » Paranoia » Intrusive thoughts » Disturbing mental images » Feelings of unreality » Thoughts of death and suicide » Hallucinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Breathing difficulties – the resulting imbalance of CO2 and oxygen can lead to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Chest tightness</i> • <i>Shooting chest pains</i> • <i>Feeling like you can't breathe</i> • <i>Heart pounding and racing</i> • <i>What feels like an irregular heartbeat</i> • <i>Butterflies in the stomach</i> • <i>Sweating or hot flushes</i> • <i>Feeling dizzy or light-headed</i> • <i>Weakness</i> • <i>Feeling sick</i> • <i>Shaking hands and legs</i> • <i>Sweaty palms</i> • <i>Tingling or numbness of the arms, legs, fingers, toes or face</i> • <i>Blurred vision</i> • <i> ringing or pulsating in the ears</i> • <i>Body tremors</i> • <i>Panic attacks</i> » Sleep problems » Fatigue » Digestive issues – stomach cramps, bloating, constipation, diarrhoea, indigestion, heartburn and acid reflux » Muscle tension in the neck, shoulders and jaw, which can result in physical aches and pains » Acne » Skin rashes » Dry mouth » Eye twitches » Temporary hair loss (which grows back) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » An urge to withdraw and avoid situations » Feeling frozen/stuck » Finding it hard to slow down and relax » Constant fidgeting » Seeking reassurance » Sleeping too little/too much » Eating too much/too little » Using tobacco, alcohol and other drugs more than usual » Low libido and sexual problems » Neglecting self-care » Moving slowly » Excessive yawning » Excessive urinating » Picking or pulling your fingers, nails and hair » Self-harming



CAUSES OF POOR MENTAL WELLBEING

Next, let's start to make sense of why you're feeling this way. Poor mental wellbeing is highly complex. There's no simple answer to "What causes depression and anxiety?" Many factors play a role. Here are some examples of external causes.

SITUATIONAL CAUSES

1. Childhood Trauma

"It is politically convenient for policy makers to emphasize individual biology in ways that decontextualize mental health problems and thus deflect scrutiny from damaging social systems. Childhood abuse and neglect, adulthood assault, poverty, and discrimination have devastating personal consequences, yet medicalizing subsequent distress permits a level of denial and distancing that absolves those in power of responsibility for addressing injustice and instituting legislative change." – Eleanor Longden et al.

Research shows that experiencing childhood trauma is disturbingly common.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study) is one of the largest scale investigations into childhood trauma and later-life health and wellbeing.

A whopping two thirds of the participants had an ACE score of at least one – 11,078 out of 17,337 people had experienced some form of abuse or parental dysfunction. The participants were mostly white, middle and upper-middle class, and college-educated. They had good jobs and great health care.

Research shows that as the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative mental and physical health outcomes. You can find out your ACE score [here](#).

2. Loss and Entrapment Situations

- » Feeling lonely and disconnected from others,
- » Feeling trapped in a relationship you no longer want to be in,
- » Feeling trapped in a job you don't want to be in anymore,
- » An unwanted period of unemployment,
- » Divorce or relationship breakup,
- » Personal illness,
- » Bereavement.

3. Threat Situations

- » Lacking a sense of security and/or control in terms of employment, finances, and housing,
- » Work-related stress, which has been shown to be related to six core areas:
 1. **Demands** – issues with your workload, work patterns and work environment
 2. **Control** – lacking control over the way you do your work, the pace of your work, and when you take breaks
 3. **Support** – lacking sufficient encouragement and resources at work
 4. **Relationships** – experiencing conflict and unacceptable behaviour
 5. **Role** – a lack of clarity around your role and responsibilities



4. Change Situations

- » Changing jobs,
- » Moving house,
- » Pregnancy and becoming a parent,
- » Getting married,
- » Being a carer for a family member or friend that requires a lot of support.

SOCIAL CAUSES

- » The lack of compulsory mental wellbeing skills education in schools,
- » Rising levels of work-related stress,
- » Excessive funding cuts to local authorities and mental health services,
- » The loneliness epidemic,
- » Damaging neoliberal values in Western societies (i.e. individualism, competitiveness, overwork and materialism),
- » Helicopter parenting and the impact of neoliberal values on parenting styles (i.e. parents placing higher demands on their children),
- » The harmful effects of social media and excessive mobile/tablet usage (i.e. perfectionism, blue-light exposure, and body image issues),
- » Toxic masculinity (i.e. the pressure that exists on men to suppress their emotions and thus not reach out for support),
- » The harmful effects of non-constructive and sensationalist journalism (i.e. news that revolves around negative and conflict-based stories),
- » High levels of income inequality,
- » The crisis of inadequate, unaffordable and insecure housing,
- » The fact that a fifth of the UK population is now living in poverty, amid the worst decline for children and pensioners in decades.

OTHER CAUSES

- » Problems with the thyroid gland,
- » Vitamin deficiency (e.g., B12),
- » Hormone problems,
- » Gut infections,
- » Anaemia,
- » Diabetes,
- » Complications with other medications,
- » High alcohol and/or caffeine intake,
- » Recreational drugs,
- » Chronic exposure to low levels of carbon monoxide.

If you suspect a physical health problem may be underlying your poor mental wellbeing, it's worth discussing this with your GP.



PARENTING STYLES ASSOCIATED WITH POOR MENTAL WELLBEING

“Sometimes people become depressed even though they have not recently experienced any actual major loss, but in the course of therapy it may turn out that they have never felt loved or wanted by their parents or partners, and are in a kind of grieving-yearning state for the closeness they lack.” – Dr Paul Gilbert

Poor parenting styles such as the ones listed below are also associated with poor mental wellbeing. Note that sometimes parents don't fit neatly into one category, so you may have experienced more than one parenting style.

1. Affectionless-Control

- » Lack of warmth and care,
- » Overcontrolling,
- » Impose high standards of achievement,
- » Intrusive,
- » Critical,
- » Low frustration tolerance - prone to angry outbursts,
- » Child experiences fear and anger towards the parent.

2. Enmeshment and Boundary-Violating

- » Does not recognise a child's own individuality and tries to control their lives,
- » Places adult responsibilities onto child such as looking after a younger sibling,
- » Shares information that is not age-appropriate for the child such as relationship problems,
- » Child may feel a responsibility to “rescue” parents,
- » Child feels a sense of burden and guilt.

3. Unpredictable

- » Loving one minute and distant the next,
- » May be verbally and/or physically abusive,
- » Child loves but also fears the parent.

4. Unreliable

- » What they say and do differs – they may talk about being loving, but don't always act that way,
- » Child perceives parents as unavailable for reliable protection and support.

The common theme in these parenting styles is that they interfere with our sense of social connectedness and safety.

Research has clearly demonstrated that people who experience parental love and affection develop a well-functioning soothing system, meaning they're biologically well-equipped to handle distress.

On the other hand, experiencing emotional disconnection, coldness and hostility can lead people to develop an underactive soothing system.





A Thought Experiment

A little girl gets hit by a car on a street with a 30mph speed limit. The driver was looking down at their phone and didn't see the little girl crossing the road. Sadly, she broke two ribs and her leg. It's now six months later, and she's just had her leg cast removed.

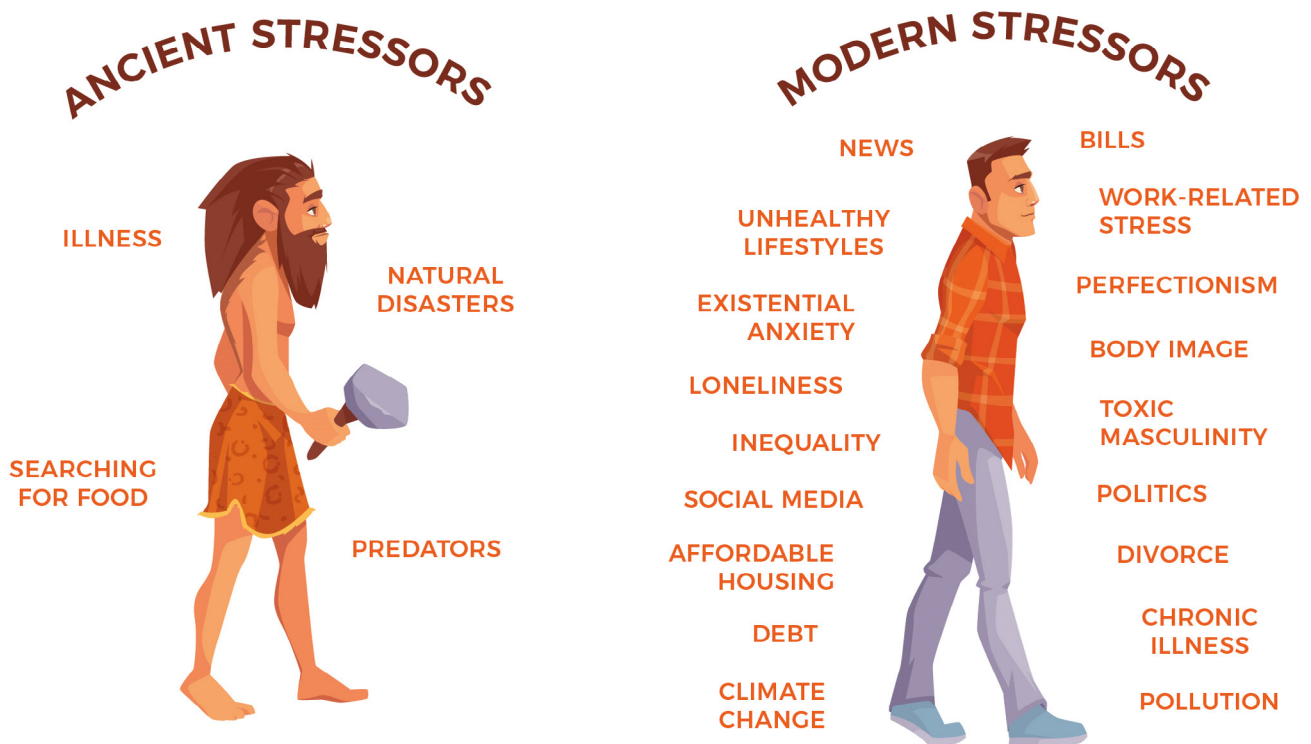
Do you scold the little girl for not knowing the exercises to regain her muscle strength?
Do you belittle her for being in pain, telling her she shouldn't feel that way?
Do you tell her she's being a burden by asking others for help?

Of course, the answer is no. Yet, we so often treat ourselves this way, don't we?

We beat ourselves up for not being able to manage our emotions and bodily responses. We don't remind ourselves that mental wellbeing skills aren't taught in schools and it's not our fault that we struggle to cope.

Just like the physical injury wasn't the girl's fault, your mental injury is not your fault. However, just like the girl can do leg exercises to build up her physical strength, you can do mental and behavioural exercises to build up your mental strength.

You can rewire your brain and body. You can help yourself feel better. Your poor mental wellbeing state is not your fault, but it is your responsibility to help yourself heal.




Inspired by *The Illustrated Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris and Bev Aisbett



YOUR POOR MENTAL WELLBEING TRIGGERS

Review the previous pages and make some bullet points below about the external factors you believe may have contributed to your poor mental wellbeing.



UNDERSTANDING PANIC ATTACKS

Panic attacks are caused by a surge of adrenaline into your system and can be one of the most distressing things you'll ever experience. They might come in waves, and typically last between 5 minutes and half an hour. They can feel completely out of the blue. Although they're very frightening, they're not dangerous. We urge you to familiarise yourself with the signs of panic attacks so that if you do ever experience one, you understand what's happening and can follow the steps for dealing with them listed below.

MIND	BODY	BEHAVIOUR
<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Feeling a sense of terror or impending doom» Racing, anxious thoughts» Feeling disoriented and strange» Feeling a loss of control» A sense of not being connected to your body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Heart pounding and racing» What feels like an irregular heartbeat» Chest pains» Sweating» Trembling» Tingling or numbness of the arms, legs, fingers, toes, around the mouth, or across the side of your face» Feeling weak and faint» Dizziness» A choking sensation» Ringing in the ears» Nausea» Dry mouth» Experiencing chills» Needing the toilet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Feeling frozen/stuck» Feeling an urge to run away from the situation

How to Handle a Panic Attack in 4 Steps

Step 1. Slow Your Breathing. Your breathing and heart rate are interconnected. If you notice you're breathing quickly, start by trying to slow down your breathing or practise a breathing exercise.

Step 2. Step Back and Observe Your Mental Activity. It's common to experience racing, anxiety-driven thoughts such as, "What if I'm having a heart attack?" and "What if I'm dying?" You can start to slow down a racing mind by taking a step back and observing your thoughts rather than getting carried away by them.

Step 3. Use Coping Statements. Remind yourself that you're not in any real physical danger. Repeat whatever coping statement feels the most natural for you, such as "I'm safe," "I can handle this," or even, "bring it on!"

Step 4. Try to Stay Put. By riding out the panic attack where you are, you signal to your amygdala—the part of your brain that generates the stress response—that the situation you're in doesn't present any real danger. This helps your brain and body become less stress reactive in the long run.



WHY IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE WE STRUGGLE TO COPE

We're far from functioning at our best when we're in the poor mental wellbeing state. Factors that make it especially hard to cope include:

- » Poor concentration,
- » Memory problems,
- » Low energy,
- » Low motivation,
- » Less creative thinking.

So, please try to be kind to yourself if you're finding things really difficult. It's all about breaking things down into small, manageable steps. We strive to make all our tools as 'fluff-free' and easily digestible as possible. Nobody wants to be faced with a 500-page book when we're feeling this way.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING

Improving your mental health is all about developing awareness of the **factors within your control**. It's about improving your **mental wellbeing skills** - becoming more resilient and learning how to cope better with life's inevitable challenges.

The cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) cycle is an extremely useful framework for this. Without an understanding of the CBT cycle, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and unsure where to start when it comes to helping yourself feel better. The good news is that changing just one part of your cycle can make changing the other parts easier. The CBT cycle is broken down into these main areas:

- » Situation
- » Thoughts
- » Emotions
- » Behaviour
- » Physical Reactions

Here are some examples of ways you can improve your mental wellbeing:

POOR MENTAL WELLBEING TRIGGERS	ACTION STEPS
Situation: Lack of social connection	Find ways to connect with like-minded people, understand your relationship patterns and improve your communication skills
Thoughts: Rumination (a.k.a. 'overthinking')	Learn various cognitive and behavioural methods to reduce rumination - experiment and discover what works best for you
Behaviour: Decreased activity levels and social withdrawal	Practice observing your emotions and taking positive action regardless of feelings (motivation follows action!)
Behaviour: Rarely communicating your feelings and needs to others	Improve your assertiveness skills



Behaviour: Focusing so much on others that you forgo your own needs and lack a strong sense of identity	Practice tuning into your needs and strengthening your sense of identity
Behaviour: Avoidance coping (i.e., the tendency to deny, minimize or avoid dealing with problems and stressful demands)	Hone your problem-solving skills, overcome safety behaviours, and reduce your use of addictive tools (i.e., alcohol, overworking, and love and sex)
Behaviour: Getting less than 7 hour's sleep a night and suffering from poor sleep quality	Improve your sleep hygiene to better meet your body's sleep needs and to reduce stress and anxiety
Physical Reactions: Diet-induced chronic low-grade inflammation	Eat more of an anti-inflammatory diet
Physical Reactions: Hyperventilation-induced physical anxiety symptoms (i.e., chest tightness, feeling dizzy and panic attacks)	Practice controlled breathing exercises for 2 minutes 3 times a day or regularly practice another relaxation-response inducing activity

We address all of these factors with practical tools in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

We also delve into the CBT cycle in much more detail in our free book [The Framework](#).

It's important to be mindful that improving your mental health is a slow, gradual process.

Changing your thinking and behaviour takes time. Rewiring your brain and body takes time.

There's no quick fix. Just like you wouldn't expect to be able to play the piano overnight, you can't expect to develop strong mental wellbeing skills overnight.

And just like you can't heal a physical injury overnight, you can't heal a mental injury overnight.

Slow growth is normal growth. Please try to be patient and persistent.

We're here to help you on your journey. Our unique, fluff-free tools address root causes and incorporate the science of habits – helping you feel better, sooner.

Wishing you the very best on your mental wellbeing journey,

The Wellness Society



We love hearing from you.

Thank you to everyone who shared their experiences with us for the development of this guide.

Collaboration is incredibly important to us, and we really appreciate your help in making our tools the best they can be.

Do you have any feedback on the workbook? Or suggestions for future updates/tools?

Please email us at hello@thewellnesssociety.org.

We love to hear from you!

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A full list of references is available on request by emailing hello@thewellnesssociety.org