

Feeling
good



**KEYS TO
EMOTIONAL
HEALTH**



You are well on your journey towards living more, and along the way you have been exposed to many arenas of health and wellbeing. However, the real challenge with adopting healthier behaviours and making sustainable changes—is keeping them. This booklet is all about a crucial piece of the lifestyle medicine puzzle: emotional health.



Stress is a natural human response to pressure when faced with challenging, and sometimes dangerous situations.¹ A stress free life however, is not the goal! Stress is helpful when it increases our ability to be alert, energised, switched on and resourceful in managing daily tasks. Stress becomes detrimental when it leaves us feeling fatigued, tense, anxious, burnt out or overwhelmed. Everyone has a different response threshold to stress, and sometimes our thresholds can vary depending on what's happening in our lives. When stress is unusually prolonged or repetitive, it becomes a potential threat to health.² This is known as *distress*.

In 2011-12, 70.1% of Australians aged 18 years and over experienced a low level of psychological distress. Around one in ten adults (10.8%, or 1.8 million people) experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress.³



HOW DOES DISTRESS AFFECT OUR HEALTH?

HEART HEALTH

Stress causes a release of adrenaline, a hormone which increases our heart rate and causes our blood vessels to constrict, which in turn increases blood pressure.⁴ It has also been shown to increase the thickness of our blood as well as clotting properties.⁵

GUT FUNCTION

Heartburn, nausea, indigestion, vomiting, diarrhoea and constipation can be implicated as a result of stress.⁶

IMMUNE FUNCTION

The concept that our psychological state can affect our nervous system, that in turn affects our immune system, is an established science.⁷ When people feel greater fear or distress prior to surgery, poorer outcomes including longer stays, complications and rehospitalisation are more likely to occur.⁸

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Stress changes the way we feel, and this can influence our behaviour and decisions. These behaviours and choices can include poorer nutrition choices, less physical activity and poorer sleep habits.^{9,10}



Less stress¹¹

Not everyone stresses to the same extent about the same things. More often than not, stress is a combination of circumstances, personality and past experience. Some may feel as though there is nothing you can do about stress. The fact of the matter is, more often than not, your career and family responsibilities will always be there, the bills won't stop, and you can only fit 24 hours in a day. In order to gain back some control in your life, use some of the following steps and strategies for better managing stress.

IDENTIFY THE SOURCE OF STRESS IN YOUR LIFE

Sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it can be very easy to overlook your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that promote stress.

HOW? Start a stress journal, determine responsibility.

REFLECT ON HOW YOU CURRENTLY COPE WITH STRESS

Are your strategies healthy or unhealthy, counterproductive or effective?

HOW? Make healthier lifestyle changes using *Booklet 1—Living Well* as your guide. Remember, start with small and sustainable goals for long term success.

AVOID UNNECESSARY STRESS

Of course not all stress can be ignored, and it is definitely not a good idea to avoid something that needs to be addressed. However, there may be some you can better manage.

HOW? Learn to say *no*, take time out, avoid stress aggravators, take control of your environment, prioritise your to-do list for the day, and complete the *musts* rather than the *shoulds*.

ALTER THE SITUATION

If you can't avoid a situation, what tools and strategies can you put in place to ensure it doesn't happen again?

HOW? Communicate with others, avoid not expressing your thoughts, employ better time management practices.

ADAPT TO THE STRESSOR

Sometimes changing your own thoughts and attitudes can help manage stress.

HOW? Think positively, adjust standards, put everything in perspective.

WIPE OUT UNNECESSARY WORRY

Accept that you can't control everything. This is harder for some than others.

HOW? Focus on things you can control, think more positively, talk to others, learn the power of forgiveness.

RELAX MORE

By consciously making the time to rest, relax and have fun, you will be better equipped to handle life's stressors.

HOW? Go for a walk, practice breathing more deeply, take a long bath, play with your children or pets, exercise, get a massage, participate in a hobby, spend time with friends, listen to music etc.

Stress benefits of exercise¹²

- ✓ BURNS OFF STRESS HORMONES
- ✓ PROMOTES DEEP BREATHING
- ✓ STIMULATES THE RELEASE OF FEEL GOOD CHEMICALS IN OUR BRAIN
- ✓ MAKES US FEEL BETTER ABOUT OURSELVES
- ✓ PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO STAND BACK, GAIN CLARITY AND STRATEGISE

HOW TO MEND YOUR MIND

More and more research is being conducted on the links between diet, exercise, rest and mindset in helping people to fix how they feel. Here are five major strategies:

1. EAT BRAIN FOODS

When it comes to feeling great, a whole-food plant-based diet comes out on top. A liberal supply of fruits, vegetables and grains provides the best nourishment for your brain.¹³ Although there is hardly a poor choice among them, the standout contenders include:

BERRIES contain phytonutrients that boost cognition, coordination and memory.¹⁴

CRUCIFEROUS VEGETABLES such as broccoli and cauliflower can help enhance memory.¹⁵

GARLIC phytonutrients may help prevent dementia including Alzheimer's disease.¹⁶

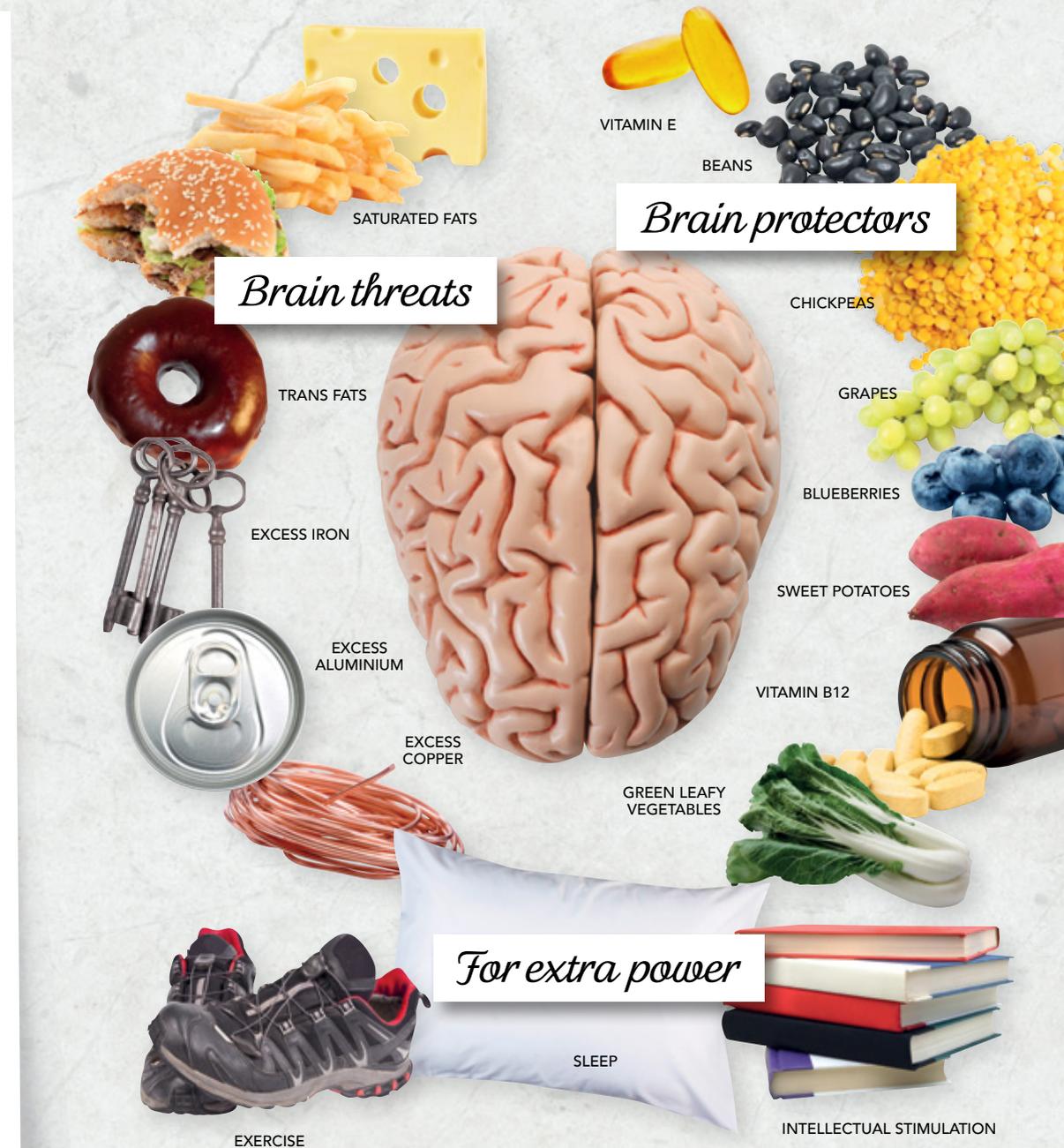
GREEN LEAFY VEGETABLES such as spinach and kale help support the immune system and keep an ageing brain sharp.^{17,18} They are also high in iron and a rich source of folate.¹⁹

NUTS consumption may enhance mood,²⁰ and can help with clarity and clear thinking.

OLIVE OIL is rich in phytochemicals that help enhance blood flow in the brain.²¹

POMEGRANATE can help with brain and memory protection due to high anti-oxidant levels.²²

SEEDS such as sunflower, sesame, flax and chia contain high vitamin E and omega-3 beneficial fats, as well as minerals and phytochemicals that may help brainpower and mood.^{23,24}



TOMATOES which are rich in lycopene that possess potent anti-oxidant properties that may help fight the development of dementia.²⁵

WHOLEGRAINS rich in phytonutrients and B group vitamin,²⁵⁻²⁷ are a great energy source needed for maintaining concentration throughout the day and improving memory.

There are some foods that you should be cautious and aware of that act as brain drainers. Foods and substances such as sugar,²⁸ alcohol,²⁹ nicotine,³⁰ as well as high fat diets,²⁸ have been known to hinder brain function. In addition, high carbohydrate meals loaded with refined food, sugar or junk can decrease mental performance.³¹

Neurotransmitters are chemicals released in the brain that affect our anxiety and moods. See diagram on the opposite page to understand how the neurotransmitters serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine affect our behaviours. Tryptophan is an amino acid which helps produce serotonin, and tyrosine is another amino acid that is linked to norepinephrine and dopamine. Good food sources of these include pumpkin and chia seeds, seaweed, lentils, nuts, eggs, tofu and sun-dried tomatoes.^{19,32-36}

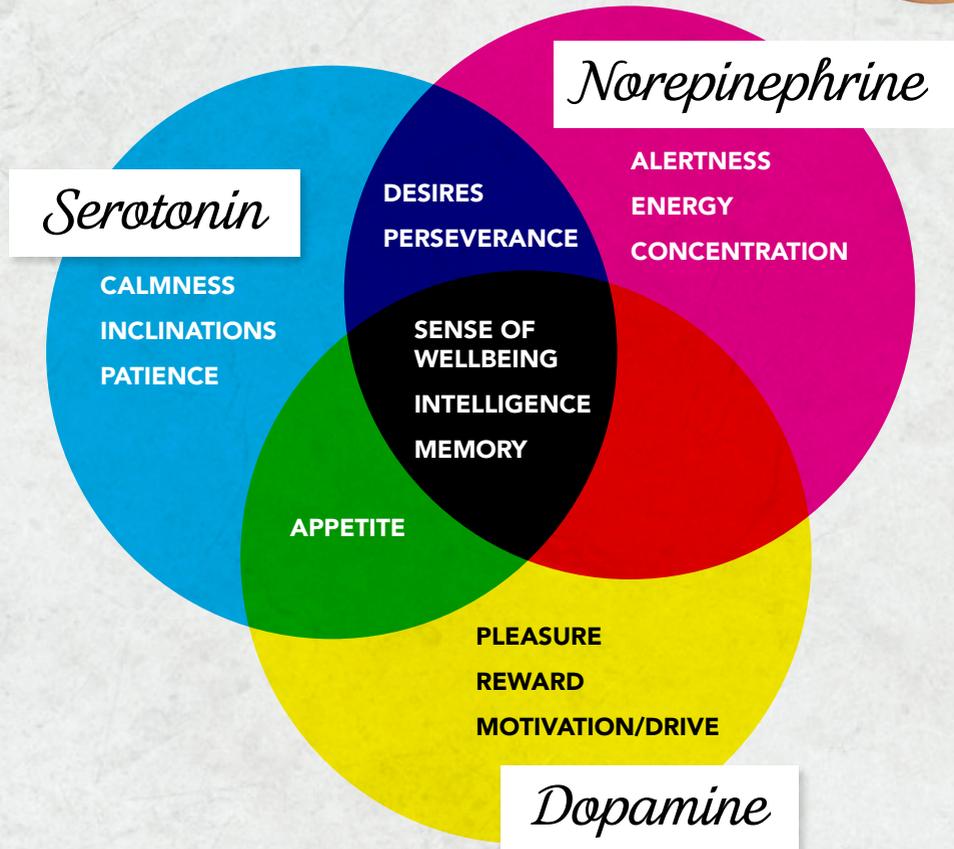
OMEGA-3 is a vital nutrient for mind health. In fact, deficiency is one of the most common contributing factors to mental disease.³⁷ It is an effective memory booster,³⁸ and important for cognitive performance.³⁹ Foods high in omega-3 include fish (salmon, herring, trout, mackerel, tuna), flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts, canola oil and green soybeans.^{19,40}

2. MOVE MORE

Exercise is a powerful way to mend the mind. Exercise and its effects have been linked to relieving depression and reducing anxiety.^{41,42} It has also been known to enhance cognition,⁴³ memory and brain development.^{44,45}

So what are you waiting for? It is never too late to begin an exercise regime. The benefits of exercise go far beyond emotional health. See *Booklet 8—Less is More* for more information.

NEUROTRANSMITTERS AND BEHAVIOURS⁴⁶





3. GO GREEN

Getting out into nature is another useful strategy. Go on, give it a try. It is easy in a modern world to feel a disconnect with the environment, yet there is something incredibly therapeutic about immersing yourself in the natural world. Hospital patients with a view of natural landscape have shorter hospital stays.⁴⁷ Exposure to nature can help enhance relationships and promote positive health behaviours. Breathing in fresh unpolluted air, as well as safe exposure to sunlight, can also help elevate health and mood.⁴⁸



4. REST WELL

Sleep has a huge effect on our emotional and mental health. Lack of adequate sleep affects mood,⁴⁹ motivation,⁵⁰ judgment,⁵¹ and our perception of events.⁵² Lack of sleep can also be associated with anxiety disorders and depression.^{53,54}

Try avoiding caffeine, alcohol and nicotine. Try sticking to a sleep schedule, using natural light,⁵⁵ establishing a pre-sleep routine,^{56,57} and preparing light evening meals to improve the quality of your sleep.⁵⁸ See *Booklet 9—Water & Sleep* for more information.

5. THINK POSITIVE

Is your glass half empty or half full? If the former, why not give positive thinking a try. It may help how you feel and add a different perspective to situations. Although not always possible, being more positive can greatly impact our emotional health. Researchers continue to explore the effects of positive thinking and optimism on health. Health benefits that positive thinking may provide include increased life span, lower rates of depression, lower levels of distress, greater resistance to the common cold, better psychological and physical wellbeing, reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease, and better coping skills during hardships and times of stress.⁵⁹

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