

## Top ten lifestyle changes to combat low mood and anxiety

The natural assumption when you are assailed with negative thought patterns, sky high anxiety or a serious mood slump – is that it is your mind that needs ‘sorting’. And of course, talking therapies can be highly effective in understanding what issues are troubling you.

However, it is easy to overlook that your mind *is* your brain; a heavy, complex, fatty organ – and part of your whole body. Therefore when you team the implementation of positive lifestyle choices that improve your overall health – with talking therapies, this directly affects how you will think, ergo feel. Here are ten ways to support your thinking habits with positive lifestyle changes:

1. **Exercise** – If asked whether you thought which improved your cognitive function more - doing a crossword puzzle – or going for a brisk walk, you may be inclined to think the former. However studies have shown the fantastic effects of exercise on the brain. It increases oxygen to the brain, which helps create an optimum environment for the growth of brain cells and new neuronal connections. Additionally, it triggers the release of ‘feel good’ hormones, endorphins and serotonin, and as hormones work in opposition, it is not possible to be relaxed and tense at the same time, ergo, your cortisol and adrenalin will be reduced. Additionally, if your exercise includes being in the great outdoors, even better, as sunlight will top up your vitamin D – an important vitamin if you’re looking to support your wellbeing.
2. **Alcohol** – You may already have picked up magazines informing you that alcohol has a depressive effective, and drinking too much alcohol impairs cognitive function, both at the time, and even the next day, due additionally to dehydration. The body only needs to be 2% dehydrated before cognitive function is impaired. Needless to say, the confusion you can feel can also exacerbate low mood or anxiety. If you find, following xmas/new year, that you have fallen into a habit of drinking excessively, the first stage is acknowledging this. Simple strategies you might want to consider can include; simply avoid having alcohol in the house. If it’s not there, you can’t be tempted. Research suggests ‘urges’ or cravings lasts 20-30 seconds. Not long. So by having the thought, but not taking action, means you can take charge once more or the habits and behaviours. If however you feel your drinking is out of control, do not be tempted to think ‘will power’ is the answer, but seek professional help immediately.
3. **Relaxation** – the mind-body connection is such that when we relax our bodies, our minds will follow. By spending ten minutes a day engaging in Progressive Muscle Relaxation, we can train our minds to enjoy down time and fully relax too. It is quite easy to find a wide array of apps which will talk you through PMR (or CD’s for the less technical of us). Essentially, these are guided visualisations which invite you to bring your awareness into your body, and focus on relaxing all your muscles. Not only will the feel good hormones have a chance to kick in, but our minds are much more plastic and

suggestible to positive messages. Very often apps will include positive affirmations.

4. **Diet** – Take a look at the ‘Eatwell plate’, which is a government nutritional guide. Is your diet balanced and varied? If you are not getting the adequate balance of protein, carbohydrates, vegetables and fruit, you may become low in vital nutrients – detrimental to your body – which includes your brain/mind. Whilst most people will know that the vitamin B’s or vitamin D are important for maintaining a balanced mood, taking a specific vitamin may not be effective as looking holistically at food intake. Therefore, concentrate on eating natural and unprocessed foods. Mindfully involve your senses in the preparation and cooking of food. We are allowed to enjoy food. If what you put in is quality, be assured your body is highly effective at digesting and taking in the nutrients it needs.
5. **Sleep** – When we are depressed or anxious, our sleep patterns can be disrupted. It can often feel difficult to get to sleep, or you may find yourself waking up and unable to get back to sleep. Sometimes this can lead to tiredness during the day, and needless to say tiredness can affect your thinking patterns. You may already be able to identify memories when you reacted negatively to something, because you were tired. Sleep is fundamental to our emotional wellbeing. Ensure you are properly relaxed prior to bedtime, and look at your routine. Maybe change from a shower to a long relaxing bath. Avoid tea, coffee, alcohol, or eating too heavily before bed. Calming teas can help, and look for herbs such as: valerian, lemon balm, skull cap, camomile, limeflower or rose. See also Mindful moments below to ensure you are able to calm an overactive mind.
6. **Mindful Moments** Simply put, mindfulness is about being in the ‘now’, the moment. We can become sad engaging with past memories, or anxious throwing our minds forwards to try and read the unknown future. Neither of these are the thing we actually live. When you become aware you are doing either of these, try simply focusing on what is happening right now. Really use all of your senses to engage in what it is you see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Bring yourself back. Don’t worry if you drift off again, just gently bring yourself back. Even ten minutes of mindfulness can have a profound effect on our sense of well being.
7. **Food Sensitivities** – A sensitivity is not the same as a food allergy, or Crohns disease or being a Coeliac. In ‘Grain Brain’ by David Perlmutter, a neurologist, physician and dietitian, explores the effects on the body when, in particular grains – and gluten, present in foods such as wheat. Continued consumption of a food that provokes this reaction has been shown to have a profound effect on how one can think and feel. Sometimes a sensitivity can only be identified by eliminating foods from your diet, in order to check what effect this has. This should only be done through an appropriately qualified dietician/professional, so that you understand exactly what you are doing, and ‘cause and effect’ of foods be properly monitored, ensuring you are still eating well.

8. **Herbs** – It maybe worth investigating natural products to help with supporting your mood. Herbs have been around long before our pharmaceuticals and have been shown to have subtle but beneficial effects on our body chemistry. You may want to research the effects of calming herbs, such as:- skull cap, which traditionally was used for ‘overthinking’ and calming the mind, as well are better known herbs such as rose, limeflower, lemon balm, camomile or valerian (the latter is a little heavier and more used where sleep is a problem.) Additionally, there exist studies on the effectiveness of St John’s Wort, and more recently a Siberian herb called Rhodiola, an adaptogenic herb which supports the adrenal glands – potentially helpful for anxiety.
9. **Supplements** – It can be difficult to pinpoint if you are suffering from a deficiency which is affecting your mood, without resorting to blood tests. However, we can point to research which generalises about our western diets, indicating how common foods are more weighted towards Omega 6 – meaning we may not be getting the other desired essential fatty acids, such as omega 3, present in foods such as fish, flaxseed, or eggs. Our brain – read mind - need a balance of fatty acids in order to function properly. Fats are now being identified as essential if we are to protect our brains from dementia and Alzheimers in later life. Additionally, oils such as Starflower oil, Evening primrose Oil, have been associated with having a beneficial effect on hormone imbalances and mood. Keeping your diet rich in good fats; avocados, olive oil, eggs, flaxseed, and oily fish, can therefore help maintain optimum cognitive function.
10. **Work** – is your work – working for you? When our work gives us meaning and purpose in our lives, then it has a positive effect. However even a job we enjoy, if we are working at it too long and hard, can wear us down and affect our mood. If you have lost sight of how much you work, it may prove helpful to sit down with a pad and pen and assess how much time you spend fully away from it – is it eating up your life? Additionally, commuting can lead to anxiety and sometimes even panic attacks provoked by the experience of public transport. If this becomes a problem, hypnotherapy or counselling could help identify strategies to stay calm and deal with these fears.