



Optimising Minds

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We are all familiar with the saying, "Mind over matter." Simply put, what happens in the mind has a profound influence on physical health. More than a century ago a wise and inspired little lady expressed this truth in these insightful words: "Sickness of the mind prevails everywhere. Nine tenths of the diseases from which men suffer have their foundation here." Counsels on Health, p. 324 Modern research continues to support this principle. Approximately 80% of visits to primary care doctors are related to stress, and an estimated 70–80% of health conditions are either triggered or worsened by chronic stress. These include acne, type 2 diabetes, colds and influenza, shingles, migraines, autoimmune diseases, heart disease, and even cancer. Protecting our mental health is therefore essential for overall well-being.



Mental distress rarely has a single cause. Rather, it usually develops from a combination of genetic, environmental, physical, social, and lifestyle factors. When several of these are present, the risk of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety increases significantly. Genetic factors can increase susceptibility to mental illness. For example, a family history of

depression or suicide in a first-degree relative raises an individual's risk. While we cannot change our genetic inheritance, healthy lifestyle choices and positive life experiences can influence how these genes are expressed. Childhood experiences also have a lasting impact on mental health. Growing up in a broken home, experiencing physical, verbal, or sexual abuse, neglect, living with substance abuse, or being subjected to unrealistic expectations can all shape patterns of thinking that persist into adulthood. Environmental toxins, including excessive exposure to lead, mercury, arsenic, and other heavy metals, can impair brain function and contribute to mental illness. Physical illness is another important factor. Heart disease, stroke, cancer, poorly controlled diabetes, head injuries, chronic pain, autoimmune disorders, and many other long-term illnesses can all adversely affect mental well-being. Substance use also plays a significant role. Alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs, dependence on sleeping tablets, and caffeine can all negatively influence brain function and emotional health. Social stressors, such as loneliness, lack of supportive relationships, financial hardship, and major life stresses, increase the burden of mental distress. Finally, lifestyle factors including poor nutrition, nutritional deficiencies, physical inactivity, inadequate sunlight exposure, and poor sleep habits all contribute to reduced mental resilience.

Although these influences are diverse, they share one common pathway: they impair the function of the brain's frontal lobe. The frontal lobe is the largest of the brain's four lobes and serves as its executive control centre. It governs many of the abilities that make us uniquely human, including our capacity to think, choose, plan, and relate to others.

The frontal lobe:

- Houses the will—the God-given ability to choose.
- Develops morality, spirituality, character, wisdom, and sound judgment.
- Shapes personality, self-awareness, and emotional expression.
- Enables reasoning, learning, abstract thinking, and problem-solving.
- Organises planning and goal-directed behaviour.
- Supports speech and language.
- Maintains attention and concentration.
- Provides working memory.
- Coordinates voluntary movement and fine motor skills.
- Regulates emotions, mood, impulses, and social behaviour.
- Contributes to motivation and happiness.

Considering the many vital functions performed by the frontal lobe, it becomes clear why protecting it is essential for both mental and physical health.



Reduced frontal lobe function has been associated with several mental health disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Many everyday habits can compromise frontal lobe function and, in turn, negatively affect mental health. These include:

- Very low-carbohydrate diets (the brain relies primarily on glucose for energy).
- Diets high in refined sugars.
- Diets high in saturated fats.
- Alcohol, a recognised brain toxin.
- Caffeine.
- Excessive media use, including television, gaming, and social media.
- Pornography.
- Frequent exposure to heavily syncopated modern music.
- Meditation practices that intentionally suppress frontal lobe activity.
- Lack of mentally stimulating problem-solving activities.
- Neglecting spiritual exercise.
- Repeatedly acting against one's conscience.

For many people, starting the day with tea or coffee (or energy drinks)—and continuing with several more cups throughout the day—has become a daily habit. Few appreciate the effects that caffeine can have on the brain and mental well-being. Caffeine reduces blood flow to the frontal lobes and has been shown to decrease overall cerebral blood flow by as much as 30%. It also alters brain chemistry and the transmission of nerve signals. Although caffeine often produces a temporary feeling of alertness, it can impair higher-level thinking, reduce mental performance on complex tasks, and lessen the brain's ability to cope with stress. Research has also linked excessive caffeine intake with an increased risk of anxiety disorders and sleep disturbance, and it may aggravate symptoms in susceptible individuals with other mental health conditions. One of caffeine's greatest impacts is on sleep, particularly when consumed within six hours of bedtime. It can:

- Make it more difficult to fall asleep.
- Reduce both the quality and duration of sleep.
- Decrease the amount of restorative deep sleep needed for physical and mental recovery.

Avoiding caffeine is an important step toward improving mental health.

Having considered the factors that can impair mental health, we can now turn our attention to the lifestyle habits that strengthen the frontal lobe and support optimal brain function.



One of the most powerful places to begin is by developing, or renewing, a personal relationship with your Creator. Over the past several decades, a substantial body of research has examined the relationship between spirituality and mental health. Harold Koenig, in a 2015 review published in *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine*, summarised many of these findings. Healthy spirituality has been associated with:

- Improved mental health and overall well-being.
- A greater sense of purpose and meaning.
- Increased hope and optimism.
- Higher self-worth.
- Lower rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance misuse.
- Improved recovery from depression.
- Stronger social connections and support.

Having an active and living relationship with God provides not only emotional support but also hope, peace, purpose, and strength during life's challenges.

Diet has a profound influence on brain function and emotional well-being. A whole-food, plant-based diet—built around fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and seeds in their natural or minimally processed form—has been associated with:

- Lower rates of depression and anxiety.
- Improved mood.
- Reduced brain fog and fatigue.

Mental illness such as depression has been linked with both inflammation and imbalances in brain neurotransmitters. Whole plant foods are naturally rich in antioxidants and phytonutrients that help reduce inflammation, protect brain

cells from damage, and support healthy neurotransmitter function.

There are some foods that needed to be avoided as much as possible. Highly processed, sugar-rich foods can adversely affect mental health. Regular consumption has been associated with:

- Increased risk of depression.
- Greater anxiety and stress.
- Mood swings, irritability, and fatigue.
- Reduced concentration, memory, and learning.
- Increased cravings and addictive eating behaviours.

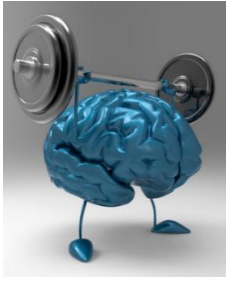
Animal-based foods are also best consumed sparingly. They are major sources of arachidonic acid, a compound that can promote inflammation when consumed in excess. Diets high in saturated fat may also impair communication between brain cells and reduce the formation of new neurons. In addition, high intakes of animal protein reduce the availability of serotonin, one of the brain's key mood-regulating neurotransmitters. Together, these factors may negatively influence mood and cognitive function.

Several nutrients deserve special attention because of their important roles in supporting healthy brain function and emotional well-being.

- Tryptophan is an amino acid required to produce serotonin, one of the brain's primary mood-regulating neurotransmitters. Excellent plant sources include tofu, flaxseeds, sesame seeds, almonds, walnuts, and leafy green vegetables such as watercress. Consuming these foods with complex carbohydrates—including fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains—enhances the transport of tryptophan into the brain, where it can be converted into serotonin.
- Omega-3 fatty acids help reduce inflammation and have been shown to support mental health, particularly in depression and bipolar disorder. Rich plant sources include flaxseed (linseed), chia seeds, and walnuts. While seafood contains omega-3 fats, a whole-food plant-based approach avoids the saturated fat, cholesterol, and inflammatory compounds that may diminish some of the overall health benefits.
- Magnesium is essential for healthy nerve function and serotonin production. It also promotes relaxation and stress resilience. Good sources include leafy green vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains.
- Folate is vital for healthy brain function, and deficiency has been associated with depression. Excellent sources include chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans, navy beans, and green leafy vegetables.
- Vitamin B12 is essential for brain and nerve health, and deficiency can contribute to depression and cognitive impairment. Because reliable natural sources are almost exclusively animal foods, those following a plant-based diet should consume fortified foods or an appropriate vitamin B12 supplement.
- Vitamin B6 also plays an important role in the production of serotonin and dopamine. Good plant sources include chickpeas, potatoes, avocados, bananas, and leafy green vegetables.



Regular physical activity is one of the most effective lifestyle strategies for protecting and improving mental health. Research shows that people who engage in moderate exercise several times each week have a significantly lower risk of developing depression than those who are inactive. Exercise benefits the brain in several ways. It increases the



production of serotonin, helping to improve mood and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. It also lowers stress hormones such as cortisol and stimulates the release of endorphins—our body's natural mood enhancers. For mild to moderate depression, regular exercise has been shown to be as good as medication and better than counselling. Just 30

minutes of moderate physical activity each day can make a meaningful difference.

For even greater benefits, exercise outdoors. Activities such as gardening, bushwalking, hiking, cycling, or horse riding combine the advantages of physical activity with the restorative effects of nature. Spending time in natural surroundings has consistently been associated with lower stress levels, improved mood, and enhanced overall well-being.

Sunlight is another simple but powerful contributor to mental well-being. Sensible sun exposure stimulates the production of vitamin D, which plays an important role in brain health and mood regulation. Low vitamin D levels have been associated with an increased risk of depression and other mood disorders. Exposure to natural light also increases serotonin production, helping to improve mood and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, sunlight helps regulate the body's internal clock, promoting better sleep, improved concentration, greater alertness, and enhanced cognitive performance. It also helps lower stress hormone levels, encouraging a greater sense of calm and relaxation. Whenever practical, aim for approximately 30 minutes of early morning sunlight each day.

The brain depends on adequate hydration to function efficiently. Drinking sufficient water throughout the day supports healthy circulation, helps maintain normal brain function, and assists the body's natural metabolic processes. Even mild dehydration can contribute to fatigue, irritability, poor concentration, reduced mental performance, and a decline in mood. In contrast, good hydration promotes emotional stability, sustained energy, improved alertness, clearer thinking, and greater resilience to stress.



Sleep and mental health are closely intertwined. The relationship is bidirectional—poor sleep can contribute to mental illness, while mental illness frequently disrupts sleep. Research has shown that chronic insomnia substantially increases the risk of developing depression and other mental health disorders. During sleep, the brain processes the day's experiences, consolidates memories, and regulates emotions. Consistently sleeping fewer than six hours each night impairs these vital functions, making it more difficult to process positive experiences and regulate emotions effectively. On the other hand, regularly sleeping more than nine hours per night has also been associated with poorer mental health outcomes. For most adults, the ideal goal is seven to eight hours of quality sleep each night, maintaining a consistent bedtime and wake time, with a substantial portion of sleep occurring before midnight.

Our thoughts profoundly influence our emotional well-being. Persistent negative thinking is strongly associated with increased stress, anxiety, and poorer overall health. Learning to recognise unhelpful thought patterns and consciously replacing them with truthful, constructive, and

hopeful thoughts is a valuable habit that strengthens emotional resilience and supports better mental health. you are having an unconstructive negative thought, you should immediately replace it with a positive thought.

Healthy relationships are essential for emotional well-being. Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of depression and anxiety, whereas supportive relationships foster resilience, improve mood, and provide a strong sense of belonging. Investing in family, friendships, church fellowship, and positive community connections is one of the most effective ways to protect mental health.

Serving others is one of the most rewarding ways to strengthen mental well-being. Whether through volunteering, helping a neighbour, or participating in community or church ministry, serving shifts our focus from ourselves to the needs of others. Research has shown that volunteering can:

- Improve mood.
- Reduce stress.
- Increase purpose and meaning in life.
- Enhance feelings of value and appreciation.
- Lower rates of depression and anxiety, particularly in older adults.

Several herbal medicines may provide gentle support for the nervous system. While they should not replace appropriate medical care when needed, they may be useful alongside healthy lifestyle measures.

- Passionflower has calming properties and is commonly used for insomnia, anxiety, restlessness, and irritability. A typical dose is approximately 3 g of the dried herb daily.
- Skullcap acts as both a calming and restorative nervous system tonic. It can be helpful for nervous tension, exhaustion, and debility. A typical dose is 3–6 g of the dried herb daily.
- Valerian is a well-known calming herb that may assist with anxiety, nervous tension, and insomnia. A typical dose is 3–6 g of the dried root daily. It should not be taken with sedative medications or alcohol.
- Green oats have long been valued as a nourishing tonic for the nervous system and may be particularly beneficial during periods of exhaustion or low mood. Approximately 6 g of the dried green tops may be used daily. Individuals with gluten sensitivity will need to avoid this herb.
- Damiana is traditionally used to support the nervous system during periods of stress, anxiety, and nervous exhaustion. A typical dose is 3–6 g of the dried leaves and stems daily.
- Withania (Ashwagandha) is a restorative herb traditionally used to promote calmness, reduce stress and anxiety, and support learning and memory. A typical dose is 3–6 g of the dried root daily.



Healthy Mind Prescription

- Connect with God
- Eat a Plant-based Diet
- Exercise half-an-hour each day
- Enjoy some gardening
- Include daily sunlight
- Stay hydrated
- Aim for 7-8 hours of sleep
- Avoid negativity
- Build strong social supports
- Serve others
- Try some herbal remedies: oats, passionflower, skullcap & withania

