Wellbeing: A Practical Guide

Wellbeing is not something that sits apart from the rest of the body—it is a fundamental part of our metabolic, immune and hormonal systems. In 2025 the World Health Organization estimated that more than one billion people worldwide live with mental health conditions[1], making mental well-being one of the great health challenges of our time. At Pausa we believe that understanding and supporting wellbeing should go beyond labels or symptoms. This guide explains why wellbeing matters, reviews the latest research on root causes, and offers practical, evidence-based strategies that you can incorporate into daily life. Scientific references are included throughout to help you explore the literature and to show where claims come from.

Wellbeing at a glance

Wellbeing refers to our emotional, psychological, physical and social health. It affects how we think, feel and act, and influences relationships, learning and physical health. Good mental wellbeing allows us to cope with stress, work productively and contribute to our communities. Key benefits include:

- **Cognitive function:** mental well-being supports memory, attention and decision-making[1].
- **Emotional regulation:** balanced mood helps us respond flexibly to life's challenges[1].
- **Physical health:** mental wellbeing is bidirectionally linked to inflammation, immune function and chronic disease risk[1].
- **Longevity & quality of life:** depression and anxiety are associated with shorter life expectancy, whereas good mental wellbeing extends healthspan[1].
- **Relationships & work:** psychological well-being improves communication, resilience and productivity[1].

Root causes and factors that influence wellbeing

Modern psychiatry is moving away from purely symptom-based labels toward an integrated “root cause” approach. Researchers point out that mental disorders arise from complex interactions between biology, behavior and environment and that diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 do not capture this complexity[2]. A 2025 functional psychiatry report argued that mental health cannot be separated from metabolic function, chronic inflammation, the gut microbiome and nutritional status[3]. Understanding these root causes helps us identify personalized interventions. The main influences include:

Biological factors

- **Genes & epigenetics:** inherited traits can predispose us to certain conditions, and environmental factors can modify gene expression via epigenetic mechanisms.
- **Brain chemistry:** imbalances in neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine may contribute to depression, anxiety or psychosis. These imbalances often reflect broader metabolic or inflammatory processes rather than isolated chemical defects.

Developmental factors

- **Early life experiences:** trauma or insecure attachments during childhood increase vulnerability to mental wellbeing problems later in life.
- **Environment & stress:** chronic stressors—financial insecurity, workplace pressures, discrimination—can dysregulate the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and drive inflammation.

Lifestyle factors (modifiable)

- **Diet and nutrition:** eating patterns shape our gut microbiome and impact inflammation, neurotransmitter synthesis and blood sugar regulation. Diets high in ultra-processed foods are linked to increased depression and anxiety symptoms[4], whereas Mediterranean-style diets rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fish and healthy fats are associated with reduced symptoms[5].

- **Physical activity:** regular exercise reduces inflammation and boosts endorphins, serotonin and dopamine. A network meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials found that walking/jogging, yoga and strength training are particularly effective for treating depression[6].
- **Sleep:** sleep and mood have a bidirectional relationship. People with insomnia are 10 times more likely to have depression and 17 times more likely to have anxiety than those without sleep problems[7]. Going to bed early and waking early is associated with better mental wellbeing, while staying up late increases the risk of depression and anxiety regardless of your natural "chronotype"[8].
- **Social connection:** strong social networks reduce inflammation and protect against mental wellbeing disorders. The WHO Commission on Social Connection reported in 2025 that social connection can reduce inflammation, lower the risk of serious health problems and halve the risk of depression, while loneliness is associated with higher risks of stroke, heart disease, diabetes and suicide[9].
- **Substance use:** alcohol, nicotine and recreational drugs disrupt brain chemistry and increase the risk of mental wellbeing disorders. Even moderate consumption may interfere with sleep and mood regulation.

Gut–Brain axis and nutrition

The gut microbiome communicates with the brain via neural, immune and hormonal pathways. Dysbiosis (an imbalance of gut bacteria) can trigger systemic inflammation, alter neurotransmitter production and contribute to anxiety and depression[10]. Key findings from recent research:

- **Altering the microbiome changes mood:** animal studies show that changing gut bacteria through probiotics, prebiotics or fecal microbiota transplant alters behavior and stress responses[11].
- **Human evidence:** individuals with depression often have lower abundance of anti-inflammatory genera such as Faecalibacterium and higher levels of pro-inflammatory Enterobacteriaceae. Clinical trials indicate that probiotic and prebiotic supplementation can alleviate depressive symptoms by enhancing serotonin synthesis, suppressing neuroinflammation and normalising HPA-axis activity[12].

- **Dietary patterns:** Mediterranean-style diets support a healthy microbiome through fiber, polyphenols and omega-3 fats. In a 2025 Israeli survey, higher Mediterranean diet adherence was associated with lower anxiety and depression scores, whereas greater processed food consumption predicted increased psychological distress[5].
- **Inflammation and mood:** diets high in processed foods increase levels of inflammatory cytokines (CRP, IL-6, TNF-α), which cross the blood–brain barrier and contribute to mood disorders[13]. Mediterranean diets rich in anti-inflammatory components reduce these cytokines and improve mood[14].
- **Causal evidence:** randomized controlled trials show that transitioning to a Mediterranean diet leads to clinically meaningful improvements in depression scores, particularly when dietary changes are accompanied by professional support[15].

Practical tips for a brain-friendly diet

- Base meals around **whole foods**—vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, seeds and whole grains. Aim for a variety of colors and fiber sources.
- Include **omega-3-rich** foods (fatty fish, walnuts, chia seeds) two to three times per week.
- Use **extra-virgin olive oil** as your primary fat; limit refined vegetable oils.
- Eat **fermented foods** (plain yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi) to supply beneficial bacteria and prebiotic fibers.
- Minimize **ultra-processed foods**, sugary drinks, refined carbohydrates and excessive alcohol. Even small reductions in processed food intake can decrease inflammation and improve mood[5].
- Drink plenty of water. Mild dehydration affects concentration and mood.
- Consider **probiotic or prebiotic supplements** if diet alone is insufficient; a healthcare professional can guide appropriate strains and doses.

Common mental health & wellbeing challenges

Mental health & wellbeing conditions vary widely in symptoms and severity. Some of the most common include:

- **Depression**

Persistent sadness, loss of interest, low energy. Affects ~3.8% of the global population and is predicted to become the leading non-communicable disease burden by 2030.

- **Anxiety disorders**

Excessive worry or fear accompanied by physical symptoms such as heart palpitations and sweating. Affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

Intrusive memories, hyper-arousal and emotional numbing after trauma.

- **Bipolar disorder**

Alternating episodes of depression and elevated (manic) mood.

- **Schizophrenia**

Hallucinations, delusions and cognitive difficulties.

- **Eating disorders**

Distorted body image and unhealthy eating behaviors (e.g., anorexia, bulimia, binge eating).

- **Obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD)**

Intrusive thoughts and repetitive behaviors.

These conditions are multifactorial and require personalized care. Early diagnosis and professional support improve outcomes and prevent complications.

How poor wellbeing affects the body and mind

Poor wellbeing is not “just in your head.” It impacts multiple systems:

- **Cardiovascular:** depression is an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease and is linked to hypertension.
- **Immune:** chronic stress and depression suppress immune function and can trigger overactivation of inflammatory pathways.
- **Digestive:** gut dysbiosis and increased intestinal permeability (“leaky gut”) contribute to inflammation and mood disorders[10].
- **Endocrine:** mental wellbeing issues activate the HPA axis, raising cortisol levels and disrupting hormone balance.
- **Cognitive:** depression and anxiety impair memory, attention and decision-making. People may experience “brain fog” or slowed thinking.
- **Emotional:** mood disorders reduce self-esteem and resilience and increase rumination.
- **Relationships & work:** poor mental wellbeing can lead to social withdrawal, conflict, reduced productivity and absenteeism.

Recognizing these effects underscores why proactive care is vital.

Evidence-based strategies to support wellbeing

Nourish your mind with food

Eating patterns influence inflammation, neurotransmitters and gut health. Follow the practical tips under Gut–Brain axis and nutrition to adopt a Mediterranean-style diet. Plan meals ahead, keep healthy snacks on hand and cook at home when possible. If you notice mood swings after specific foods (e.g., sugar or caffeine), adjust your intake accordingly. Consider tracking your diet and mood to identify patterns.

Move your body regularly

Exercise is one of the most effective non-pharmacological treatments for depression. A 2024 network meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials reported that walking/jogging, yoga and strength training provide the greatest benefits[6]. Physical activity reduces inflammation, improves neuroplasticity and boosts endorphins. **Action steps:**

- **Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity** (e.g., brisk walking, cycling) or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week, plus **two sessions of muscle-strengthening exercises.**
- **Choose activities you enjoy:** dancing, hiking, swimming and gardening all count. Consistency matters more than intensity.
- **Include mind–body practices** such as yoga or tai chi, which combine movement with breathing and mindfulness.
- **Break up sedentary time:** stand up and stretch every hour. Brief walks during the workday improve mood and focus.

Prioritize sleep hygiene

Insufficient or irregular sleep disrupts mood and cognitive function. Research shows that people with insomnia are **10 times** more likely to experience depression and **17 times** more likely to develop anxiety[7], and that sleep apnea triples these risks**[7]**. Going to bed early and waking early, regardless of chronotype, is linked to better mental wellbeing[8]. To improve sleep:

- **Establish a consistent sleep schedule:** go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- **Create a relaxing pre-bed routine:** dim lights, avoid screens for at least an hour before bed, and engage in calming activities such as reading or gentle stretching.
- **Optimize your sleep environment:** keep the bedroom dark, quiet and cool; use blackout curtains and earplugs if necessary.
- **Limit stimulants:** avoid caffeine after midday and minimize alcohol at night.
- **Seek evaluation for sleep disorders:** snoring, gasping or extreme fatigue may indicate sleep apnea—see a healthcare professional for testing.

Practice mindfulness and relaxation

Mindfulness and meditation cultivate non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, reducing emotional reactivity. A 2025 randomized controlled trial found that online mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) lowered depression and anxiety by decreasing emotional suppression[18]. To get started:

- **Meditation:** begin with 5–10 minutes of seated meditation each day. Use guided apps or recordings if you're new.
- **Deep breathing:** practice slow diaphragmatic breathing (inhale for a count of 4, exhale for 6–8) to activate the parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Yoga or tai chi:** integrate gentle movement with breathing and awareness.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR):** systematically tense and relax muscle groups. A 2024 systematic review concluded that PMR effectively reduces stress, anxiety and depression and works even better when combined with other interventions[19][20].
- **Body scan:** mentally scan your body from head to toe, noticing sensations without judgment.

Cultivate social connection

Loneliness and social isolation are major risk factors for mental and physical illness. The WHO report on social connection warns that lonely people are twice as likely to be depressed and have increased risks of heart disease, stroke and cognitive decline[9]. Building connections protects against inflammation and fosters resilience[9]. Practical approaches:

- **Reach out regularly:** schedule time with family, friends or neighbours; send a message to someone you haven't spoken to recently.
- **Join a group:** participate in clubs, community classes or sports teams aligned with your interests.
- **Volunteer:** helping others boosts mood and provides a sense of purpose.
- **Be present:** put away your phone during conversations; listen actively and show empathy.
- **Seek support when lonely:** if feelings of isolation persist, look for support groups, counselling or community programmes.

Engage in cognitive and problem-solving practices

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) teaches skills for challenging negative thoughts and solving real-world problems. A 2024 study from Stanford Medicine found that a form of CBT called problem-solving therapy reduced depression in one-third of participants with both depression and obesity and produced measurable changes in brain circuits within two months[21]. Action steps:

- **Identify automatic thoughts:** notice self-critical or catastrophic thinking. Ask yourself whether there is evidence for these thoughts and reframe them more realistically.
- **Break down problems:** define the issue clearly, brainstorm possible solutions, evaluate pros and cons and choose one to try.
- **Behavioural activation:** schedule enjoyable or meaningful activities to counteract avoidance and rumination.
- **Consider professional CBT:** therapists can personalize exercises and provide accountability; digital tools and apps can supplement practice.

Spend time in nature

Exposure to green spaces lowers cortisol levels, reduces anxiety and enhances mood. Activities such as walking in a park, forest bathing, gardening or even looking at natural scenes can have beneficial effects. Try to spend at least two hours in nature each week, ideally in daylight to synchronise your circadian rhythm. Combine nature time with physical activity and mindfulness for added benefits.

Supplements and natural remedies

Certain nutrients and herbs may support mental wellbeing, but evidence varies considerably and supplements should complement—not replace—lifestyle changes and professional care. Always consult a healthcare provider before starting supplements, especially if you take medications. Examples with some evidence:

- **Omega-3 fatty acids**

Anti-inflammatory fats found in fatty fish, flaxseeds and walnuts. Supplementation may reduce depressive symptoms and support cardiovascular health.

- **B-complex vitamins**

Cofactors for neurotransmitter synthesis; deficiency can impair mood.

- **Vitamin D**

Low levels are associated with depression; supplementation may improve mood, particularly in deficient individuals.

- **Magnesium**

Involved in sleep regulation and relaxation; deficiency is linked to anxiety.

- **Probiotics**

Support a healthy gut microbiome and may improve mood. Choose clinically studied strains.

- **Adaptogenic herbs (e.g., ashwagandha, rhodiola)**

Traditionally used to reduce stress; some studies suggest they lower cortisol and improve mood.

- **Saffron or St.John's wort**

Herbal remedies with antidepressant effects in mild to moderate depression; interact with medications—consult a physician.

Professional support and therapy

Self-help strategies are powerful but may not be sufficient for moderate or severe mental wellbeing conditions. Seeking professional help is a sign of strength. Options include:

- **Psychotherapy:** cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), psychodynamic therapy and interpersonal therapy (IPT) address thoughts, behaviours and relationships.
- **Medication:** psychiatrists can prescribe antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications or mood stabilisers when necessary. Medication may be most effective when combined with lifestyle changes and therapy.
- **Support groups:** peer-led groups provide shared understanding and reduce isolation.
- **Digital tools:** evidence-based apps offer mood tracking, guided meditations and CBT exercises between sessions.

If you experience persistent sadness, anxiety, sleep problems, suicidal thoughts or difficulty functioning in daily life, contact a healthcare professional. Early intervention improves outcomes and prevents crises.

Prevention and long-term maintenance

mental wellbeing care is not just about treating illness; it's about sustaining well-being over the long term. Consider incorporating the following habits:

- **Avoid substance abuse:** limit alcohol and avoid recreational drugs and nicotine.
- **Build resilience:** practice gratitude, develop problem-solving skills and maintain a growth mindset.
- **Digital detox:** take regular breaks from screens and social media to reduce information overload and comparisons.
- **Lifelong learning:** educate yourself about mental wellbeing and develop coping strategies; cultivate hobbies and curiosity.
- **Check-ins:** schedule periodic mental wellbeing check-ups with a professional, just as you would with physical health.
- **Stress management:** incorporate relaxation practices daily; know your stress triggers and plan healthy responses.
- **Work–life balance:** set boundaries around work and preserve time for relationships, self-care and rest.

Limitations of diagnostic labels and the case for precision psychiatry

Traditional diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-5 categorize mental disorders based on symptoms, which can oversimplify complex conditions and ignore underlying biology. Scientists argue that there is substantial overlap among diagnoses and that categories do not map onto specific biological pathways[2]. Functional and precision psychiatry aim to integrate symptomatic, biological and behavioural data to tailor treatments[3]. Future mental wellbeing care may involve biomarkers, brain imaging and genetic tests to match patients with the most effective interventions, just as precision medicine is used in oncology. Until then, adopting a holistic, root-cause approach and working with healthcare professionals can help tailor your own mental wellbeing plan.

Key takeaways

- mental wellbeing is deeply interconnected with physical health; improving one supports the other.
- A holistic approach considers biological, psychological, social and environmental factors and addresses root causes instead of merely treating symptoms.
- Mediterranean-style diets, regular exercise, adequate sleep, mindfulness, social connection and cognitive strategies are evidence-based ways to support mental well-being.
- Personalized interventions, professional support and early action improve outcomes. There is no shame in seeking help—mental wellbeing care is self-care.
- Prevention is key: cultivate healthy habits, build resilience and prioritize relationships to sustain mental wellbeing across the lifespan.

Disclaimer

This guide is for educational purposes and does not replace professional medical advice. Individual needs vary—consult your physician or mental health professional before making significant changes to your diet, exercise programme or medication.

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