

Subtitles Video 6: Physical Well-being

The third habit is about physical well-being. I'd like to stress that we don't exactly know which of the habits are more important or which are less important, though it is safe to say that these first three habits, building close relationships, acts of kindness, and this one, physical well-being, have an enormous impact on our happiness.

In fact, during the last five years or so, the number of scientific studies on food and mood, as well as exercise and happiness, has exploded, so let's try to summarize these studies.

First, let's take a look at exercise. Secondly, we're going to take a look at the impact of sunlight and last, but certainly not least, we're going to talk about food.

Changing our habits regarding only those three things, can literally be life changing.

We now have very broad scientific agreement that regular exercise has a major impact on our mood. To take only one example, a review of more than 120 studies carried out by the Cochrane review, one of the most influential medical reviews in the world, concluded that the impact of exercise, especially on anxiety, is at least as effective as antidepressants.

But once again, why don't people know about this? Why don't we have commercials on TV about exercise? Well, you know the reason. You can't sell exercise in bottles.

Though I should say that, if you are experiencing a psychiatric emergency, please talk to your doctor. As we mentioned earlier, the quickest way to deal with serious depression is to talk to someone.

It takes about two to three weeks for exercise to have an impact on mood, but after that, the impact can be powerful. Studies show that this impact is not only the temporary feeling of euphoria that many people experience during a long workout, which is known as "runner's high." As long as we exercise at least 3 times a week, exercise seems to elevate mood over the long term.

The big question is, why is exercise effective?

We are still trying to find out. We used to think it was a family of neurochemicals called endorphins, but new studies are now pointing to endocannabinoids, a whole class of feel-good neurochemicals, and the great news is that your body can produce its own endocannabinoids, which is perfectly legal.

Some foods, and especially raw cocoa, which is a wonderful mood booster, generate the same endocannabinoids.

One more major discovery is that exercise generates large amounts of BDNF, Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor. BDNF is amazing, and I wish I could dedicate a whole video to it. We have now discovered that BDNF levels are closely related to depression, but we don't know exactly how.

We do know that BDNF increases your neuroplasticity, the generation of new connections in your brain, which affects your creativity as well as your mood, and very recent studies show that it slows down the progression of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's.

So exercise may be the best medicine in the world. It relieves depression, slows down Alzheimer's, as well as actually extending your lifespan.

So how often and how actively do we need to exercise? Only 20 minutes or half an hour of moderate exercise at least three times a week such as brisk walking or swimming will significantly boost your well-being. The golden rule is to listen to your body, as well as your doctor, and take things step by step. You can slowly increase the dosage.

After a few weeks your brain will probably talk to you as well, and tell you, wow, that feels great, don't stop! Personally, I'm addicted to exercise and dark chocolate, and I don't want to go to rehab.

As we discovered in the opening module on relationships, listening to people is very important, but so is listening to our own body and our own brain.

They both talk to us, and sometimes they shout at us. That's what depression is. Your brain is telling you that you need to change something. And very often, your brain is begging you to change your lifestyle.

Now let's talk about one more new area of exploration, and it's called SAD, "sad," which is Seasonal Affective Disorder, and yes, it can make you sad, especially in winter.

Nine out of ten people in the US experience changes in mood according to the season, particularly as you get far away from the equator, and about five percent of the population experience serious changes in mood.

In the old days, we would get up early in the morning to go hunting or farming. Our bodies as well as our brains followed the movement of the sun, that's what we call our Circadian Rhythm. This is one more reason why we are dealing with a depression epidemic; humans are not used to staying indoors, sitting in chairs, and staring at screens. Luckily, we've found some solutions. You don't have to go back to hunting or farming. The bottom line is that you only need about 15 to 20 minutes of early sunshine and if you do get it, it can change your whole day.

Now, if you happen to live too far north, or in a cloudy part of the world, like England or Siberia, you can find a lot of relief by purchasing what's called a lightbox.

If you live in a bright place, the best thing to do is get some exercise outside as soon as you can grab a cup of coffee. You can walk briskly around the block, go jogging, or better still, do some gardening.

Jogging outside and gardening are what we call super-habits, two or more life skills rolled into one. I love gardening in the morning. I can achieve three things at the same, getting exercise, staying in tune with my circadian rhythm, and enjoying close contact with nature.

Our modern nighttime habits are creating big problems too. Our ancestors were naturally in sync with the movement of the sun. They were bathed in the bright blue colors of strong daylight and the orange or golden colors of the sky at the end of the day.

Nowadays we are stuck with the blue light of our smartphones, computers and TVs. Blue light tells our brain that we are in the middle of the day and so it can cause major disturbances in sleep patterns, and of course our mood, which is strongly affected by sleep.

The best solution is to reduce your screen time, especially after dark, and switch off your phones at night.

But if you can't go cold turkey, most phones and computers have a wonderful capability called "night shift," which changes the color of your screen to suit the time of day, from blue to red, and back again.

Now let's talk about something really fun. It's about food and mood. The topic of food and mood has become a major focus of attention, even bigger than exercise. Scientists are telling us that the Greeks and Romans, the founders of modern medicine, were right. Food is medicine, medicine for the brain as well as the body.

"But that's impossible!" you might say. "I ate a lot of vegetables for lunch and I'm still depressed!" Like exercise, it takes a while to change our mood through food, a few weeks or a month, and perhaps that's why most people don't realize how big the impact is.

But now very recent discoveries are clearly telling us that food plays a leading role in our emotional well-being.

The bottom line is that your mum was right. In order to stay happy you need to eat lots of vegetables as well as fruit, and cut down on sugar and processed food.

But until now we didn't know why. Fruit and vegetables make you happy not only because they contain vitamins and good stuff, but because the good bacteria in your body love eating those vegetables, especially high fiber vegetables, and the bad bacteria get high on sugar.

The impact of these friendly bacteria on our brain is a new and fascinating area of scientific exploration.

Did you know that 50 percent of the serotonin in your body, the key hormone that stabilizes your mood, is produced by your microbiome, the garden that is growing in your gut?

The question is: Is your garden full of weeds, or are you growing beautiful flowers?

We also have a growing pile of evidence that fish oil, and particularly what we call omega-3 fatty acids contained in fish oil, have a stabilizing impact on mood, including major depressive disorder as well as bipolar disorder. And we've recently discovered that EPA, and please don't ask me to pronounce the whole word, which is a constituent of omega 3 fatty acid, is the ringleader in the impact on our emotions.

In conclusion, we have talked about three ways that you can transform your mood by taking care of your body: regular exercise, keeping in tune with your circadian rhythm, and eating the right food.

So let's summarize:

Exercise, along with good food, is the best medicine in the whole world.

Try to work out at least 3 times per week for 20-30 minutes.

Don't give up. It takes a few weeks for exercise to kick in and strongly impact mood.

And take it step by step. Listen to your body and your mind, as well as your doctor. They will both show you how to find your flow, meaning the perfect balance between exercise that is too easy or too challenging.

Secondly, try to get back in sync with the movement of the sun, which we call your Circadian rhythm. As soon as you wake up, try to get at least 20 minutes of early light. If it's too dark outside, use what we call a Lightbox.

And very importantly, try to reduce your screen time. There's a very close correlation between how long people spend on the internet and how depressed they get. Use night shift, an amazing capability, which is now available on smartphones as well as desktop computers.

Thirdly, feed your friendly bacteria, eat lots of vegetables and fruit, cut down on sugar and processed food.

And once again, have patience. It takes a few weeks, but the results can be amazing.

And finally, you can try fish oil. evidence is building that high EPA fish oil can relieve depression as well as bipolar disorder.