

# Top tips for supporting your brain health



# Introduction

Brain health is a critical part of our overall health. It underlies our ability to communicate, make decisions, problem-solve and live a productive and useful life.

The brain processes around 70,000 thoughts per day and it is, not surprisingly, interlinked to our mental health and well-being. This guide offers top tips for supporting your brain health and is focused on: Sleep and Relaxation, Mental Fitness and Social Interaction.

The top tips illustrated in this guide have been co-created with GAMIAN-Europe members who have lived-experience with a range of different mental health conditions<sup>1</sup>. The quotes included here were gathered from a workshop convened in February 2023<sup>2</sup>. This guide also includes supplementary material drawn from scientific research.

There are six globally recognized pillars of brain health which are: Sleep and Relaxation, Mental Fitness, Social Interaction, Food and Nutrition, Physical Exercise, Medical Health. However, in this guide we will be focusing only on the first three pillars:

## 1 Sleep and Relaxation

## 2 Mental Fitness

## 3 Social Interaction

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# What is brain health?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines brain health as:

*'The state of brain functioning across cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioural and motor domains, allowing a person to realize their full potential over the life course, irrespective of the presence or absence of disorders.'<sup>3</sup>*

For some people with lived experience of a mental health condition brain health may mean having fewer or no symptoms of illness. It can also mean other things like living well, knowing what is important for you, striving for a life free of fear and stress, or having a state of mind where you can be satisfied with yourself and the life you are living.

Another important aim is to use your brain's potential to be able to live your best life even within your own personal boundaries or limits. This may mean being able to make choices, even for the simple things in life like eating and sleeping at the appropriate times.

“When I really struggled with my depression I lost my ability to make choices. That was the most important thing for brain health... to decide what I want to do.”  
- Stefan

“What's most important is to reach a point where you feel content. I'm not going to say happy because we can't be happy all the time, but satisfied with ourselves.”  
- Ema

<sup>1</sup> Referred to in this guide as someone with lived experience.

<sup>2</sup> The names next to quotes have been changed to maintain anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> WHO – Optimising brain health across the life course



# Social interaction

Social interaction is another important area of brain health. It can mean different things to different people but in this guide, we refer to:

*'staying connected, leading a healthy social life with friends and family and making sure to engage in conversations you find stimulating when you are socialising'.*

Mental health problems can sometimes interfere with our ability to socialise with others. It might make us paranoid, anxious or mistrustful of other people. Stigma and discrimination towards people with mental health conditions can also add to these difficulties. As a result, our social networks may not be what they use to be, and making friends may become more difficult to do.

People with lived experience can learn to adapt and find ways to overcome various difficulties by socialising with others. A key thing is to find people who empathise and understand you, whom you can connect and communicate with.

Self-reassurance is also important when we feel mistrustful or paranoid about other people. It is also about giving ourselves a break when we are having a bad day(s) and allowing ourselves the opportunity to socialise. Social interactions are not always easy for us, especially if we do not feel comfortable or at ease with ourselves. But, overcoming these difficulties can also contribute to good brain health. There are many things to be aware of when forming social interactions.

We may have to remind and prepare ourselves for certain things, like avoiding abusive people or situations. Learning to trust someone and having the skills to do this are also important for brain health. We sometimes have difficulty picking up non-verbal communication or worry about what people might think about what we say. Nevertheless, social interactions can be rewarding when we find the right people we can communicate with.



“My biggest challenge was to give my emotions a break and to have social interactions. It's important to have those friends/people around me who accept and understand me and my emotions as well.”

-Leonie

“I am very insecure, but having a challenge [like talking in a group] and having a positive result (that I survived this) is also brain health for me.”

- Ella

“It's really important that you pick people that are really healthy for you... that they are helpful in ways that make you feel better when you are around them.”

“With mental health issues, it's really hard to trust, but it's important for me to learn to trust people again, especially with stigma and social issues.”

- Hans

“On my good days, I try to build my social network, particularly with people who can help me on my bad days.”

- Jan



# Social interaction

## Things to try and improve social interaction:

1

Join a peer support group or club – to meet new people who have similar experiences/interests

2

Make friends during your good days – find people who understand you, whom you can connect with and who make you feel good about yourself

3

Seek employment or voluntary work – this is a great way to meet new people and build self-esteem

4

Find a good therapist – someone who can help you rethink any negative thoughts about yourself or others and help you to learn to trust

5

Communicate clearly – if you are struggling with your thoughts, fears and emotions confide in someone who knows you well and whom you trust



## The 'Why'

While joining a peer or support group will probably make you feel good, studies have shown that having close friends helps decrease cognitive decline as you age (Maher 2017). There is also evidence that suggests loneliness increases the risk of loss of thinking skills (Kovacic 2022). Finally, meaningful relationships also appear to provide buffers against several harmful impacts of stress (Hostinar CE 2015).



# Sleep and relaxation

Most of us need between seven to eight hours of sleep a night, but some people may find sleeping longer (10-12 hours a night) is what they need, especially if they take psychotropic medication (e.g. antipsychotics). Sleep helps our memory, restores our brain function and helps us to maintain a positive mood and outlook, and is generally important for good mental health. We also need downtime when we can relax, without any pressures or obligations. While the definition of sleep and relaxation are self-explanatory, sleep, in particular, is important for the brain as:

*'...getting enough good-quality sleep sharpens focus and concentration and supports most aspects of cognitive thinking. While sleep deprivation lowers stress resistance and can harm your brain...'*

Sleep can be a significant problem for someone with lived experience, but there are ways we can help aid in better sleep. A good sleep routine is also very important. Going to bed at roughly the same time and avoiding very stimulating activities or conversations are helpful. Some people find herbal remedies useful. And others might have to rely on sleeping tablets prescribed by their physician.

Sometimes we might think we have to exhaust ourselves to get a good night's sleep but this can be counterproductive. Physical exercise is an important activity, not just for keeping healthy but also because it is beneficial for good sleep. Some people combine physical exercise with their way to relax.

Difficulty sleeping may be a symptom of another health problem. Sometimes it might be linked to sleep apnoea, a condition in which breathing stops and starts when sleeping so it is worth speaking to a physician. Many techniques can be used to help get a good night's sleep.





“ I do indoor workouts with music. During this time I don't have any thoughts running through my head, just the music and the exercise...'  
- Louise

“ For relaxation what's helpful for me is physical exercise ... I walk for an hour a day. It clears my mind clear.”  
- Dirk

“ For me sleep is crucial. It's been a problem for years, my body remains very alert during the night...but I've found some earbuds that are very good. I put them in and I feel the world falling away... it feels really safe and very relaxing.’  
- Olivia

“ I always have a busy mind when I go to sleep. I need medication to sleep. It's prescribed but not too much.’  
- Jacob

“ I was looking for possible causes for my bad sleep and it turned out that it was sleep apnoea. I have a mask now which has improved my sleep.’  
- Walter

“ When I was having problems with sleep I was destroying myself with physical work just to crash into bed. I would sleep for 2-3 hours and then I was up again. It wasn't a good technique.’

“ I use to take medication to fall asleep. I quit them a while back. I had to try a lot of things to find out what would work for me.’  
- Elias



# Sleep and relaxation

## Things to do before going to sleep:

1

Write down any thoughts or feelings in a notebook or diary. You can also do this if you wake up at night.

2

Do a meditation, muscle relaxation or breathing exercise.

3

Read a boring book or listen to calming music.

4

Stick to a regular routine (e.g. go to bed at a similar time)

## Things not to do before going to sleep:

1

Consuming alcohol and caffeine late in the evening

2

Stimulating conversations or watching the news



## The ‘Why’

While we all know the feeling of having a good night's sleep and the freshness it provides us, it has many positive implications for brain health. Mainly, when we are getting quality sleep, the brain can “flush out” molecules and prevent their toxic build-up which increases the risk of neurodegenerative brain diseases (American Brain Foundation 2022). The reasons why writing down thoughts, having routines and doing meditation/mindfulness exercises help with sleep are due to anxiety and stress reduction (Northwestern Medicine 2022) while meditation has been seen to increase natural melatonin levels (Ravindra 2012).



# Mental fitness

Mental fitness is about keeping your brain and emotional health in good shape. While it may refer, in part, to practising memory games or thinking puzzles, it is more importantly about having good habits to keep us mentally well and to build up our resilience to stress.

This means keeping our brains active in positive ways. This might be: being aware of our thinking patterns and having behaviour strategies that improve our mood and mental health. It can also include positively developing our brains by trying new things, learning new skills, for example, speaking another language, and limiting our smartphone use. It can mean not overthinking negative things.

The definition used in this guide for mental fitness includes:

*'The ability to think clearly and to make decisions effectively and efficiently. A parallel can be drawn with physical fitness, which relates to the body's ability to function...'*

Physical health and brain health are inextricably linked. Physical exercise is again a key factor in ensuring good brain health. Exercise can be combined with mental fitness as well, where some activities require mental effort too (e.g. football, dancing). But if physical exercise is not possible or of interest, many other things maintain mental fitness. You can use techniques to help manage thoughts that make us feel emotionally overwhelmed. For example, limiting social media and listening to the news if they make us feel low.

We can create good habits by taking up hobbies or activities that help take our minds off things. It is also important to know our limits and only do what we feel works for us. But also venture into new challenges and try out different things, be curious...



“ What's very important is 'calorie burning' the bad emotions... the emotions that don't make you feel good. You can do this through physical exercise, through writing them down, through simply allowing yourself to feel the anger, fear and not to repress them and to do this in a safe environment.'  
- Hanna

“ Every holiday I just turn off my social media for one month. I'm off the grid. When I come back I feel like a new person.'  
- Peter

“ Lego can take your mind away from anything else. It's something you can concentrate on and not have to think about anything else. It's like mindfulness.'  
- Sarah



# Mental fitness

## Things to do to improve mental fitness:

1

Get creative – take up art or learn to play an instrument and/or write music.

2

Do something that uses your brain like a social quiz, or playing with lego

3

Be kind to yourself – through relaxation release any pressure on yourself or from others

4

Go outdoors – walk in nature or somewhere nice everyday

5

Keep a diary or notebook - write down your thoughts, emotions and feelings (discard it if you want), but also write down the positives.



## The 'Why'

Small memory exercises and keeping the mind stimulated have been seen to help brain health by increasing "fluid intelligence" i.e. the ability to reason and solve new problems (Jaeggi 2011). While calming the mind allows you to problem-solve in a more relaxed way and therefore reduce daily stress and anxiety (Roth 2017). Writing down thoughts and emotions allows us to better process information, organise our thoughts and provide emotional relief (Schroder 2017) which in turn helps our brains' clarity as it can reduce the 'brain's emotional centre' and engages the thinking brain (Lieberman 2007).

## Conclusion

Maintaining good brain health is incredibly important for everyone's mental health and well-being and is key to living a healthy life. Those living with different mental health conditions may find themselves with challenges specific to them when it comes to their brain health. The important thing to remember, as with maintaining good mental health, is there is no one size fits all approach. Try a couple of the above things and if they don't work, try another one. The whole process is a journey and as they say, "It's not the destination, it's the journey".



