



Health and
wellbeing

HCAHealthcare UK

Dr Gill's Blog - May 2018



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As the weather gets warmer I have been thinking about vitamin D and all the steadily emerging research about just how important it is. I am ready to get my skin in the sun and make my own vitamin D and wondering about checking my levels before stopping the supplements I take over the winter.

Then I read an article that I thought was just as relevant to the weather and gave me serious “food for thought”:

Barbecues

Heterocyclic amines (HCAs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) form in barbecued, grilled and pan fried meat and are activated by enzymes in the body (bioactivation) to become capable of damaging cells and causing cancer.

Studies vary but there seems to be a link to colorectal pancreatic and prostate cancer. A new study shows something interesting - eating 15 portions of fish or meat cooked this way (includes roasting) caused a 17% increase in high blood pressure. This is a new finding adding weight to the argument about being careful how much you eat.

So either way this is food to moderate!



Plastic

This is a really high profile topic at the moment thanks at least in part to David Attenborough. I was shocked to read that 95% of Americans excrete plastic in their urine, 83% of tap-water worldwide contains plastic. A 2014 study of German beer found microplastics in all the samples. The tap-water data is particularly worrying - plastic is in the water table.

Bisphenol A (BPA) is an endocrine disrupter. It was banned from baby bottles in 2012 by the FDA and in 2017 it was listed as a substance of serious concern by the European Chemicals Agency.

This has all happened so fast, there was no plastic packaging in my childhood and early plastic products had no built in obsolescence, my mum had a plastic bucket from the early 1950s that lasted 60 years before it developed a crack. Now one lunch in town results in several plastic items in rubbish.

I have already stopped buying water in bottles and started avoiding packaged food, not always easy. I am working on plastic reduction in my life with a plan of a plastic free month, although frankly that is a massive challenge to achieve. Just a glance in my bathroom cabinet is a stark reminder of how dependant we have become on plastic packaging. Which seems absurd when we were essentially plastic free pre 1940s!

So my theme is carcinogens, cancer is getting more frequent and occurring at a younger age. Why is probably very complex but there is no getting away from the environmental harm we are doing; so buy a metal water bottle, fill it from a tap (uk has less plastic in tap-water than most places at about 72% and there will be at least as much in the plastic bottles) and remind yourself how lucky we are to live in a country with clean drinking water and how mad we are to buy it in bottles, we have been exploited by marketing!

Looking after your lifestyle



Emotional Resilience

Do you have the ability to bounce back?

When we talk about emotional resilience, this isn't a competition to see who can deal with the most pressure and emotional situations without breaking.

It is more about whether you are a tennis ball or an egg. When you are under pressure at work or dealing with emotional situations at home, how well do you bounce back and resume 'normal' functioning?

There are some key factors that will support emotional resilience and ensure that you remain mentally healthy and strong:

Monitor your capacity

This is something I talk to patients about daily, in terms of being aware of your own capacity not just for practical tasks but also for emotive things too – if you imagine your life as a pie chart then it is important to adjust the sections as others expand, not just take on more and more.

Accept mistakes and difficulties

Rather than seeing mistakes as a sign of failure it is important to be more accepting that things do not go well all the time and allow these times to pass rather than beating yourself up or ruminating on why they happened.



Take time to reflect When we are busy and under pressure it is very easy to fall into the trap of keeping the wheels turning. It is essential, however, that we stop to think about what we are managing at present, review it and take time to rest, replenish and congratulate yourself where deserved.

Acknowledge your strengths/qualities regardless of achievement It is important that we can feel confident in ourselves as individuals despite our performance or achievement. This will act as a foundation when you face obstacles such as not getting a promotion or not winning a tennis match.



Be aware of your own triggers If there are certain situations or people that you find more difficult to manage or draining; be aware and plan accordingly for these situations. This is an area where avoidance can be helpful at times.

Don't be a sponge Absorbing other people's emotions or stress from an environment can make it difficult to manage yourself effectively. Be clear about your own boundaries and what you will and won't accept from others and be sure to use exercise as a positive way to release any tension.

Sleep Anyone's emotional resilience will be impacted on when they are sleep deprived as we instantly become more vulnerable and less able to maximise our cognitive capacity to protect ourselves. 'Sleepio' - a new free app has just been launched in London which uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy principles to work through insomnia related problems. It helps individuals to both address the cognitive aspects such as 'the racing mind' which can make sleep difficult as well as helping you to establish a healthy sleep pattern.

Facing pressure, stress and emotional difficulties is inevitable and it is key that we see this as normal to allow us to develop our resilience to it.

Content kindly provided by Dr Melanie James



Dr Melanie James

CPsychol

Counselling Psychologist, HCA Healthcare UK

National Mental Health Awareness Week was recognised across the UK from 14-20 May.

Contact our [Client Relations Team](#) should you wish to find out more information about our Psychological Services

Doctors Corner

Dear Doctor,

What simple self-help measures can I use to lift my mood?

Dear Reader, yes we all get down at times and there are lots of quite simple things that we can do for ourselves to help:

Firstly, getting the physical lifestyle habits right cannot be underestimated. It is no secret how important having sufficient sleep, eating well, staying hydrated and exercise are for us. When it comes to food; oily fish which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids and foods containing folate found in beans, citrus and spinach have been shown to be particularly helpful as is the anti-oxidant effect of fruit and vegetables in general. Selenium too has a beneficial effect and can be found in garlic, nuts (particularly Brazil nuts), seeds and brown rice.

" Exercise is often the quickest way to lift our mood as it results in the release of endorphins (our own internal 'feel-good' chemicals) "

This rebalances the chemicals that get released when we get 'stressed'. However exercise that you enjoy is better than exercise you don't. Not everyone likes going to the gym and for some, there is a boredom factor of doing activity in isolation which maybe inhibitory.

Playing a ball sport, doing a Zumba class, taking up line dancing or a martial art are examples of more social exercise and there is a lot of evidence that social activities generally have added benefits in making us happy. Walking outdoors is also important. It not only provides exercise but gives us an opportunity to link back to the natural world and there is a growing body of evidence which shows that this in itself improves our mood.



It is worth considering what we choose to watch and listen to in our leisure time. Newsworthy items with the exception of royal babies and weddings tend to be tragic, worrying or just plain

depressing. And then the rest of our viewing, if we are not careful may be made up of news discussion programmes looking at the same issues, documentaries on similar subjects, hard hitting thrillers and soaps which are written to maximise drama by focussing on trauma and distress. Sport may allow us some relief but only if our team wins! I sometimes 'prescribe' my patients a daily dose of their favourite comedy show instead- it works really well.

When we think about comedy it is also worth thinking about laughter. We actually laugh a lot more than you would think and the majority of laughter isn't at formal jokes but as part of conversation – we laugh in response to funny comments or wry statements, perhaps to a raised eyebrow or an exaggerated grimace. Laughter appears to have evolved as a social bonding phenomenon.

" You are said to be thirty times more likely to laugh if you are with someone else than if you are on your own and this in turn links back to how we communicate with others "

As neuroscientist Sophie Scott identifies, conversations had face to face evokes much more laughter than we realise, the same conversation by phone rather less and once reduced to just the written word in email/ social media or text, laughter almost disappears. She suggests that is why we use so many symbols such as emoticons to put back that vital part of communication. However as the physical social contact releases the helpful hormone oxytocin and laughter itself releases endorphins, simply putting a smile in a text is a poor replacement. So whenever possible, have real conversations face to face rather than sending an email.



Writing down three things at the end of every day that have been positive or that we feel grateful for and looking at the list the following morning has a proven beneficial impact on our mood. The 'positives' can be as little as getting an unexpected seat on the tube or getting into work just before the worst of the rain. To be effective, this technique needs to be done as a habit repeated daily. The reason it works is interesting. It isn't so much about thinking about the particular positive things we have written on any one occasion but about changing the way we focus altogether.

It is a common experience when just about to buy a new car to suddenly notice that the roads appear to be full of people driving the same make and model that we are interested in. 'How coincidental?' we may think. Not really – the same number of similar cars were almost certainly there in the months before but as we weren't so 'focussed' we simply didn't notice. By knowing we have a daily task to spot 'positives' finding the 'good stuff' in our lives becomes a focus and we suddenly start to notice all sorts of things we simply never did before. That in turn steadily lifts our mood.

Finally the mood uplift from doing an act of kindness cannot be underestimated. The benefits of voluntary work, charity or just being 'there' for someone are doubled as the giver can gain in different ways as much as the recipient.

There is a lot more that can be said on this most interesting of subjects but ultimately if despite self-help measures your mood is still low it is worth coming in to have a discussion with one of the doctors.

This month's Doctors Corner was kindly provided by Dr Karen Lindall, HCA UK GP



Dr Karen Lindall
HCA UK GP

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