

# **Coping during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic**

## **Tools for people living with Brain Injury**

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**Health and Wellbeing during COVID-19:** As we face the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us will be feeling worry and uncertainty. The reality is that the distress that most of us are feeling is a completely understandable response to an unprecedented, frightening and real threat. Managing our emotions at this time is particularly challenging, especially if you are living with an underlying neurological condition. We wanted to share some practical things you can do to improve health and wellbeing.

Many of us face a long period of time inside and it is therefore important to consider what opportunities we might have to improve our physical and mental health. We may also find that if we can establish new positive routines during lockdown that we might be able to maintain these positive changes when 'normal life' resumes.

Many people we work with, report feeling guilty because they are enjoying some aspects of being in lockdown and are feeling less pressure than usual. Others feel bad because they think they should be coping better. The bottom line is, there is no right way to feel. If you are feeling overwhelmed, having something to focus on might provide much-needed focus and a sense of control. If this is something that you feel would be useful, the rest of this document provides some ideas for how you might focus on improving aspects of health and your wellbeing.

Everyone's experience of living with a neurological condition will be different, so, we have included different types of wellbeing exercises for

you to choose from. You do not have to try all of these exercises at the same time. If you only work on one area, there is much evidence to show that functioning in other areas will improve. You might find it easier to read the booklet in sections, rather than all in one go.

**What is health and wellbeing:** It is often assumed that ‘health’ is equivalent to the absence of illness. It is not. Similarly, the presence of ‘wellness’ is not just the absence of distress.

We have defined wellbeing as psychological experience that can be impacted on by a variety of health behaviours, and involves positive connections to ourselves, others and the communities and environments in which we live.

Our work has been heavily influenced by feedback from people who live with brain injury and stroke. Our intention is to ‘build on what is strong’ as opposed to simply focusing on ‘fixing what is wrong’.

It is important to note that our aim is not to ‘get rid’ of, avoid or ignore negative emotions and experiences – this is not possible, nor desirable. All emotions are informative and no one can be positive all of the time. Negative emotions can be helpful and motivating, but sometimes we can become overwhelmed by them. Our aim is to provide information about things you can do to restore the balance by building positive emotions, experiences and connections.

Our group has carried out and published several literature reviews leading to a novel framework of wellbeing which includes five key areas:

- 1. Positive Minds**
- 2. Healthy Bodies**
- 3. Meaningful Relationships**
- 4. Natural Environments**
- 5. Positive Change**

This booklet is structured around these five areas. For each section we outline some activities that, if practiced, will improve health and wellbeing.



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# Positive Minds



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## Positive Minds

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This section focuses on building a positive mind. We now know that it is possible to learn to be happier by doing certain things to improve wellbeing.

### Activities to promote positive minds:

#### 1. Discovering your strengths



Discovering your strengths can help you recognise what you are good at and what qualities you bring to your relationships, your work and your home life. Everyone has a set of strengths which is unique to them.

Completing the following survey will help you to identify your key strengths, which you can use to improve your wellbeing. For example, one study showed that when people know and use their character



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strengths, they were up to 18 times more likely to flourish in life than those who do not use their strengths.

**To identify your strengths:** Follow the link for the strength's questionnaire:

<https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>

1. Once you follow the link it will take you to a page with a whole list of questionnaires
2. Scroll down to the one that says 'VIA survey of Character Strengths' and select 'Take Test'
3. You will have to register to take the test. So, select 'register' and follow the instructions to create your account
4. At this point the link may take you back to the whole list of questionnaires. If so, simply scroll down again until you see 'VIA Survey of Character Strengths' and select 'Take Test'.

The process takes around 40 minutes. If you need a break, make sure you save what you have done already.

When you complete this survey, make a note of your top five strengths. Next, think about ways in which you can use these strengths to enhance your wellbeing. Here are some suggestions on how to use your strengths:

[http://www.actionforhappiness.org/media/52486/340\\_ways\\_to\\_use\\_character\\_strengths.pdf](http://www.actionforhappiness.org/media/52486/340_ways_to_use_character_strengths.pdf)

**2. Three Good Things:** The 'Three Good Things' exercise involves reflecting on the past day every day for at least a week. At the end of



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each day remember three things you are grateful for or that worked well for you. This exercise helps to enhance your ability to notice positivity in your life.

### **How to complete the three good things activity:**

- Get a notebook or use your phone to record your 3 good things every day.
- Every night before bed, sit down and look back at your day. Record three things that you are grateful for, or three things that went well today.
- Think of specific details from the day or week (i.e. the warm sunshine coming through the window or enjoying a cup of tea). You just need to observe small things.
- Some people have enjoyed helping their family or friends improve their wellbeing by doing the exercise with them.
- Some people struggle with this at first and if you do, just start with one good thing a day and build up when you can.

**3. Finding Flow:** Have you ever been so immersed in a task that you lose all track of time? This complete immersion is known as 'flow.' You experience flow when doing something that is rewarding and that is just the right level of challenge for your skill level. If the task is too challenging, you will lose interest and feel frustrated. If the task is too easy you might enjoy it, but you will not experience flow.

Tasks that lead to 'flow' will be different for everyone. Some examples include gardening, exercising, working on a piece of art, knitting and



creative writing etc. Flow can improve overall happiness and wellbeing, and allow us to feel more engaged and meaning in life.

**4. Building Optimism:** Some people feel they are natural pessimists, but we know that even natural pessimists can learn to be more optimistic. You can learn to be more optimistic by training yourself to see the potential for opportunities in any situation. This takes practice at first. The first step is to try to recognise negative thoughts. This is half the battle because often we have negative thoughts without even noticing. The more you pay attention to what you are thinking, the more you will start to notice negative thoughts. When you become more aware of your thoughts, you might observe that you are using words like ‘always’ and ‘never’ and making ‘general’ statements. For example, ‘I **always** do **everything** wrong’. The next step is to try to change these thoughts to make them temporary and context specific. For example, ‘I **sometimes** forget people’s birthdays’. Using words like ‘sometimes’ and ‘lately’ emphasises the **temporary** nature of the negative event, and the **specific** situation in which it occurred. Here are some more examples:

Optimistic Thinking Style	Pessimistic Thinking Style
I have made a few mistakes <b>lately</b> , but things go wrong <b>sometimes</b>	I can <b>never</b> do anything right; things <b>always</b> go wrong for me!
I forget things <b>sometimes</b>	I <b>always</b> forget things
Things haven’t been going well for me <b>lately</b> , but things go wrong <b>sometimes</b>	I feel like things are <b>never</b> going to get better

At the end of this booklet we have included some activities to help you develop a more optimistic mindset.

## 5. Meaning and purpose and positive identity after brain injury

It is impossible to talk about meaning after brain injury or diagnosis of a neurological condition without also talking about our sense of identity. After brain injury many people tell us they don't feel like the 'same person'. This can be because people experience loss, which ultimately undermines their sense of identity as well as their sense that life is meaningful and purposeful.

In the early stages of recovery many people strive to return to their 'old lives'. For some people this is possible with some adjustments. For others, returning to their 'old life' is not possible. Typically, the bigger the gap between the perceived 'old-self' and 'new-self', the more you might experience negative emotion.

The important point here is that **it is possible** to reconstruct a new positive sense of identity after brain injury and to experience life as meaningful again.

To rediscover meaning after brain injury, some of the people we have worked with find it helpful to think about their strengths (see the strength exercise described earlier). This can give people a starting point to think about what they are good at and what qualities they possess. For many people having the opportunity to use their strengths can lead to increased wellbeing and a sense that life is meaningful. If you wanted to

start thinking about 'meaning' it might be helpful to do the strengths exercise and think about how you might be able to use your strengths more. It can also be useful to talk about this with your support network (family, friends, clinicians, voluntary sector workers) and discuss together what opportunities there might be for you to use your strengths in a new way. It can be helpful to start small and build on this as your confidence increases. Many people we work with who have found ways to use their unique strengths more often, tell us that they feel more like their 'old self' again or that they have started to feel happier with the 'new me'.

Knowing that it is possible to live a meaningful life after injury or diagnosis is important to provide a sense of hope.

## 6. Hope

**Hope** is a strength that motivates us.

Knowing that change can be possible despite brain injury can help us develop a 'growth mindset'. If we have a **growth mindset**, we believe that our abilities and understanding are open to change and development. It is not just our abilities and talents that bring us success, but the work we put in to achieving our goals no matter how small they may seem. If we have a fixed mindset, we believe that our situation is set in stone and that nothing can be changed. The fixed mindset is a barrier for constructing a new identity after brain injury. A fixed mindset can prevent us from reaching our full potential and finding new ways to experience meaning and purpose.

# Healthy Bodies



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## Healthy Bodies

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**Positive Health Behaviours:** Positive health behaviours are really important for physical and mental health. Positive health behaviours refer to a diet rich in fruit and vegetables, physical activity, good quality sleep, not-smoking and meditation. It is well known that adopting healthy behaviours is good for our physical health. It is less well known that positive health behaviours have a big impact on our mental health and wellbeing.

### **The connection between our body and mind**

Positive health behaviours have a powerful impact on the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve is perhaps one of the most important nerves in the human body. This nerve connects our brain to nearly every major organ in the body. This includes the ears, heart, lungs, kidneys, gut and reproductive organs. The vagus nerve supports our ability to control our emotions and to form social relationships. It also plays a key role in our bodies immune, metabolic and inflammatory response. Our vagus nerve is considered to be a structural link between our mind and our body. This may be why engaging in positive health behaviours positively impacts on the mind as well as the body.

We can enhance the function of our vagus nerve using a simple breathing exercise. We can do this in response to stressful situations to calm our body and brain. We can also do as part of our daily routine to improve our wellbeing.

To do this breathing exercise

- Breathe in for two counts (i.e. count two seconds)
- Pause at the very top of your inhale for one count. Feel your lungs full of air.
- Breathe out for four counts (i.e. count four seconds).
- At the very end of the exhale, pause for one count.
- Repeat

### **The Benefits of a Balanced and Healthy Diet**

We can enhance the function of our vagus nerve by adopting a healthy diet which has a range of benefits for health and wellbeing. For example, consuming a healthy diet (fruit, vegetables, whole-grain products, oily fish) and replacing foods high in fat with healthier alternatives can reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Making healthy food choices can improve thinking skills as well as improving mood.

### **Physical Activity and Brain Recovery**

When we engage in regular physical activity our heart rate (at rest) is reduced and our heart rate variability (at rest) is increased. Heart rate variability is a measure of how well our vagus nerve functions. We can enhance the function of our vagus nerve by increasing physical activity which leads to a range of benefits: -

- Exercise improves overall brain health
- Improves thinking skills
- Improves wellbeing and quality of life



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- Reduces depression and anxiety
- Protects against ageing
- Enhances brain injury recovery
- Exercise improves physical health

The key is to find something you can do and that you enjoy.

## Sleep

We can enhance the function of our vagus nerve by getting the right amount of good quality sleep. Poor sleep makes it more likely that you will forget things you learned during the day. Sleep deprivation can affect everything from attention, to decision-making, to planning. Sleep loss and depression are also highly linked. Sleep/wake patterns affect our heart functioning, and blood pressure, and lack of sleep has been linked to obesity and ill health.

Positive health behaviours have been shown to enhance the functioning of our vagus nerve over the long term. This leads to improvements in our physical and mental health. At the end of the booklet (Appendix Three) we have included a table which summarises the latest guidelines about health behaviours.

# Meaningful Relationships





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## Meaningful Relationships

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Having positive and meaningful relationships are really important for our physical and mental health. Positive social connections can increase our sense of life satisfaction, reduce our risk for several physical diseases and mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety.

**Staying connected:** During the COVID-19 pandemic we have all become familiar with the term 'social distancing'. This is an unfortunate term. What is really meant by this is actually 'physical distancing'. Social connections are needed more than ever during lockdown and people are now using technology to stay connected. Fortunately, technology makes it easy to keep in touch with others even when physically apart. Staying in touch can be as simple as video calling or phoning a friend for a chat.

Research suggests that a video-chat is better for us than a phone call, whilst a phone call is better than a text. This is because hearing familiar voices reduces stress and promotes the release of hormones involved in the formation and maintenance of positive relationships. Hearing familiar voices may be just as important as physical touch in bonding and reducing stress, in that the soothing voice of a loved one resembles a virtual hug! Research indicates that hearing someone's voice provides comfort in ways, which text messaging does not.



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Here are a few free and easy to use tools to help us stay connected:



WhatsApp

**Whatsapp:** Allows unlimited video calling for up to four people at a time. You need to download the app from the App Store. You can also put WhatsApp on your computer to send free text messages. You can only video call using a smartphone.



**Zoom:** Video calling from computer or smartphone; you register for a free account and download 'Zoom'. You can then send a link out so that people can connect to the call. It doesn't require your mobile number – just an email address.



**Skype:** To use Skype, you first need to register for an account before you can use it.



**Facetime:** You and the person you are connecting to must have an apple device (iphone/ipad/mac which will come with FaceTime). It is free and allows for group video calls.

**Activities to build positive relationships:** Connection is essential for positive relationships and wellbeing. The extent to which we are embedded into our social communities is strongly related to how we view the quality of our lives. There are many opportunities to help develop our perceptions of connectedness to others.

**1. Expressing Gratitude:** Expressing gratitude for frontline workers is a fantastic example of community spirit during lockdown. Thousands of people across the world have stood together (although, physically apart) to show their support for frontline workers facing this crisis head-on. For a few short minutes, people feel uplifted, bringing a sense of community and belonging. Expressing our gratitude like this can boost our wellbeing and that of others. In turn, the sense of unity and togetherness that we feel when we connect with others provides further opportunities for wellbeing.

**2. Random Acts of Kindness:** A Random Act of Kindness is simply doing something nice for someone else, without them asking for it and without you doing it for something in return. Ideas of ways to complete Random Acts of Kindness might include cooking a meal for a friend, writing a letter, or sending someone a bunch of flowers. With a little imagination, opportunities are endless.

**3. 'Loving Kindness' Meditation:** Research also demonstrates that a type of meditation called 'loving kindness meditation' can increase the feeling that we are connected with others. For instance, researchers have shown that loving kindness meditation increases positive emotions, which increase the perception that we are connected with others. This meditation is freely available here:

[\[https://www.positivityresonance.com/\\_avideo/Love%20.0%20Meditation%20Loving-Kindness\\_v2.mp3\]](https://www.positivityresonance.com/_avideo/Love%20.0%20Meditation%20Loving-Kindness_v2.mp3).

# Natural Environments

## Natural Environments

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Spending time in nature or bringing nature into your everyday life can benefit your mental and physical wellbeing. Whether you are doing things like growing food or flowers, exercising outdoors or sitting in your garden, being surrounded by nature can positively impact your mood.

Spending as little as ten minutes of sitting or walking in natural settings has positive impacts on mental and physical health. Another study showed that spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. Research also shows that the number of antidepressant prescriptions increase the further people lived from green spaces.



Why not try making the most of our daily outside allowance by going for a walk, take your dog out or spend time in your garden if you have one? You could give meditation a try outside? Or when you are doing your daily exercise incorporate some nature journaling if you can:



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<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Nature-Journal> Journaling helps to reduce stress and improve wellbeing.

**Why does contact with nature help?** Spending time in nature is beneficial for a variety of reasons: physical activity, stress reduction, opportunities for social contact, and building meaning and purpose in life. Spending time in nature can even enhance our feelings of compassion and gratitude towards others! All these reasons tie into other aspects of wellbeing, including mental health benefits of exercise, the need for meaning and purpose in life, and the importance of having positive social ties.

**Take up a small gardening project:** Research shows that gardening can have a variety of beneficial effects. The benefits include building a sense of community, improving life satisfaction and enhancing wellbeing. Even tending to an indoor plant helps create a more calming and peaceful home environment, and improves indoor air quality.

**If you can't get out, then bring nature in:** We can reconnect with nature in various ways, including guided mindfulness activities, even when not actually in the outdoors. The following simple guided nature experience is available on YouTube [[https://youtu.be/S3rMHs-0\\_yk](https://youtu.be/S3rMHs-0_yk)]. All you need to do is ensure that you are in a comfortable position, and simply view the images on screen while following audio instructions.

# Positive Change



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## Positive Change: Making changes that last

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Improving wellbeing often requires us to change our behaviour. For instance, most of us know that we need to eat less and move more! Unfortunately, more often than not, we do not follow this advice, or when we do, we tend to lapse back into old habits. You may have heard the phrase “common knowledge is not common action”. When it comes to changing our behaviour there is a disconnect between what we know and what we do.

### INFORMATION IS NOT TRANSFORMATION

**How to make long lasting changes to our behaviour:** Five common themes help to maintain behaviour change over the long term. We now outline each of these themes to help increase the success of your efforts to improve and maintain improvements to your wellbeing.

**Motives:** Our initial reason to change a behaviour is often not enough to maintain the change in the long term. You are more likely to change your behaviour if you find the new behaviour rewarding or enjoyable. This means you need to find an exercise that you enjoy, or do it with someone to help make it enjoyable. If you want to eat more healthily, it might help you to learn how to make a few healthy meals that taste good.





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**Will power:** Will power is needed in order to change behaviour.

However, will power is a limited resource that requires conscious effort and energy. To make the most of our will power, it can be helpful to think about how we might make the new behaviour easy and the old behaviour more difficult. For example, if we want to eat healthily, we can make this easier by preparing meals for busy times when we know that we will have less willpower. We can remove unhealthy foods from our cupboard and put fruit bowls around the house so that eating unhealthy food is more effortful than eating healthier food. It may also be useful to record progress of a new goal and review progress at a set time. This can provide a sense of achievement that will encourage repetition of the behaviour.

**Habits:** Habits are behaviours that we perform automatically, without even thinking about them; if we had to make a conscious choice about everything we did each day, we would be overwhelmed by breakfast! We do many of our day-to-day tasks on 'autopilot'; we do not have to remind ourselves to get dressed every day, to lock the door when we leave the house, to come home from work etc. We can convert old habits into new desired habits through **repetition**. That is, we need to repeat the new behaviour every day until that new behaviour becomes automatic or second nature. Having a set time will help to establish this behaviour as part of our everyday 'autopilot'. For example, doing exercise on the way to or on the way home from work. The idea is that when a habit is formed the conscious battle to establish the habit will eventually become automatic and effortless.



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**Headspace:** Changing your behaviour is an effortful process. Engaging in some form of meditation, being mindful or giving yourself time to relax can help to reduce sense of feeling overloaded and helps to refocus on your plan. Setting reminders on your phone at certain times during the day can help to remind you to stop and evaluate your progress.

**Environmental Cues:** Forming new habits can be aided through situational cues. For example, having your gym kit in the car and always going to the gym at the same time e.g. on the way to home from work; putting walking shoes and dog lead by the door and always walking your dog at lunchtime; putting bowls of fruit around the house and remembering to take fruit to work. It is also helpful, if possible, to remove cues that trigger previous habits that you are trying to get rid of (i.e. unhealthy food in the cupboards). Think about how you can make the new behaviour as easy as possible and the old behaviour more effortful.

**Social Influences:** Research shows that a supportive social environment can help you change a behaviour. Group membership is helpful; where you can relate to people and share the same goals. If the new behaviour can include opportunities for social connections and positive emotions this will increase the chances that the behaviour is repeated in the long term (i.e. joining a team sport or a support group that makes you feel good).

It is important to remember that relapse is common. It may even be part of the process. You will learn something from relapse which you can use to adapt your plan. At the end of the booklet we have included a 'behavioural change plan' (see Appendix 1) that may help to increase your chances of changing unwanted behaviours.



## Appendix 1: Increasing Optimism

<b>Increasing optimism: The ABCDE model</b>	
<i>When you notice yourself thinking pessimistically, it can be helpful to record your thoughts and see whether you can change the way you are thinking so that it is more helpful and increases your optimism. You don't have to do this forever, just until you get into the swing of it.</i>	
<b>Adversity:</b> What is causing me to stress?	<i>e.g. Making mistakes</i>
<b>Belief:</b> What thoughts am I having about the thing that is causing me stress. Is it permanent and universal? e.g. I <b>always</b> get <b>everything</b> wrong'.	<i>e.g. 'I <b>always</b> get <b>everything</b> wrong'</i>
<b>Consequences:</b> How do I feel when I have these thoughts and what do I do?	<i>e.g. Frustrated and I avoid seeing/talking to people</i>
<b>Disputation:</b> Can I reframe these thoughts? How can I think about them differently? Can I use 'temporary' and 'specific' language instead?	<i>e.g. 'I <b>sometimes</b> forget people's birthdays'</i>
<b>Energising:</b> What did I do differently and how did this make me feel. What did I do?	<i>e.g. I can explain that my injury has affected my memory. I can set reminders on my phone. I can remind myself that I have been though a lot and I am bond to make mistakes but I am learning new ways to do things.</i>



## Appendix 2: Behaviour Change Plan

*If you are thinking about adopting one of the strategies in this booklet and you want to practice it so that it becomes part of your everyday life, here are some key questions that can help you stick to your plan:*

What behaviour do I want to change?	
How am I going to do this? Be specific and start small and build. Focus on one change at a time.	<i>Start small and build up. If you push yourself too hard you won't enjoy it and you are less likely to keep doing it.</i>
How do I make the behaviour rewarding and enjoyable so I am more likely to maintain it in the long term?	<i>What form of exercise do you enjoy</i>
What is my motivation?	
How will I maximise my will power?	<i>If possible choose a time where you have the most energy to do the exercise. Make a plan to support your goal (e.g. preparing healthy meals ahead of time for when you are tired).</i>
Positive emotion can help me better self-regulate. What can I do to build positive emotion into my behaviour and my week generally?	
Having regular breaks in my day will help me stick to my plan. How will I do this?	
How can I make changes to my environment to make it as <b>easy</b> as possible to change my behaviour?	
How can I make changes to my environment to make it as <b>difficult</b> as possible to revert to the behaviour I am trying to change?	



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How can I form a habit? How can I make my new behaviour routine?	<i>i.e: Chose a consistent time to help you form a habit or link the change to an existing habit</i>
Can I tell my social support network how I want them to support me?	
Can I join a group with people with same goals?	



## Appendix Three

<b>A Summary of guidelines: NHS (2019) and Kromhout et al. (2015)</b>	
<b>Diet: Fruit, Vegetables &amp; Fibre</b>	At <u>least</u> 5 x 80g portions a day but more if you can. Eat beans and pulses weekly. Eat at least 90g portions of whole-grain products daily, and avoid refined products. Try to eat more plant based and less animal-based foods.
<b>Diet: Other</b>	Include some dairy or dairy alternatives in your diet daily. Eat at least 15g portion of unsalted nuts daily. Eat oily fish weekly. Limit red meat and especially processed meat consumption. Eat eggs in moderation and limit salt intake to 6g daily.
<b>Beverages</b>	Less than 14 units of alcohol per week. Three cups of green or black tea daily is beneficial.
<b>Physical Activity</b>	Any type of physical activity is good for you, the more you do the better! Aim for 150 minutes of aerobic exercise a week, plus at least 2 x strength training sessions. Doing just 15 minutes of vigorous activity a day – as a starting point – can have significant health benefits. Try to break up long periods of time sitting or lying with some activity
<b>Sleep</b>	Keep regular sleeping hours, aim for 6-9 hours a night depending on your needs.