

# LESSON 1 HOW A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE CAN IMPACT ON PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Health is more than just the absence of disease or illness. Both physical health and mental health underlie our overall sense of wellbeing. Health is all aspects of our being including the social, emotional, psychological, spiritual, mental and physical parts.

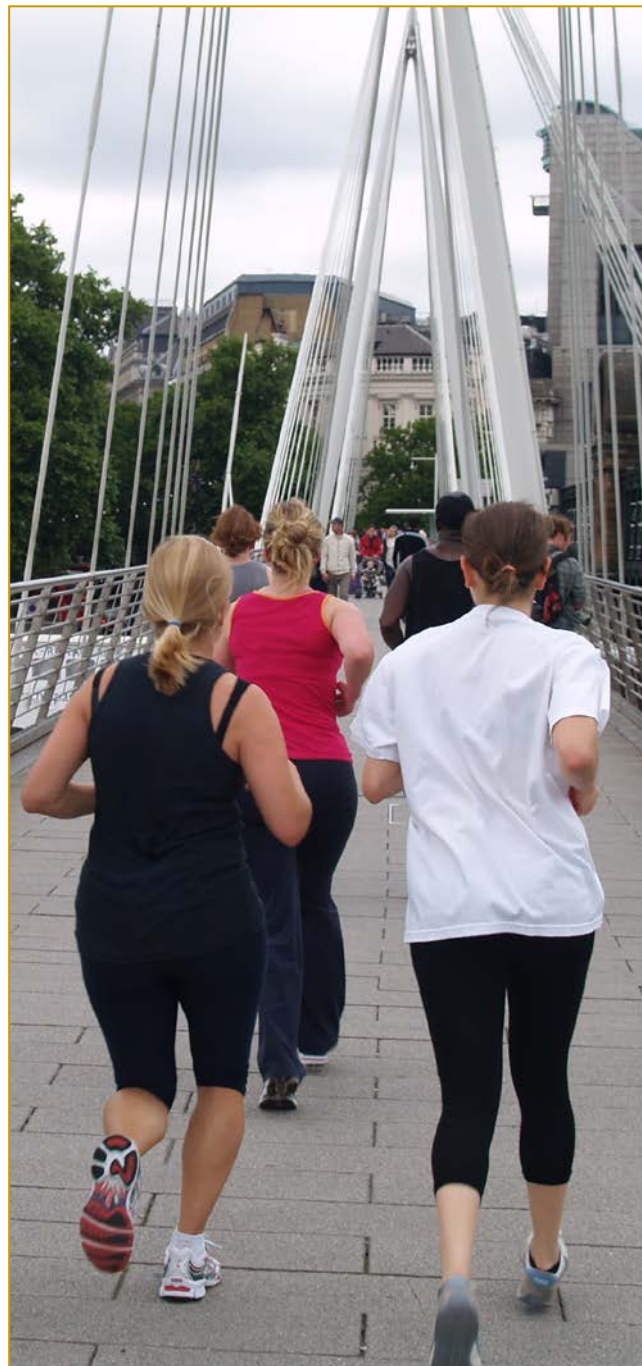
## HEALTH

The mind and body are inextricably linked - a decline in one correlates with a decline in the other. If we are mentally stressed, this can affect our physical body. If we are physically tired or feeling ill, this in turn can affect our mind and emotions.

## DEFINITIONS OF HEALTH

But what do we mean by health? If we look at a purely physical definition of health, we could say that this when our body is free from injury or illness. But when we also take account of our mental health, we could state that it is our body and mind's condition. The World Health Organisation stresses the importance of the mental aspect of health in their definition.

*“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”*



### Suggested Tasks: ▼

*Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.*

## STRESS & HEALTH

Stress is linked to a range of different physical conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, headaches, infectious diseases, gastric ulcers, and so on.

But firstly, what do we mean by stress? Our bodies are primed to protect themselves. If we perceive a threat, our body reacts. It gets our muscles ready, our heart rate up, our adrenaline up, and so on - we prepare to run away from the threat or to fight the threat. This is known as the 'fight-or-flight' response.

The fight-or-flight response, also known as the acute stress response, was first described by Cannon in the 1920s. He was expressing how all animals react to stress. When animals first experience stress, there are specific physiological reactions in the sympathetic nervous system in response to the release of adrenaline and noradrenaline (epinephrine and norepinephrine) from the medulla of the adrenal glands. This is triggered by acetylcholine released from the sympathetic nervous system.

This release leads to physical reactions such as:

- Increased heart rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Constriction of blood vessels
- Tightening muscles

These responses prepare us for action. But we may not be facing situations that we can run away from or fight. If we have had a bad day at the office, it's probably not a good idea to punch your

A psychologist called Marie Jahoda (1958) identified six characteristics of ideal mental health:

- Having positive self-esteem and a strong sense of identity.
- Personal growth - using our abilities to fulfil potential.
- Having good relationships - giving and receiving affection and warmth.
- Being able to be autonomous, relying on our inner strength and judgements.
- A good perception of reality - being realistic.
- Mastery of our environment – being able to adapt to our environment, use problem solving in different situations.

Jahoda suggested that these things are needed in order for people to live their lives optimally, get the most enjoyment from them and give back to society.

The Mental Health Foundation (UK) state that if you are in good mental health, you can –

*“Make the most of your potential, cope with life, play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends.”*

All of these definitions are quite loose and so they can be adapted to different cultures.

## LEARN MORE >>>

### Suggested Tasks

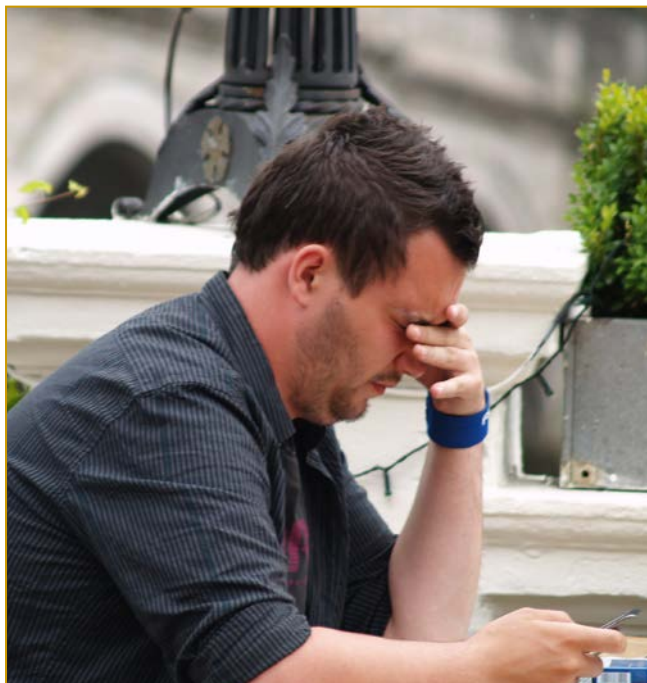
Write down your own definitions for:

- Health psychology
- Mental health
- Health & wellbeing

Now search online and read several definitions for each of the above. How do your own definitions compare?

boss or hit your computer. And you can't really run away from work and so this stress has nowhere to go. So people living stressful lives can experience chronic stress because their body is ready to run or fight most of the time, but is not able to do anything about it.

Our lifestyle impacts on both our physical and mental health. Drugs, caffeine, alcohol, our diet, exercise levels, amount of sleep, age, gender and medication can also affect how we feel mentally and physically. This can also influence our stress levels. If we feel stressed we will often use coping mechanisms in order to deal with that stress. If these coping mechanisms are unhealthy, it can actually make our physical and mental health worse. For example, some people drink too much, take drugs, eat too much or smoke when they are stressed and these are poor choices. If instead they were to exercise to relieve stress or use relaxation techniques they would be doing their body a favour. Positive coping mechanisms relieve symptoms of stress without causing detrimental effects.



## EXERCISE

Exercise is useful to reduce stress. As well as stress, it can also reduce a person's risk of other major illnesses, such as strokes, diabetes, heart disease and cancer by up to 50%. But today so many of us have less exercise than we should. We drive to places when we could walk. We may have jobs that require us to sit down on a computer for hours of the day, we may watch TV instead of go for a walk, or play video games instead of playing netball or football, and so on. The UK Department of Health call this sedentary life style – the “silent killer”.

*“If exercise were a pill, it would be one of the most cost-effective drugs ever invented”*

*(Dr Nick Cavill,  
Health Promotion Expert)*

There is a lot of scientific evidence to show that leading a physically active life can lead to a healthier and happier life, reducing the risk of a lot of chronic disease, as mentioned above. But we can also improve our mental health with physical activity. Physical activity can boost our self-esteem, boost our mood, improve the quality of our sleep, increase our energy and also reduce the risk of stress, dementia, depression and Alzheimer's Disease.

The National Health Service in the UK have conducted research and found the following benefits from regular activity.

- 35% lower risk of stroke and coronary heart disease



- 50% lower risk of type 2 diabetes
- 50% lower risk of colon cancer
- 20% lower risk of breast cancer
- 30% lower risk of early death
- 83% lower risk of osteoarthritis
- 68% lower risk of hip fracture
- 30% lower risk of falls in older adults

But also they found there was a 30% lower risk of depression and a 30% lower risk of dementia.

So, how much exercise is required to improve a person's physical and mental health? The National Health Service suggests that moderate intensity aerobic activity is the most important form of exercise. This means you are working hard enough to break a sweat and raise your heart rate. This includes activities such as walking fast, pushing a lawn mower, or playing tennis. They suggest that 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity aerobic activity is important.



## WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BODY WHEN WE EXERCISE?

Our mind and body work together. Our mind works well when our body works well and vice versa, so the state of our mind affects the state of our body.

Think about it, when you are tired or fed up, you do less, so you feel more tired and depressed, then you miss out on things you might enjoy, so you feel more tired and depressed. It is a vicious circle. The more anxious and low you feel, the less active you become. So for our mind to work properly, we need to ensure that our body is working properly. We can do this by eating well and taking care of ourselves. Exercise is an important part of this.

People can often be turned off by the thought of exercise for many reasons:

- They weren't good at sport at school
- They are unfit
- People might look at them
- They are not used to exercise
- They don't want to feel sweaty or uncomfortable
- They don't like their body
- It's expensive
- It's boring
- They don't want to go alone.

## LEARN MORE >>>

### Suggested Tasks

Use the list of reasons why people may choose not to exercise listed on this page.

For each point, write a counterpoint showing how a person can think more positively about exercise.

For example, "They weren't good at sport at school."

Counterpoint: "It's not a competition, and it's not about being good at it. It's about improving your health and fitness and taking it as fast or slow as you like."