

A guide to what works for mental wellbeing

An evidence review of interventions



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Foreword

Beyond Blue is proud to deliver A Guide to What Works for Mental Wellbeing, an evidence review of interventions that can help improve a person's mental wellbeing.

Beyond Blue's role is to work with the community to improve mental health and make it easier for people to feel better earlier, get well and stay well.

This guide responds to recent community insights that show people want clearer, trusted advice on how to take action to improve their mental wellbeing. This guide can be used by services and supports to build mental wellbeing as an important part of improving mental health.

Mental wellbeing includes positive aspects of how people feel, function, and reflect on their lives, including experiencing positive emotions, connection and a sense of meaning and purpose. All people can experience mental wellbeing, which is associated with a range of positive benefits. This includes improved learning, creativity and productivity, more pro-social behaviour, better relationships, and improved physical health and life expectancy.

High levels of mental wellbeing are also associated with lower rates of mental health conditions, so working on our mental wellbeing can help people prevent or manage mental health conditions. There are many people who live with mental health conditions and have developed strong mental wellbeing, which helps them live meaningful and contributing lives. There are also people who have low mental wellbeing but do not meet the criteria for a mental health condition. This is referred to as *languishing*, which can increase the risk of developing a mental health condition in the future if left unaddressed.

That's where this evidence review can help. **Developed by the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI), this guide spotlights more than 20 interventions that have strong evidence for improving a person's mental wellbeing.** It provides useful explanation of current research to encourage wider use of mental wellbeing interventions. The guide has been designed for people seeking reliable information based on a high standard of evidence, to inform future research, and for practitioners working in a variety of fields including in health, mental health, community wellbeing and program design. The targeted focus of this review on published, peer-reviewed intervention studies complements other knowledge sources, such as reports in the grey literature, to help inform decision making in policy and practice.

We also encourage people to explore our Wellbeing Action Tool, a free, user-friendly, and practical tool to help people take action to improve their mental wellbeing. This tool complements the great work of others in the sector and offers unique value due to its focus on encouraging personal, meaningful wellbeing actions underpinned by community and lived-experience co-design.

This approach to mental wellbeing is one part of a broader understanding of the factors that influence mental health, and focusses on 'interventions' individuals can participate in, to improve their mental wellbeing. **Our mental health is shaped by individual, community and societal factors, past and present, that vary in each person's life. These include secure housing; feeling safe and respected at home and in the community; educational opportunities; positive organisational settings including workplaces, schools and aged care; good food on the table; healthy sleep and physical activity; access to healthcare including mental health supports; social connection; and a sense of purpose in daily life.**

We encourage readers to embrace this guide to help enable a greater focus on mental wellbeing. This is a step towards Beyond Blue's vision: that all people in Australia achieve their best possible mental health. By working together to promote mental wellbeing, we can make it easier for people to feel better earlier, get well and stay well.

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About the authors

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The information in this document is general advice only. The advice within it may therefore not apply to your circumstances and is not intended to replace the advice of a healthcare professional. References are located at the end of the document.

What is mental wellbeing?

Improving mental wellbeing can support mental health, including for people experiencing a mental health condition.

There is more to mental health than the absence of a mental health condition.

According to the World Health Organisation, mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.

Mental wellbeing is a component of mental health. It can be understood as how people feel and how they function on a personal and social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.

As a part of the development of this guide, community members provided insights regarding current scientific definitions of mental wellbeing. This included the voices of people with lived experience of mental health conditions. Feedback from this discussion reflected the following understanding of mental wellbeing:

Mental wellbeing is a state where we view ourselves and our lives positively. It's a personal and subjective experience that can involve meaningful connection with others, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing feelings of optimism.

Our mental wellbeing goes up and down and is influenced by the way we adapt to the challenges we face. It's impacted by our environment, life experiences, cultural background and behaviours.

Everyone has a level of mental wellbeing, and we can improve it by taking action, even when we experience a mental health condition.

A greater focus on mental wellbeing has potential benefits for all.

When someone experiences mental wellbeing, they often have better connections with others, can manage their emotions and feel greater optimism, and acknowledge a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

A well-established body of research shows that mental wellbeing is linked to a wide range of benefits.

Some of these benefits include:

- better physical health
- improvements in quality of life
- reducing the risk of developing a mental health condition
- improvements for people experiencing a mental health condition



Mental wellbeing and mental health conditions

There is value in understanding the relationship between mental wellbeing and mental health conditions.

All people, including those experiencing a mental health condition, can experience mental wellbeing and live meaningful and contributing lives. This is supported by feedback from people with a mental health condition and the scientific research.

For example, a person managing an ongoing mental health condition in a non-acute phase, such as anxiety, bipolar disorder or PTSD, may also experience a strong sense of purpose, daily enjoyment, good relationships, and work on their self-development – all of which contribute positively to mental wellbeing. Positive mental wellbeing may help the person to manage their mental health condition, and experience better mental health overall.

This way of thinking about our mental health has important implications for the services we design and the types of care we provide. It means we need to adopt a considered approach to improving mental wellbeing. We cannot take interventions designed for mental health conditions and think they will automatically work to build mental wellbeing, and vice versa.

This guide contributes to our understanding by providing insights on interventions targeted at the individual to improve mental wellbeing, across multiple sources of evidence.

How this guide was developed

This guide summarises the findings of a review of the scientific literature on interventions to improve mental wellbeing.

Evaluating the evidence

The team undertook an umbrella review, sometimes called a ‘review of reviews’, aimed at discovering effective interventions to improve mental wellbeing.

For clarity, this review did not capture the results of individual studies or other research not published in peer-reviewed journals, such as grey literature. That is, the search was focused on previously published reviews.

This type of review is an efficient way to capture results of large and diverse research fields and is considered one of the highest levels of evidence quality. This approach was adopted for two main reasons:

- To manage the expected high volume of identified studies across multiple types of interventions. For example, a recent systematic review of psychological interventions resulted in 23,038 references to review.
- To establish the existing evidence base with confidence, to ensure this review is a trusted source of credible information on mental wellbeing interventions.

In early 2023, the scientific literature was searched systematically on the following online databases: PsycINFO, Scopus, Pubmed/Medline and CINAHL.

The review was deliberately broad. It looked at reviews on any type of intervention (for example, systematic reviews summarising the effect of mindfulness or social prescribing on mental wellbeing). When the evidence presented within the reviews of interventions was limited or conflicting, the team conducted

a manual search for individual studies for those interventions to ensure that the evidence was not misrepresented.

Interventions for depression and anxiety

Reviews were included in the report if they were explicitly focused on mental wellbeing and included studies with dedicated measures of mental wellbeing as outcomes.

This review speaks to impact on outcomes of mental wellbeing only. While the interventions may also have a benefit on other outcomes, such as depression or anxiety, this is not considered in this review.

To learn more about which interventions work for depression or anxiety, see [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue’s resource library online.

A focus on intervention studies

This study looked at interventions to improve mental wellbeing. We looked at reviews with methodologies that allowed us to determine what someone can tangibly do or implement to positively influence mental wellbeing. For example, this means we looked at reviews that tested the impact of interventions, programs or initiatives as tested by randomised controlled studies or pre-post studies.

For this reason, **this guide does not list everything that may be good for a person’s mental wellbeing. There are lots of things that are important for mental wellbeing, but they have not been studied in intervention studies, so could not be included in the current report.** For example, observational studies have shown that certain behaviours, such as healthy eating, are on average

associated with mental wellbeing, however such findings are outside the scope of the methodology of this report.

As a result, some of the evidence ratings in this guide may come as a surprise. Remember, this does not mean that something is not good for mental wellbeing. Rather, it indicates where more intervention research may be needed.

It is important to note that research on mental wellbeing is significantly less mature than other areas of mental health, such as depression and anxiety. **Over time, with a maturing evidence base, we hope to see more interventions, programs and initiatives that reliably improve mental wellbeing.**

Cultural background and mental wellbeing

Our cultural background shapes our identity and our sense of belonging in our community.

Our cultural background influences our mental wellbeing and the things we can do to improve mental wellbeing.

Many scientific studies on mental wellbeing have been conducted in Western countries, which leads to caution when trying to translate the evidence to other cultures. Considerable effort has been taken to testing (at least a subset of) mental wellbeing interventions in different countries, among people with various ethnicities and within different cultural contexts.

This report will outline the insights from these studies when describing the evidence for different types of interventions.

Social and emotional wellbeing and First Nations Peoples

First Nations Peoples have a holistic view of health and mental health. Mental health is thought of in terms of social and emotional wellbeing.

In First Nations communities, social and emotional wellbeing is underpinned by the connections between spiritual, cultural, social, emotional, physical and community influences on health. Family and community relationships are the basis of culture and are important to community wellbeing. This holistic view of social and emotional wellbeing is a strength of first nations communities.

The concepts of 'social and emotional wellbeing' and 'mental wellbeing' share overlap - for example with their emphasis on strengths and resourcefulness. However, social and emotional wellbeing focuses on broader conceptualisations about the quality of a person's life rather than the factors that influence mental wellbeing. Furthermore, mental wellbeing research for First Nations Peoples often uses distinct research methodologies.

As such, this report does not focus on social and emotional wellbeing, which would benefit from a dedicated report that does justice to the growing body of literature on improving the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations Peoples.

How to use this guide

Each intervention in this guide is rated based on the strength of its evidence and what the research indicates about its effectiveness.

All the interventions in this guide have been investigated as possible approaches to improve mental wellbeing. However, the amount of evidence supporting the effectiveness of different interventions can vary greatly.

Understanding the evidence quality ratings

We have rated the quality of the evidence for each intervention covered in this guide using a 'thumbs' scale. It's important to note the rating scale indicates the strength of the evidence base, not how effective the intervention is. So, regardless of the number of thumbs an intervention receives, a 'thumbs up' indicates there is evidence that it will improve mental wellbeing.

We have also rated the evidence for interventions that improve mental wellbeing in population groups, looking at general populations and clinical populations. By clinical populations, we mean people with a mental health condition or experiencing current symptoms of poor mental health, such as anxiety or depression.

Evidence quality ratings



There are three or more systematic reviews, including at least one meta-analysis, showing that the intervention improves mental wellbeing.



There are 2 or more systematic reviews showing that the intervention improves mental wellbeing.



There is one systematic review showing that the Intervention improves mental wellbeing.



Although the systematic reviews on the topic had inconclusive results, at least 2 high-quality studies indicate that there is emerging evidence that the intervention improves mental wellbeing.



There either is not enough evidence or the evidence is currently unclear as to whether the intervention improves mental wellbeing.



There is evidence to suggest that the intervention does not lead to a meaningful improvement in mental wellbeing.

Evidence in populations



Evidence shows that the intervention improves mental wellbeing for general populations



There is insufficient evidence from this review that the intervention improves mental wellbeing for general populations.



Evidence shows the intervention improves mental wellbeing for clinical populations.



There is insufficient evidence from this review that the intervention improves mental wellbeing for clinical populations.

Glossary

Systematic review: A systematic review attempts to identify and review all of the relevant evidence to answer a given research question.

Meta-analysis: A statistical process for bringing together data from different studies, which have investigated the same issue, to find common results and identify overall trends.

Narrative review: A narrative or traditional literature review is a comprehensive and objective analysis of the current knowledge on a topic.

General populations: The evidence has been assessed for interventions that improve the mental wellbeing of people generally, without determining effectiveness for specific subpopulations (e.g., people experiencing a mental health condition).

Clinical populations: The evidence has been assessed for interventions that improve the mental wellbeing of people with a mental health condition, or experiencing current symptoms of poor mental health, such as anxiety or depression. For clarity, this review did not examine the impact of the intervention on improving symptoms of mental health conditions. Further, in this context, 'clinical' is not referring to other physical and medical conditions.

Key considerations for the findings in this guide

The points below reinforce the key considerations for interpreting the findings of this guide:
















This review looks at the impact of the interventions listed on an individual's mental wellbeing. It does not look at the impact of these interventions on other mental health concepts, such as symptoms of depression or anxiety.

This review looks at impact on overall mental wellbeing. It does not look at the impact on specific components of wellbeing (for example, a sense of purpose, relationships or autonomy).

This review sets a high bar for evidence by predominantly examining systematic reviews. This is to ensure that we present the interventions with the strongest evidence behind them, and build confidence that this review is a trusted source of information on mental wellbeing interventions.

A summary of what works for mental wellbeing

Interventions

Social prescribing interventions	
Physical activity interventions	
Nutrition and diet interventions	
Art interventions	
Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)	
Life coaching interventions	
Cognitive therapy (CT) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)	
Compassion interventions	
Expressive writing interventions	
Forgiveness interventions	
Mindfulness interventions	
Positive psychological interventions (PPIs): multi-component. Note: Many studies have tested the impact of individual positive psychological interventions. The results of these are on page 28 .	
Psycho-educational interventions	
Reminiscence interventions	
Dance interventions	

Yoga interventions



Gardening interventions



Leisure-based interventions



Nature-based interventions



Pro-social interventions






Social support interventions



Interventions

A decorative graphic consisting of a large, smooth, wavy shape that spans across the middle of the page. The shape is filled with a gradient of blue, transitioning from a lighter, vibrant blue on the left side to a darker, more muted blue on the right side. The wave starts high on the left, dips down towards the center, and then rises again towards the right before tapering off.

Social prescribing interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Social prescribing interventions involve connecting people with non-medical resources and services in their community that could support mental wellbeing.

These services include social groups, community centres, exercise programs, volunteering opportunities and other activities that are known to have positive impacts on mental wellbeing.

How is it meant to work?

Social prescribing interventions are focused on increasing a sense of social connection. When someone engages with a social prescribing intervention, they may experience a sense of belonging and social connectedness, resulting in increased mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Three systematic reviews and meta-analyses and 3 narrative systematic reviews, ranging from 3 to 11 studies, reported that social prescribing interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing.

There is a lot of variation in what can be considered a social prescribing intervention.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes, although most social prescribing interventions are delivered over a longer period.




Are there any risks?

None are known.

Recommendation

Social prescribing interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing. More clarity on the definition of a social prescribing intervention would help with better understanding its effects.

Physical activity interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Physical activity interventions are programs or strategies designed to increase or change the level of physical activity. These interventions may involve structured exercise programs, such as aerobics or weightlifting, or more informal activities, like walking or swimming.

How is it meant to work?

Physical activity interventions are designed to work by helping people achieve and maintain a healthy level of physical activity.

By getting more exercise and moving more regularly, people can improve their cardiovascular health, strengthen their bones and muscles, and reduce their risk of chronic diseases. These immediate and long-term health benefits drive positive mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Five reviews including 7 meta-analyses and 5 narrative systematic reviews, with review sizes ranging from 4 to 48 studies, showed that physical activity interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing. These studies were conducted among people not experiencing a mental health condition (general population), as well as among those experiencing mental health symptoms (clinical population).

The research found that physical activity interventions were effective across age groups and were most effective in improving the mental wellbeing of middle-aged adults and people who are sedentary.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research suggested that aerobic and resistance-based exercise may be more effective compared with calisthenic (bodyweight) exercises. One review that focused on high intensity interval training (HIIT) did not find a significant impact on mental wellbeing.

Are there any risks?




None are known.

Recommendation

Physical activity interventions are highly effective at improving mental wellbeing for general and clinical populations.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

Nutrition and diet interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

Recommendation

Increasing fruit and vegetable intake may improve mental wellbeing. Further evidence is recommended to assess how diet and nutrition interventions may improve mental wellbeing.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

What is it?

Nutrition and diet interventions aim to positively influence the consumption of food or nutrients to benefit mental wellbeing.

How is it meant to work?

Nutrition and diet interventions take different approaches, including providing general education about healthy eating and portion control, encouraging whole-of-diet changes (for example, switching to a Mediterranean diet), increasing intake of specific nutrients and vitamins (for example, vitamin C), providing advice on personalised meal planning and maintaining healthy eating habits.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One review indicated that eating more fruit and vegetables can improve mental wellbeing in general population. In this research, it was not clear if people experiencing a mental health condition (clinical populations) also benefited.

A second review that looked at intake of vitamin D did not indicate an improvement in mental wellbeing.




Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

Art interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

Recommendation

Art interventions are effective at improving the wellbeing of general populations and clinical populations.

What is it?

Art interventions use various art forms, such as drawing, painting, music or drama, as a therapeutic tool to improve mental wellbeing.

How is it meant to work?

Art interventions are meant to provide a creative outlet for people to express their thoughts, emotions and experiences. They may stimulate flow.

Art interventions can also act as a nonverbal form of communication, allowing people to express their feelings in ways that may be difficult to do through words.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One meta-analysis and 5 narrative systematic reviews, ranging from 6 to 17 studies, found that art interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing in those not experiencing a mental health condition (general population) and those experiencing mental health symptoms (clinical populations).

Amongst sub-populations, the reviews found that art interventions can be effective in older adults and caregivers.




Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a form of psychotherapy that teaches people the benefits of responding to unpleasant thoughts and feelings in a mindful and accepting way.

Although it has roots in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), ACT emphasises practising acceptance and non-judgment over learning to change unpleasant thoughts and feelings. (Cognitive behavioural therapy interventions are discussed on [page 22](#).)

How is it meant to work?

Acceptance and commitment therapy interventions are based on the idea that trying to avoid or control difficult thoughts and feelings often makes them worse. Instead, ACT teaches people to practise psychological flexibility.

When someone is psychologically inflexible, they can get trapped in impulsive and reactive ways of thinking or behaving. By becoming psychologically flexible, people learn to make decisions and behave in a way that is consistent with their goals and values, even in the face of difficult thoughts, feelings, memories and experiences. This in turn can lead to an improvement in their mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Five reviews, including 6 meta-analyses, indicated that ACT interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing among general populations and among clinical populations. Reviews ranged in size from 3 studies to 12 studies.

Reviews specifically found that ACT interventions delivered in workplaces and universities can improve mental wellbeing.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

Acceptance and commitment therapy interventions were shown to be effective when delivered in a variety of formats, including individual (one-on-one) delivery and group-based programs. One review that focused on ACT-based smartphone apps found them to be effective at improving mental wellbeing. In general, it was shown that longer, more intensive formats were the most effective.

Are there any risks?




There are no major risks associated with ACT interventions. When working with clinical populations, it is recommended to involve a trained mental health professional.

Recommendation

Acceptance and commitment therapy interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing among general populations and clinical populations.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

Life coaching interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Through life coaching interventions, people learn to work on personal development and goal achievement to benefit their mental wellbeing.

As life coaching interventions focus on personal development, they are generally applied in non-clinical settings.

How is it meant to work?

Individuals work with a life coach to learn mental wellbeing strategies for enhancing particular areas of their life.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One review of 8 studies indicated that the evidence on the effectiveness of life coaching interventions on mental wellbeing was not yet conclusive. As several high-quality individual studies support the impact of life coaching on mental wellbeing, the evidence is graded as emerging.

Currently there is emerging positive evidence for those not experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition (general populations) and insufficient evidence for those experiencing a mental health condition (clinical populations).

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The review did not provide any guidance on implementation. In general, life coaching interventions tend to be conducted one-on-one and require intensive contact over a longer period of time to be effective.

Are there any risks?




None are known.

Recommendation

Life coaching as an intervention to improve mental wellbeing has good emerging evidence for general populations. More evidence is encouraged for clinical populations.

Note: In some instances, psychological interventions with a stronger evidence base – such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – may be referred to as ‘coaching’. For example, Beyond Blue NewAccess mental health coaching programs use an evidence based Low intensity CBT Intervention, based on the successful Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) model in the UK (adapted for Australia).

Cognitive therapy (CT) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Interventions that use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques aim to help individuals manage negative or unhelpful thought patterns that can negatively impact their mental wellbeing.

How is it meant to work?

CBT-based interventions are grounded in the idea that the way people think affects the way they feel and behave. Using different exercises or techniques, participants identify and work on automatic negative thoughts and beliefs that are contributing to poor mental health.

Although CBT-based interventions have traditionally been used to help treat mental health conditions, they can also be used to help improve mental wellbeing. For example, experiencing problematic thoughts can affect aspects of mental wellbeing, such as making it more difficult to experience a sense of purpose or self-acceptance.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

CBT-based interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing. Reviews ranged in size from including 9 to 17 studies.

The evidence mainly supports their use among people in clinical populations, with evidence in general populations being inconclusive.

Most reviews do not test for the impact of CBT-based interventions among the general population. The one review that did concluded that there was inconclusive evidence for their

use in the general population. One review found that CBT-based interventions are effective at improving the mental wellbeing of older adults.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not provide much guidance on implementation. Generally, more intensive interventions delivered over a longer period of time lead to better outcomes. One review found that CBT-based smartphone apps can be effective at improving mental wellbeing.

It should be noted that many of the psychological interventions described in this report include techniques from CBT-based interventions, such as positive psychological interventions and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (mindfulness interventions are discussed on [page 26](#)).

These are effective at improving mental wellbeing general populations, indicating that combining CBT-based techniques with other approaches can be recommended.

Are there any risks?




CBT-based interventions are generally considered safe. When working with clinical populations, it's recommended to involve a trained mental health professional.

Recommendation

CBT-based interventions are an effective approach to improving the mental wellbeing of individuals with symptoms of a mental health condition. To improve the mental wellbeing of people in the general population, CBT-based intervention techniques should be combined with other approaches – for example, with mindfulness or positive psychology techniques.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

Compassion interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

Recommendation

While compassion-based interventions can lead to improvements in mental wellbeing in the general population, more evidence is recommended to be certain of the effect for general populations and to understand the impact for clinical populations.

What is it?

Compassion interventions focus on increasing compassion to oneself or others, for instance by noticing moments of struggle and responding in supportive and considerate ways. These interventions include compassion-focused therapy and interventions that focus on self-compassion.

How is it meant to work?

Compassion interventions are based on the idea that being compassionate to oneself or others is an essential component of mental wellbeing. Compassion interventions often include skills that teach an individual to be more understanding and accepting of themselves and others. It should be noted that compassion techniques are often used in combination with other approaches, such as mindfulness.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One review with a meta-analysis of 9 studies showed that compassion-based interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing in general populations. There is insufficient evidence in clinical populations.





Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The review did not provide any guidance on implementation. Typically, compassion interventions are delivered in multiple sessions over a longer period of time.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

Expressive writing interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

Recommendation

Expressive writing interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing in the general population.

What is it?

Expressive writing interventions are a form of therapeutic writing where people record their thoughts and feelings about a particular event or topic.

How is it meant to work?

By inviting people to put their thoughts and feelings into words, expressive writing interventions aim to foster clarity and insight into someone's experiences, allowing them to process and express their emotions. This in turn may lead to improved mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two reviews with meta-analyses showed that expressive writing interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing in general populations. There is insufficient evidence for sub-populations or clinical populations.

One review that looked specifically at positive writing, where participants focused on writing only about positive events, found it was not effective at improving mental wellbeing.





Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any specific guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.

Are there any risks?

While expressive writing interventions are generally considered safe. Writing about negative events or experiences can be uncomfortable and especially so for traumatic experiences.

Forgiveness interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

What is it?

Forgiveness interventions aim to help people overcome feelings of resentment, anger and bitterness towards others who have hurt or wronged them. These interventions use techniques from more formal approaches, such as forgiveness therapy.

How is it meant to work?

Forgiveness interventions can involve a range of techniques and strategies, including empathy-building, perspective-taking and cognitive restructuring, to help people develop more positive attitudes and emotions towards those who have caused them harm, ultimately aiming to improve their mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two meta-analyses of 5 and 6 studies found mixed evidence on the ability of forgiveness interventions to improve mental wellbeing. While the results from one review were inconclusive, the other review documented a significant positive effect supporting forgiveness interventions to improve mental wellbeing.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the impact of forgiveness interventions to improve mental wellbeing for sub-populations or in people experiencing a mental health condition (clinical populations).

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes. However, it appears that forgiveness interventions may be more effective when delivered in groups compared with one-on-one delivery.




Are there any risks?

While forgiveness interventions are generally considered safe, it should be considered that focusing on negative past events can be overwhelming and uncomfortable.

Recommendation

Forgiveness interventions may lead to improvements in mental wellbeing in general populations. However, more evidence is recommended to be certain of the effect.

Mindfulness interventions

Evidence rating	
General Populations	
Clinical Populations	

What is it?

Mindfulness interventions are practices or exercises that help people cultivate greater awareness and acceptance of their present-moment experiences. These interventions involve training people to focus on and explore their thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations without judgment or reactivity.

Mindfulness interventions stem from Eastern meditation principles, but current-day techniques extend beyond pure meditation.

How is it meant to work?

Mindfulness interventions are designed to help people observe their experiences without judgement or trying to control their impact. The aim is for people to better manage their emotions and enjoy greater mental wellbeing on a day-to-day basis.

Mindfulness activities come in many forms, including guided meditations, mindful breathing exercises and body scans, and are often grouped together in formal programs. They are often delivered as part of, or together with, other interventions such as CBT-based interventions and nature-based interventions.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Tested in a wide variety of populations and formats, mindfulness interventions are backed by one of the largest bodies of evidence supporting their effectiveness on improving mental wellbeing.

Sixteen reviews including 31 meta-analyses and 13 narrative reviews showed that mindfulness interventions are highly effective at improving mental wellbeing. Review sizes ranged from 3 studies to 56 studies.

The research found mindfulness interventions are generally effective across age groups and gender. Mindfulness has been successfully studied in a number of contexts, such as workplaces, caring relationships, family relationships and across cultural groups.

While mindfulness interventions have been studied in schools and universities, the research to date found conflicting evidence for their effectiveness in these specific settings.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research found that a number of mindfulness intervention protocols are effective, including mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction. One review found that the effectiveness of loving kindness meditation on improving mental wellbeing is not yet conclusive.

One review focused on self-guided formats, including print and digital resources, and showed effectiveness at improving mental wellbeing. The amount of benefit was smaller (on average) than more intense interventions delivered in person and over a longer period of time.






Are there any risks?

Mindfulness interventions are generally considered safe and effective for most people. They encourage people to notice what they've experiencing in the present moment, either pleasant or unpleasant. However, they may not work for everyone. When delivering mindfulness interventions to those experiencing a mental health condition (clinical population), it is recommended to do so under the guidance of a trained mental health professional.

Recommendation

Mindfulness interventions are highly effective at improving mental wellbeing in general populations, as well as clinical populations, with a robust evidence base supporting a wide number of approaches and delivery formats.

Positive psychological interventions (PPIs): multi-component

Evidence rating				
General Populations		Clinical Populations		

What is it?

Positive psychological interventions (PPIs) are programs aimed at increasing positive feelings and thoughts. They are named as such because they fall within a field of scientific study called 'positive psychology'.

Positive psychological interventions labelled as 'multi-component' include several positive psychological activities that form part of a larger program or intervention (see [page 28](#) for a breakdown of individual PPIs).

Also included in this grouping are more formal approaches, such as wellbeing therapy, which aims to apply positive psychology principles in a clinical context for people who are diagnosed with a mental health condition.

How is it meant to work?

Multi-component PPIs combine various PPIs into a program that is delivered over a longer period of time.

Positive psychological interventions are specifically designed to increase positive emotions by emphasising and working with positive thoughts, experiences and personal characteristics. This in turn enhances overall mental wellbeing.

Activities may include a combination of the individual PPIs identified on [page 28](#), including working on values and character strengths.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Eleven reviews including 16 meta-analyses, with review sizes ranging from 5 to 293

studies, and 9 narrative reviews demonstrated that multicomponent PPIs are effective at improving mental wellbeing for general and clinical populations.

In addition to mindfulness, this type of intervention to date has the most significant evidence base for improving mental wellbeing.

Reviews indicated that multicomponent PPIs are equally effective in clinical and general populations across cultures. Other reviews indicated that PPIs are effective across age and gender.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

Evidence indicates more intense programs are more effective than shorter programs. Unguided and less intensive approaches like online delivery, however, can still be effective at improving mental wellbeing.

Multi-component PPIs can be successfully delivered using group-based formats. Among clinical populations, more intensive and formal programs can lead to significant improvements in mental wellbeing.

Multicomponent PPIs have been successfully tested within workplaces and universities. One area where evidence is not strong relates to the role of multicomponent PPIs within schools, with reviews not always providing positive results. Like mindfulness interventions, this may partly reflect issues with implementation and testing, rather than the benefit of PPIs.

Are there any risks?

Generally, multicomponent PPIs are considered safe and low risk among general and clinical populations.

Recommendation

Multicomponent PPIs are effective at improving mental wellbeing among general populations and clinical populations, bolstered by an extensive and robust evidence base.

Positive psychological interventions (PPIs): single

What is it?

Rather than provided as part of larger programs or interventions, positive psychological interventions (PPIs) are often prescribed as single activities focusing on a specific area.

Instead of treating these as separate interventions, it is better to see these as elements of larger PPI programs. Nevertheless, many studies have tested the impact of these individual activities, the results of which are provided below.

How is it meant to work?

Positive psychological interventions are designed to improve positive feelings, thoughts and behaviours. For the purpose of this review, activities that are explicitly focused on inducing positive states are classified as PPIs.

Types of positive psychological interventions (PPI)

Acts of kindness



What is it and how is it meant to work?

Acts of kindness interventions aim to increase pro-social behaviour by helping people engage in kind acts towards others. These interventions involve performing simple, intentional acts of kindness, such as writing a thank-you note or helping someone with a task. The idea is that performing kind acts leads to positive emotions, which can then lead to increased mental wellbeing and stronger social connections. They can be seen as pro-social interventions (see [page 38](#)), as well as PPIs.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two meta-analyses, ranging from 15 to 56 studies, found that acts of kindness may be effective at improving mental wellbeing. However, there were some mixed results. Acts of kindness may lead to improvements in mental wellbeing but more information is needed to be certain of the effect.

Best possible self



What is it and how is it meant to work?

Best possible self interventions involve imagining and reflecting on an ideal future self, and the steps required to make that vision a reality. Best possible self interventions are designed to help people focus on their goals and aspirations, creating a positive vision for their future. By imagining the best possible version of themselves, the idea is that people can increase their optimism and motivation, which in turn could lead to increased mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two meta-analyses, ranging from 7 to 16 studies, and a narrative systematic review supported the effect of best possible self interventions on mental wellbeing. However, the results were mixed. Best possible self interventions may lead to improvements, but more information is required to be certain of the effect on overall mental wellbeing.

Character strengths



What is it and how is it meant to work?

Character strength interventions are programs designed to help people identify and use their individual strengths to promote mental wellbeing. These interventions are based on the notion that behaving in line with personal values can help us cope with challenges and lead a more fulfilling life. Character strength interventions try to counteract our human tendency to focus on our weaknesses and encourages activities such as using our strengths in new and creative ways and settings goals in line with our values.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Three meta-analyses and a narrative systematic review, ranging from 9 to 14 studies, predominately studied in healthy adults, showed that character strength interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing. However, more research is needed to understand the effect in those experiencing mental health challenges.

Gratitude



What is it and how is it meant to work?

Gratitude interventions are activities or exercises designed to build a sense of gratitude or appreciation for the positive things in life.

Gratitude interventions aim to shift our focus from negative to positive thoughts and emotions. These interventions often involve reflecting on and expressing thanks for the people, experiences or things that bring joy or help in some way. Gratitude interventions may take many forms, such as gratitude journals or writing letters of gratitude.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Four systematic reviews with meta-analyses and one narrative systematic review, ranging from 6 to 32 studies, showed mixed results for the impact of gratitude interventions. The results were too conflicting for a rating to be generated at this stage. It remains unclear whether gratitude interventions in their current form are effective for improving mental wellbeing.

Humour



What is it and how is it meant to work?

Humour-based interventions work by using humour as a tool to build positive emotions and cope with stress and negative emotions. The idea is that humour releases feel-good chemicals in the brain, which can encourage more positive emotions and reduce stress. Humour-based interventions may also include activities like watching a funny movie, reading a humorous book or writing jokes.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One meta-analysis of 12 studies showed that humour-based interventions can be effective at improving mental wellbeing. Humour-based interventions may lead to improvements in mental wellbeing in general populations. However, more information is recommended regarding effect.

Types of positive psychological interventions (PPI)

Reflecting on pleasurable experiences

What is it and how is it meant to work?

Pleasure-based interventions aim to stimulate reflection on past pleasurable activities, events or interactions to build mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One meta-analysis of 6 studies did not find evidence that reflecting on pleasurable experiences alone can lead to improvements in mental wellbeing.

Three good things





What is it and how is it meant to work?

The three good things activity invites people to think about three good things that have happened to them. For example, someone may be asked to think back over the past week to identify moments that made them feel good or had special significance. The idea is that the activity helps people bring the positives in their life to the forefront of their awareness.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One meta-analysis of 10 studies did not find evidence the three good things activity alone is effective at improving mental wellbeing.

Psycho-educational interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

What is it?

Psycho-educational interventions focus on providing education about mental health conditions and symptoms, what positive mental wellbeing looks like and treatment options.

This includes general mental health promotion programs that have a large educational focus. These interventions are not just targeted at the mental health challenges of individuals, but can also focus on the mental health challenges that arise from caring for others.

How is it meant to work?

Psycho-educational interventions work by providing people with knowledge and skills to better understand, manage and seek help for mental health conditions and related issues, such as stress and hardships.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two reviews including one meta-analysis and 2 narrative reviews found that psycho-educational interventions can be effective at improving mental wellbeing in general populations.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

There was some variability depending on the focus of the interventions and the settings in which they were rolled out. For example, school-based mental health promotion interventions led to improved mental wellbeing.

For tools and resources that support educators to promote mental health and wellbeing in early learning services and

schools, see [Be You](#), the national mental health in education initiative led by Beyond Blue.

Are there any risks?




None are known.

Recommendation

Psycho-educational interventions can be effective at improving mental wellbeing, particularly when they focus on general mental health promotion.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

Reminiscence interventions

Evidence rating	
General Populations	
Clinical Populations	

What is it?

Reminiscence interventions combine activities that involve recalling and processing past experiences. They include activities such as looking at photos, listening to music or talking about memories.

Reminiscence interventions are often used in therapy or caregiving settings, and include more formal programs such as life review therapy.

How is it meant to work?

Reminiscence interventions are designed to work by tapping into the power of memories and emotions. By reflecting on past experiences, participants gain a deeper understanding of their life story and find meaning in their journey.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Nine reviews including 10 meta-analyses and 5 narrative systematic reviews, with review sizes ranging from 3 to 36, showed that reminiscence interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing in general and clinical populations.

Reminiscence interventions were found to effectively improve mental wellbeing in a wide range of individuals, including older adults, people from a range of cultural backgrounds and individuals experiencing mental health issues.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research found that structured life review programs that are focused on evaluating the significance and impact of significant life events are most effective. It was found that longer

programs were more effective, and that they could be successfully delivered in one-on-one and group-based formats.




Are there any risks?

Reminiscence interventions are generally considered safe.

Recommendation

Reminiscence interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing, particularly for older adults.

Dance interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

What is it?

Dance interventions aim to use dance, movement and creative expression to improve mental wellbeing. Interventions can range from recreational dancing to formal programs such as dance movement therapy.

How is it meant to work?

Dance interventions bring together several elements that are conducive to mental wellbeing, including physical activity, social connection and flow.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One systematic review of 8 studies concluded that dance may be impactful in improving mental wellbeing in general populations. However, results were mixed. The evidence was graded as emerging as individual studies were identified that support the positive effects of dance interventions on mental wellbeing.

Currently, we do not have enough information to provide guidance on whether dance interventions benefit people experiencing a mental health condition (clinical populations).

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation.




Are there any risks?

None are known.

Recommendation

Dance interventions may be effective at improving mental wellbeing in the general population. However, more evidence is recommended.

Yoga interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

What is it?

Yoga interventions involve the use of physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation to improve physical and mental health.

There are many different types of yoga practice – some are more focused on physical activity and fitness, while others align more closely with mindfulness approaches.

How is it meant to work?

Yoga interventions help to connect mind, body and breath through a series of physical postures, breathing techniques and meditation practices. Physical postures help to stretch and strengthen the muscles, while breathing techniques aim to calm the nervous system.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

One meta-analysis and 2 narrative systematic reviews generally found that yoga can be effective at improving mental wellbeing. However, some mixed results were found across the reviews.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research found that longer, more intensive programs resulted in the most effective outcomes.





Are there any risks?

None are known.

Recommendation

Yoga interventions can be an effective approach to improving mental wellbeing. Further research is encouraged to provide more insight into who benefits most from yoga interventions.

Gardening interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

Recommendation

Gardening interventions are generally effective at improving mental wellbeing. More evidence is recommended regarding gardening interventions and improving mental wellbeing in clinical populations.

What is it?

Gardening interventions are programs or activities that involve gardening as a means to improve physical health and mental wellbeing.

These interventions can range from community gardening projects to therapeutic horticulture programs in healthcare settings.

How is it meant to work?

Gardening interventions are meant to work by providing a positive and engaging activity that can improve mental and physical wellbeing.

There are various ways through which they may build mental wellbeing, including by increasing physical activity, developing a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction or, in the case of group programs, fostering a sense of community.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two meta-analyses and 2 narrative systematic reviews, ranging from 4 to 7 studies, found that gardening interventions are effective for improving mental wellbeing.




Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

Gardening interventions are often offered in group settings. They tend to be delivered over a longer period of time with regular interactions. One specific type of gardening intervention, horticultural therapy, currently has an inconclusive evidence base when it comes to improving the mental wellbeing of older adults.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

Leisure-based interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

What is it?

Leisure-based interventions involve engaging in enjoyable and meaningful activities, such as hobbies to improve mental wellbeing.

How is it meant to work?

Leisure-based interventions are meant to work by helping people find and engage in enjoyable leisure activities that can increase feelings of happiness, relaxation and satisfaction. Additionally, participating in leisure activities can help people build social connections and increase feelings of social support.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

While one review and meta-analysis of 6 studies showed that leisure-based interventions may improve mental wellbeing, the results were inconclusive. The evidence was graded as emerging as several studies were identified that support the positive effects of leisure-based interventions.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.





Are there any risks?

None are known.

Recommendation

Leisure-based interventions may be effective at improving mental wellbeing, but more evidence is recommended.

Nature-based interventions

Evidence rating			
General Populations		Clinical Populations	

What is it?

Nature-based interventions use natural outdoor environments to improve mental and physical health. They can include activities like nature walks, outdoor meditation or simply spending more time in nature. These are sometimes called 'greenspace' interventions when they take place in parks, gardens or forests, and 'bluespace' interventions when they take place in lakes, rivers, oceans or swimming pools.

How is it meant to work?

Nature-based interventions are meant to work by providing people with access to natural environments and opportunities for physical activity and social interaction, further promoting mental wellbeing.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Five narrative reviews, ranging from 3 to 5 studies, found support for nature-based interventions to improve mental wellbeing in general populations.

There was some variation in what was included in these interventions, with interventions often including aspects of other interventions such as physical activity or mindfulness. Currently, we do not have enough information to provide guidance on who benefits most from nature-based interventions.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes. However, greenspace interventions showed the most promising evidence.

Are there any risks?




None are known.

Recommendation

Nature-based interventions are effective at improving mental wellbeing. More clarity on the definition of a nature-based intervention would help with better understanding its effects.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

Pro-social interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

Recommendation

Pro-social interventions may be effective at improving mental wellbeing but more evidence is recommended.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

What is it?

Pro-social interventions include any interventions that encourage people to take voluntary action that benefits others, including volunteering.

A type of positive psychological intervention (PPI) called 'Acts of kindness' ([page 28](#)) could be classified as a pro-social intervention.

How is it meant to work?

Pro-social interventions aim to inspire positive emotions while people are helping others.

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two narrative reviews, ranging from 3 to 15 studies, found mixed results on the effectiveness of pro-social interventions on mental wellbeing.

One review found that higher-quality studies support the effect of pro-social interventions on mental wellbeing. As a result, the evidence was graded as promising.

Currently, we do not have enough information to provide guidance on who benefits most from pro-social interventions.




Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

Social support interventions

Evidence rating		
General Populations		Clinical Populations
		

Recommendation

Social support interventions may be effective at improving mental wellbeing in the general population. However, more information is needed to be certain of the effect.

See also [A guide to what works for depression](#) and [A guide to what works for anxiety](#), in Beyond Blue's resource library online.

What is it?

Social support interventions are designed to improve social connections and relationships by providing additional support from existing social networks or simply connecting people with new social resources.

How is it meant to work?

Social support interventions help people to build and maintain positive relationships with others.

These interventions may involve learning new communication skills, developing a support network or engaging in activities that promote social interaction (see social prescribing interventions on [page 40](#)).

Does it work to improve mental wellbeing?

Two meta-analyses and 2 narrative reviews found that interventions that enhance social support can be effective at improving mental wellbeing. However, there was some variability in the findings. There is evidence that social support interventions are effective for older adults.

Does the evidence provide guidance on implementation?

The research did not uncover any guidance on implementation that could lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes. However, most social support programs are offered over a longer period of time and generally in group settings.

Are there any risks?

None are known.

What influences the effectiveness of mental wellbeing interventions?

The way interventions are designed, the settings and formats they are delivered in, and the types of people who receive them influence their effectiveness.

The evidence is not yet mature enough for us to provide recommendations on how these factors influence each individual intervention. However, by combining the results from reviews that provided more in-depth analysis, together with insights from the authors, some clear recommendations can be provided for common factors that influence intervention effectiveness.

How interventions are delivered

Interventions can be delivered in various ways – for example, in groups, face-to-face or online – which leads to important considerations when choosing to roll out an intervention, including implementation costs, relevance for the target population and logistic feasibility.

Individual interventions

What is it?

Studies where one person receives the intervention, either one-to-one or self-guided.

What do we know?

Reviews generally showed that individual-focused interventions are effective. One-on-one, higher intensity interventions are generally more effective than self-directed interventions.

Group interventions

What is it?

Studies where people receive an intervention as part of a group of 2 or more people.

What do we know?

Group-based formats are found to be effective to deliver interventions to improve mental wellbeing in people not experiencing a mental health condition (general populations). Examples include positive psychological interventions (PPIs) and reminiscence interventions.

Technology interventions

What is it?

Studies that use websites, apps or digital software to deliver interventions.

What do we know?

Although they are on average found to be effective, the effects currently tend to be smaller for digital interventions compared to more intensive in-person interventions.

Intensity of the intervention

Program intensity is directly related to the amount of effort required of participants.

Just like our physical health, we know that generally, greater duration, frequency, and quality of an intervention will deliver stronger benefits over a longer period of time (compared to, for example, a single, brief intervention).

Classifications of intensity differ across reviews, making it difficult to make clear recommendations.

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Positive psychological interventions (PPIs): single

Acts of kindness

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Character strength

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