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Roadmap to wellbeing: microskills for positive change

1. Roadmap to wellbeing: microskills for positive change

As clinicians, it's essential to look after ourselves as well as caring for others. In this article, we explore some microskills that can help us make positive changes in our own wellbeing, and support our patients to take active steps to improve their emotional and physical health.

This article was updated in May 2024.

You may also wish to refer to our associated articles, including:

- *Motivating behaviour change.*

- *Behavioural activation.*
- *Five ways to wellbeing.*

If you are struggling with your own mental health or wellbeing, you might also wish to refer to some of our articles on clinician wellbeing, including:

- *Burnout in health professionals.*
- *Mental health in health professionals.*
- *Moral distress and moral injury.*
- *Strengths and vulnerabilities in clinicians.*

And, while enhancing personal wellbeing can provide a buffer against the challenges of life and work, it cannot be viewed as a 'sticking plaster' that ignores the impact of work-related pressures, e.g. an excessive workload, poor communication, a lack of respect or working in a culture of fear and blame. Efforts to improve our personal wellbeing must go hand in hand with fundamental organisational change to ensure healthy, supportive and positive workplaces.

1.1. What is wellbeing?

One simple definition of wellbeing is that it is a combination of feeling good and functioning well (Health Qual Life Outcomes 2020; 18, 192).

Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that affects people's emotions, thoughts, behaviour and relationships. It is not simply the absence of illness. It is possible to live with a health condition and still experience high levels of wellbeing. Nevertheless, physical and mental health can both influence wellbeing, and, in turn, wellbeing also influences health.

Wellbeing includes several dimensions:

- Experiencing positive emotions such as happiness, contentment and satisfaction with life.
- Having a sense of purpose and developing positive relationships.
- Functioning well on a personal and a social level, including developing our own potential and having control over our lives.

Our personal definition of wellbeing may also be affected by age and cultural differences. For example, younger people may place greater emphasis on happiness, kindness, fun and safety as being central to wellbeing, whereas for older individuals, concepts such as meaning and purpose may become more important (Int J Environ Res Public Health, 2023;20,5006).

1.2. Why is wellbeing important?

Wellbeing matters! It has been linked to success in professional, personal and interpersonal areas of life.

Individuals with high levels of wellbeing may have improved performance at work; higher life satisfaction; are able to learn more effectively; and have increased creativity, prosocial behaviours and positive relationships (Health Qual Life Outcomes 2020;18,192).

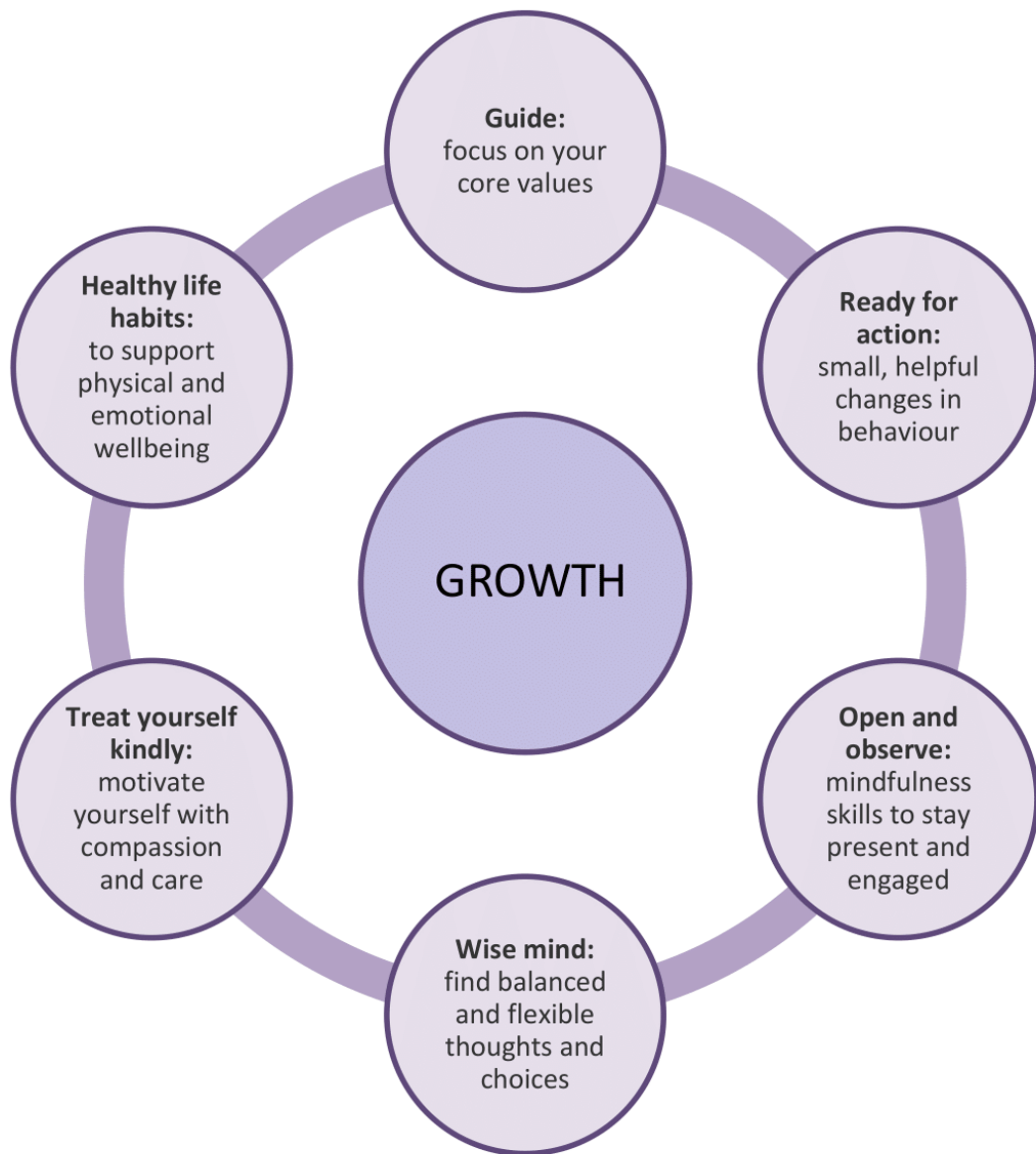
Wellbeing may also be associated with a number of positive physical health outcomes, including an improved immune system response, higher pain tolerance, increased longevity, cardiovascular health, slower disease progression and improved reproductive health (Department of Health 2014, [The relationship between wellbeing and health](#)).

1.3. 'GROWTH' – six steps towards wellbeing

The 'GROWTH steps' were first described in the book, *Boosting Your Mental Wellbeing: 10-minute steps for stressed healthcare professionals using CBT and mindfulness* (Lee David and Debbie Brewin, 2023, Scion Publishing). DOI: Lee David is a Red Whale presenter and author.

This model aims to help both patients and clinicians move towards positive mental health and improved wellbeing. These six steps were developed from several theoretical backgrounds, including cognitive behavioural therapy, behavioural activation, compassion-focused therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness. However, this section of the article is not designed to be an evidenced-based review, but rather a collection of practical tools that may be useful in our own lives as well as to support patients who seek our help.

It's not necessary to use all the steps at once, or to follow a rigid or linear pathway that moves through every individual step in turn. You can use them in any order, and you may also choose to focus on just one or two areas that seem most relevant to a particular individual. Here is an overview of the six GROWTH steps:



1.4. Guide: focus on your core values

Our **Guide** acts as an inner compass which points in the direction of our most important values.

Following a Guide involves seeking out our own personal 'Why?', and helps to ensure that our lives align with what matters to us as unique individuals: making decisions and choosing actions that have personal meaning, a wider

purpose and are important to us.

Exploring values can help motivate people to make changes that may improve their health and wellbeing, even if these require effort, or when change involves facing challenges or coping with uncomfortable sensations or emotions.

What are values?

Values refer to long-term, core priorities about what we find meaningful and important in life. Examples include:

| | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Acceptance | Achievement | Autonomy or independence | Being active |
| Body and health | Caring | Challenge | Connection and relationships |
| Contribution | Courage | Creativity | Family |
| Financial stability | Friendship | Fun | Health and physical wellbeing |
| Hope | Humour | Kindness | Leadership and growth |
| Leisure | Learning and education | Outdoors | Peace or calmness |
| Purpose | Recognition | Relaxation | Respect |
| Safety and stability | Spirituality and religion | Teamwork | Variety |

This is not an exhaustive list and there are many more values that may be important to you or to your patients. What is important is to start having conversations about the things that matter to someone deeply, and to use this information to help inform decisions about health and wellbeing.

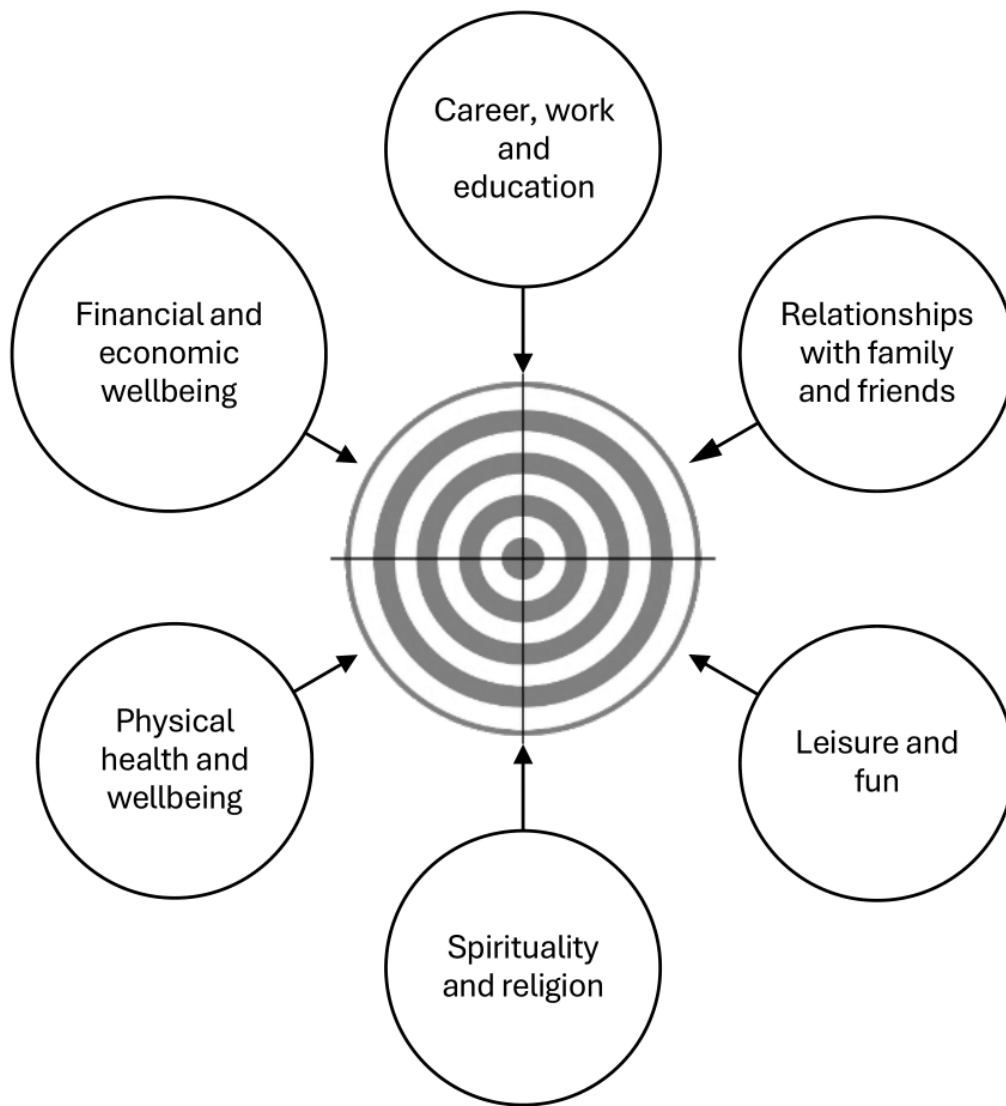
Knowing your values can help you make choices that are consistent with who you want to be as a person. For example:

- If you value being a loving, caring parent, it's worth making the effort to take time to engage with your family after a busy day at work.

- If you value closeness and connection in your relationships at work, it's worth making the effort to have lunch or a coffee break with colleagues, rather than simply 'pushing through' and ignoring your need for interaction.

Balancing different values

You can use a 'wellbeing wheel' to help someone reflect on the balance of values relating to different areas of their life (see below). Ask the person to rate how close they are to 'hitting the target' and fully living out their values in each area of the wheel. It's common to be achieving more in some areas of life (e.g. work and career) than others, (e.g. leisure and fun). Are any areas starting to dominate or take over their life? Are other areas being ignored or overlooked? What small changes might bring all their values more into balance?



‘Values’ vs. ‘needs’

Values reflect our long-term priorities, whereas needs refer to the immediate urges or impulses that can influence us in a specific situation. Needs range from basic needs such as food, shelter, rest and security through to emotional needs such as the need for love and acceptance, or space and autonomy. Thinking about needs involves being aware of what’s affecting us in the present moment, while also considering the needs of other people and the wider situation. If we ignore our needs, we run the risk of letting our fuel tanks run dry, which can lead to exhaustion, low mood,

anxiety and burnout. We explore needs in more detail in our article *Communicating our needs when making lifestyle change*.

1.5. Ready to take action

Being **Ready to take action** is a behavioural skill that involves making active choices about how we react to the changing circumstances of our lives. It's often easier to change our actions than our attitudes or emotions, and we can take small behavioural steps in the direction of key values even when facing difficulties such as health problems, emotional changes and challenging life events.

Being 'ready to take action' includes:

- Doing things because they are important or meaningful, even if we also experience negative thoughts, difficult feelings or lack of motivation.
- Being willing to try something new, rather than staying stuck in old habits or patterns of behaviour.

Link actions to values

Values focus on the journey and route that we travel, rather than on specific goals or outcomes. When planning actions, it helps with motivation and makes them more meaningful if they are linked to important values. For example, if your value is education, an action may be to read a book, study for a qualification or learn a new skill. For a value such as health or wellbeing, goals might be to improve your diet, develop a regular exercise habit or include time for relaxation or winding down in your day.

Ensure changes are small and realistic

To make behaviour changes easier to achieve, they can involve 'microsteps'. These take only a few minutes and are realistic and easy to complete. One microstep is unlikely to completely resolve a major life problem, but even though they may seem relatively small and insignificant, completing microsteps can build someone's confidence and self-belief in their ability to make change, and can lead to bigger changes over time, in a snowball effect. Microsteps also help people become less rigid or stuck in negative habits of thinking and behaviour.

Healthy patterns of activity

Any activity that moves someone towards an important value or need could lead to improvements in wellbeing. There are also different frameworks that can help people choose helpful actions that are likely bring greater contentment, happiness and wellbeing. The [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) (New Economics Foundation, 2008) defines five key steps that are likely to improve mental health and wellbeing:

- Connect with other people.
- Be physically active.
- Learn new skills.
- Give to others.
- Take notice of the present moment (mindfulness).

It can also be helpful to try and ensure that activities are varied and cover all the domains in the wellbeing wheel that we explored above. Another approach is to discuss ways to bring some **SPICE** to the person's day or

week! This involves five different types of activity:

| Type of activity | Examples |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Success or achievement | Practise a new skill, tick something small off the 'to-do' list or try a favourite recipe. |
| Physical activity and moving the body | Go for a short walk, dance to a song or try 10 minutes of yoga, Pilates or gardening. |
| Important and meaningful | Attend a health check, take your medication or apply for a job. |
| Connection or closeness to others | Plan a family activity, message a friend or family member, or put your phone down when talking to someone important. |
| Enjoyable, relaxing and fun | Listen to music or an audiobook, put on an outfit you like, have a long bath or shower, or practise mindfulness or relaxation. |

We talk more about making behavioural changes using microsteps and SPICE activities in our article on *Behavioural activation*.

Open and observe

Learning to Open and observe involves noticing what's going on inside you and in the world around you. This can help you understand yourself better, make decisions and cope more effectively under pressure. Learning to notice your thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in negative or

catastrophic thinking styles can help you focus on important activities in the here and now, and get more contentment and enjoyment from life

Using brief mindfulness does not need to involve a lengthy time commitment. In a consultation, it may involve noticing when someone is experiencing a strong emotion, and offering validation and support, or encouraging them to take a pause and a slow breath to steady themselves before continuing the discussion.

Some examples of brief 'open and observe' skills that we can bring into daily life include:

- **Focus on an everyday activity:** practise taking a shower, brushing your teeth, having a drink or taking a short, mindful walk with a little more awareness. Notice what you can see, hear, touch, smell and taste during the experience.
- **Mindful listening:** take a few minutes to focus on a piece of music or listen to the sounds outside your window. Close your eyes and really listen. Notice the different instruments and vocals, and any rhythms or patterns. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the sounds as soon as you notice.
- **54321:** this technique can help ground you and soothe distressing emotions such as anxiety, stress or irritability:
 - Notice five things that you can see. What colour are they? *I can see a red cup, a blue book, a green pen, a white curtain and a black computer.*
 - Notice four things you can touch. If it helps, move your body to create more sensations: *I can feel my feet on the ground, I'm holding a cool water bottle, I can rub my hands together, I can stretch my arms and shoulders.*
 - Take three slow sigh breaths. Breathe in and make your out-breath

as long and slow as you can, while making a soft sighing sound, 'Haaaaa', or try a gentle long hum. This helps you to breathe with your diaphragm so that your chest muscles feel less tight and uncomfortable. Can you count to 6, 8 or higher as you slowly exhale?

- Notice two sounds you can hear. Can you name the loudest and the quietest sounds? *I can hear the hum of traffic and people talking in the next room.*
- Notice one thing you can smell or taste. You could smell a perfume or take a sip of your drink. *I can smell and taste my morning coffee.*
- Now bring your attention back to the task at hand. What's the most important thing to focus on doing next?
- **Appreciate the moment:** take a moment to notice and appreciate small things in your day that bring a sense of joy, calmness or wellbeing. Describe the experience using all your senses. *I see my garden and there are some beautiful colours at this time of year. I can hear the wind in the trees and the hum of traffic. I smell a gentle scent of flowers and grass. I can feel the wind on my face. I feel content and peaceful in this moment.*

We discuss more about the evidence and use of mindfulness in our article *CBT: mindfulness-based approaches*. There are some practical mindfulness skills in the articles *Notice the NOW* and *Attention training for managing worry*.

1.6. Wise mind

Our mind is our inner voice, and includes our thoughts, beliefs, ideas, expectations, memories and personal stories. It enables us to make complex decisions and plans, and can be an incredibly powerful and useful tool. But at other times, our mind can be negative and unhelpful, focusing on

everything that's gone wrong, blaming ourselves unfairly and becoming preoccupied by potential future catastrophes.

Using **Wise mind** involves stepping back and remembering that we don't have to believe everything our mind tells us, especially if this is negative or unhelpful! Some qualities of 'wise mind' include:

- Thinking flexibly: seeking ways to overcome challenges and cope with problems.
- Finding perspective and looking at the big picture.
- Being supportive, encouraging, friendly and fair to ourselves and to others.
- Remembering our strengths and qualities, even when facing difficulties or when something has gone wrong.

Here are some ways to develop and use 'wise mind':

| Encouraging 'wise mind' | What to say |
|---|---|
| <p>Say thoughts aloud or write them down. Labelling thoughts can help to create some space around negative or painful thoughts. You don't have to 'buy into' or react instantly to the thought. Instead, you can let it pass by and continue doing what's important.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I'm having the thought that...</i>• <i>My mind is telling me that...</i>• <i>I don't have to believe what my mind is telling me!</i>• <i>I can focus on following my Guide and doing what's most important.</i> |
| <p>Seek support and encouragement. Imagine you are talking to a supportive friend or mentor. How might</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I would tell my friend that she is doing her best</i> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>they inspire or motivate you?</p> | <p><i>and there's no need to be so hard on herself.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>My trainer is always supportive and tells me I can do it, even when it feels difficult...</i> |
| <p>Get some perspective. Imagine you can jump in a helicopter and rise high in the air above your problems. This will often give a very different viewpoint and can help you to see the bigger picture.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What happens as you start to see things from high above? Can you notice anything new?</i> • <i>Fast-forward time and imagine you are looking back a year from now. Keep going until you reach 5 or even 10 years. Does this change how you see things?</i> |
| <p>Choose wise actions. Even when you are feeling anxious, stressed or fed up, it's possible to choose wise actions. What actions are consistent with following your Guide and behaving as the person you really want to be, even if you are experiencing discomfort and distress?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How helpful is this action?</i> • <i>What matters most to you? Where is your Guide pointing in this situation?</i> • <i>What might be the most helpful next step?</i> |

1.7. Treat yourself kindly

When we are struggling to make changes or are living with pain, uncomfortable physical symptoms, challenging life situations or difficult

emotions such as anxiety or low mood, we may become our own worst critic, giving ourselves a hard time and blaming ourselves for everything that has gone wrong. Repeatedly getting into a habit of self-criticism or blame can have a big impact on confidence and mood, and can make it harder to make long-term changes in health – such as sticking to healthy eating or physical activity habits.

Three different emotion systems work together to help us feel happy and content, and to cope with stressful life events and challenges.

- **Threat system:** this alerts us to potential danger and helps us to take action to stay safe. Overuse of the threat system can lead to anxiety, stress and irritability as we live with an exaggerated sense of danger and risk.
- **Drive system:** this acts to energise and excite us, helping us notice opportunities and achieve important goals. Overuse of the drive system can lead to excessive striving, exhaustion and addiction. Underuse can lead to low mood or depression. If drive becomes linked with threat, it can also lead to self-criticism and fear of failure.
- **Calm and connect system:** this helps us to experience feelings of contentment, safety and self-compassion. It is sensitive to closeness and bonding with others, and helps us recover when facing problems or when things go wrong.

We explore this in more detail in the article *Self-care and compassion: the three circles model*. Here are a few quick tips for balancing the three emotion systems:

| What are trying to do? | How might we achieve this? |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| | |

| | |
|--|--|
| Shrink the threat circle. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use 'open and observe' to recognise and acknowledge our internal response to threat, reduce preoccupation with threat or risk, and decide how to respond helpfully to stressful situations.• Cut down on unhelpful behaviours that keep the cycle of anxiety going such as excessive avoidance, checking or reassurance-seeking.• Step into the drive system by engaging in a meaningful activity such as physical exercise to shift attention away from threat-based thoughts and feelings. |
| Balance the drive system. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan activities connected to important values such as health, self-care or relationships.• If you are feeling overwhelmed or over-burdened by tasks and demands, can you make your goal smaller or easier to achieve, or set boundaries around activities such as work tasks?• Focus on the process, not the outcome, by getting involved or trying out an activity, rather than striving to be 'good at it'. For example, plan to be just a little more active during the week without setting goals about how far or fast you 'should' run or swim.• Do things for fun: try doing something because you have always wanted to, rather than because you are good at it or are striving for achievement or praise.• Relax your expectations: can you aim for silver or bronze rather than gold medal standard? |
| Grow the calm and connect circle. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopt a kind and friendly attitude, setting yourself realistic expectations and remembering that you are not super-human, but just doing your best in an imperfect and complex world.• Connect with a supportive tribe: spend time regularly with other people who are encouraging, make you feel safe and who want the best for you.• Do something calming: even 5–10 minutes of a relaxing activity |

such as taking a bath, reading, knitting, doing a jigsaw, yoga, painting or stroking a pet can bring a little peace into your day.

- Go into nature: look at the sky, a tall tree or an amazing view. Use your senses to really appreciate the moment – what can you see, hear, feel and smell?

1.8. Healthy life habits

Building healthy life habits involves finding ways to create healthy routines and patterns of living that will maximise our physical and emotional wellbeing. This includes a range of behaviours such as being physically active, healthy nutrition, maintaining a healthy body weight, getting enough sleep, taking care of long-term conditions and physical illnesses, and cutting back on unhealthy choices such as alcohol or drug use.

We have summarised some important areas that can influence wellbeing in the table below.

| Healthy life habits | Useful questions | What are you already doing that is healthy or helpful? What would you like to change or improve? |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Physical activity | <p>Are you active during the day or do you spend a lot of time sitting or lying?</p> <p>How much physical activity do you carry out each week? How much makes you feel slightly out of breath?</p> | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Healthy eating | Do you have regular eating patterns and a balance of healthy nutrition that works for your body and lifestyle? Are you able to keep a healthy weight? | |
| Sleep | Do you have regular sleep habits and usually wake up feeling rested? How easy is it to drop off? Do you stay asleep through the night? | |
| Long-term conditions and physical illness | Are you able to make healthy choices that take care of any long-term conditions or physical illnesses that you are living with? | |
| Alcohol and drug use | Do you smoke or vape? How much alcohol do you drink each week? Do you take any other drugs? | |
| Other patterns of unhealthy or addictive behaviour | Do you have any other addictive or unhealthy habits or behaviours? Do you have healthy technology or screen habits? | |

1.9. Bringing it all together

Here are some examples of questions or reflections that you could use for each step in GROWTH. You could use these in a consultation with a patient, or when thinking about difficulties that you are facing yourself.

Remember, you don't have to use all the steps or all the questions! Just pick one or two areas that seem helpful and start there.

| GROWTH step | What can you say? |
|--|---|
| Guide: focus on core values | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who or what is important in your life? What motivates or interests you?</i> • <i>What matters most to you about this issue?</i> • <i>Pause and reflect using an empathic or reflective statement: So, what seems to matter to you is... being able to make your own decisions... caring for your family... having a sense of purpose or stability... What do you think?</i> |
| Ready for action: plan small behavioural actions that are important or meaningful | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can you think of one small action that is linked to this important value?</i> • <i>What would you do differently if you felt just a tiny bit better or a little more motivated?</i> • <i>What is the very first step or the smallest step you could plan?</i> • <i>How could you make this goal smaller, easier or more enjoyable? Can you seek some support to do it?</i> |
| Open and observe: brief mindfulness skills to stay present and engaged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Acknowledge and validate when someone is experiencing an emotion: That sounds very distressing. I can see this is affecting you deeply... how are you feeling at this moment?</i> • <i>Facilitate grounding when strong emotion arises: Shall we take a pause to settle your emotions? What colours can you see in the room? What can you hear? Can you take a slow breath? OK, how are you feeling now?</i> • <i>Focus on engagement with important activities: Do negative thoughts or strong emotions make it difficult to pay attention or enjoy</i> |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <p><i>important activities? Would it be helpful to practise ways to become more present and focused?</i></p> |
| <p>Wise mind: find balanced and flexible thoughts and choices</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight and label negative thoughts without engaging with their content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>That sounds like a really worrying thought. How does that make you feel?</i> • <i>What is your anxious mind telling you about this scenario?</i> • Focus on what's important: <i>What matters most to you here? What would be the wisest choice you could make in this situation?</i> • Highlight personal qualities and plan ways to cope: <i>What skills or experience do you have that might help you get through this? What might be the most helpful thing to try next?</i> • Seek support: <i>What advice or help can you seek from others to help with this?</i> <p><i>Broaden the perspective: What advice would you give to a friend or colleague in the same situation?</i></p> |
| <p>Treat yourself kindly: motivate yourself with compassion and care</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring a self-compassionate mindset to change: <i>It sounds like you are being quite hard on yourself. I wonder if we can find ways you can encourage yourself in positive ways? Remember, we are making changes because you are important and because your wellbeing matters.</i> • <i>Can you place a hand on your heart and wish yourself well in coping with a tough situation?</i> • Encourage kind actions: <i>What small actions can you plan that care for yourself and your own needs?</i> |
| <p>Healthy life habits: to support physical and</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the person to consider whether lifestyle factors may be influencing their difficulties: <i>Healthy life habits such as being physically active, healthy nutrition, getting enough sleep, taking care of long-term conditions and physical illnesses, and cutting back on unhealthy choices such as alcohol or drug use can all affect our health</i> |

emotional
wellbeing

and wellbeing in many ways. Do you think any of these issues may be important for you right now? Would you like to discuss this further?



Roadmap to wellbeing

- Wellbeing involves a range of dimensions, including experiencing positive emotions, having a sense of purpose and being able to function well.
- Wellbeing has been associated with improvements in quality of life, interpersonal effectiveness and physical health outcomes.
- The six GROWTH steps are a series of microskills that can support wellbeing. These include:
 - **Guide:** focus on your personal values, what you care about and your life direction.
 - **Ready for action:** prepare for change and take small behavioural steps towards what matters.
 - **Open and observe:** use mindfulness skills to step back and be more present and engaged.
 - **Wise mind:** get perspective, and choose flexible, helpful responses for each situation.
 - **Treat yourself kindly:** find ways to balance your emotion systems and motivate yourself with compassion.
 - **Healthy life habits:** develop healthy routines that support physical and emotional wellbeing.



Useful resources:

Books

- *Mindfulness for Health: a practical guide to relieving pain, reducing stress and restoring well-being*, Vidyamala Burch (2013, Piatkus)
- *The Happiness Trap: stop struggling, start living*, Russ Harris (2022, Robinson)
- *The Compassionate Mind*, Paul Gilbert (2010, Constable)

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