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Six simple steps for wellbeing

GP DR GEMMA NEWMAN OUTLINES THE SIX MENTAL AND PHYSICAL CHANGES YOU NEED TO MAKE FOR LASTING HEALTH AND WELLBEING BENEFITS. BY

Western Daily Press · 15 Jan 2024 · 16 · EASY STEPS: Dr Gemma Newman LISA SALMON

YOU may intend to lose weight, get fit, stop smoking or whatever this year, but all too often those good intentions crumble within a very short time.



What you need to do instead, says GP Dr Gemma Newman, is follow just six easy steps to get well and stay well – chances are everything else you want to achieve will then just fall into place.

“Making a firm and fixed resolution on January 1 is usually not the way to go,” she points out. “I think a lot of people, when they’re starting to make New Year’s changes, think they’ve got to use their willpower, and then that willpower doesn’t really last for anyone. “It’s very much about understanding there are marginal gains to be made, but if you’re consistent, then the trajectory of your whole life can change.

“So having an exploration about what people’s core values are, what’s actually really important to them, means that if they decide to make any changes they can maintain them because it’s coming from a sense of self-identity rather than a sense of ‘I’ve got to use my willpower every day.’”

Drawing on her clinical experience as a GP, as well as her study of medicine, nutrition, psychology and the power of nature, Dr Newman has created the sixpart framework outlined in her book *Get Well, Stay Well*, which she says is the key to a healthier, happier life. They are...

1. GRATITUDE

Dr Newman explains that the brain's limbic system is responsible for emotions, and that particular part of the brain also includes the hypothalamus, which regulates bodily functions including hunger, sleep, metabolism and how we grow.

"Studies have shown that gratitude activates the whole limbic system and in particular the hypothalamus, making the systems function more efficiently," she says, pointing out that numerous studies have linked gratitude to better sleep, and because gratitude floods the brain with feel-good hormones, it has been linked to decreased pain, lower blood pressure and reduced stress.

Simple habits that can encourage gratitude, she says, are regular bedtimes and going out in nature, and she suggests thinking of three things you're grateful for when you wake up and go to bed, and keeping a gratitude journal in which you write down all the things you're grateful for.

"Positive emotions can reduce pain perception and so are a valuable tool when dealing with pain," she says. "A study to evaluate the effect of gratitude on pain indicated that 16% of the subjects who kept a gratitude journal reported reduced pain. By regulating the level of dopamine, gratitude reduces subjective feelings of pain."

2. LOVE

"I place gratitude and love, two emotional states, as the first steps to a healthy body and mind. They are fundamental to our wellbeing," stresses Dr Newman, who talks about three kinds of love in her book – for yourself, others and the community.

She suggests people use positive affirmations, identify role models or mentors, learn to accept compliments, and strive for positive relationships, as studies show loneliness and isolation are risk factors for premature death.

Learning how to forgive is also a part of love, she says, pointing out: "Data shows that active training in forgiveness can actually reduce pain perception for people who are suffering with chronic disease conditions."

3. OUTSIDE

The evidence showing the restorative power of the natural world is "abundant and exciting", says Dr Newman. Sun exposure – not too much because of the skin cancer risk – has been shown to lower blood pressure and cardiovascular mortality, she says, and this may be linked to nitric oxide, which has a positive effect on blood pressure, being released when the sun touches the skin. Vitamin D is also produced when sunlight touches the skin, and this is vital for bone growth and can help improve brain function, says Dr Newman.

"Connecting with nature can have a profound effect on our mental health," stresses Dr Newman, who points out that in one study, two groups were asked to walk for 90 minutes a day, one group in a natural area and the other in a high-traffic urban setting. Subsequent tests showed those who walked in nature showed reduced activity in a region of the brain associated with rumination, a key factor in depression.

And there are even benefits for our immune system. Dr Newman explains that trees and plants emit airborne antimicrobial compounds called phytoncides, which protect them from germs, and when we spend time in nature we breathe them in. “Our bodies respond by increasing the amount of a type of white blood cell called natural killer cells (or NK cells). These cells are critical to our immune systems because they help our bodies fight disease,” she explains.

4. VEG

Dr Newman has already written *The Plant Power Doctor*, a book on the power of plant-based nutrition for health, and she points out: “Globally, it’s reported that unhealthy diets contribute to more death and disability than smoking, alcohol and drug use combined. The most comprehensive analysis of risk factors has determined that one in five deaths are caused by an unhealthy diet.”

She says diets low in whole grains, fruit, nuts, seeds and vegetables, and high in salt and saturated fat (mainly from eating meat and ultra-processed foods), are the least healthy.

5. EXERCISE

As well as being extremely good for us physically, exercise is great for the mind too – Dr Newman says large studies show it’s strongly linked to happiness, and helpful in treating depression. “Movement is needed for a thriving body and mind,” she says, pointing out that you can slash your premature death risk by 20–30% by walking for 20–30 minutes a day, compared to people who do no exercise at all.

6. SLEEP

“Sleep is vital,” says Dr Newman. “Just as exercise and a good diet help us stay well, sleep can also help us maintain our weight and ward off serious problems like heart attacks, obesity, cancer and Alzheimer’s disease.” Although sleep can improve mood, help make your heart healthier, make it easier to maintain weight, create a stronger immune system, help kill pain, reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s disease and improve concentration and attention, one in three people struggle to nod off, says Dr Newman.

Creating a healthy sleep routine, having sensible naps, earlier meal times, exercise, active relaxation and meditation can all help, she says. Dr Newman stresses that she’s not suggesting people have a massive overhaul of their lives and bring in a series of huge changes immediately. “These are the tools if you’re wanting to make some changes, and I’ve suggested a maximum of three small things people might want to go with initially,” she says. “I want people to really think about their own personal health journey.”

Get Well, Stay Well by Dr Gemma Newman is published by Ebury, £20