

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Brief No. 2

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This is the second brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. In this brief, we focus on how physical health and the flexibility of our brains can impact emotional well-being.

Module 2 Objectives

By the end of Module 2, you will be able to:

1. Explain the connection between physical health and emotional well-being.
2. Describe how the brain can grow and adapt.
3. Identify physical health strategies that can improve emotional well-being.

As a reminder, we define emotional well-being as:

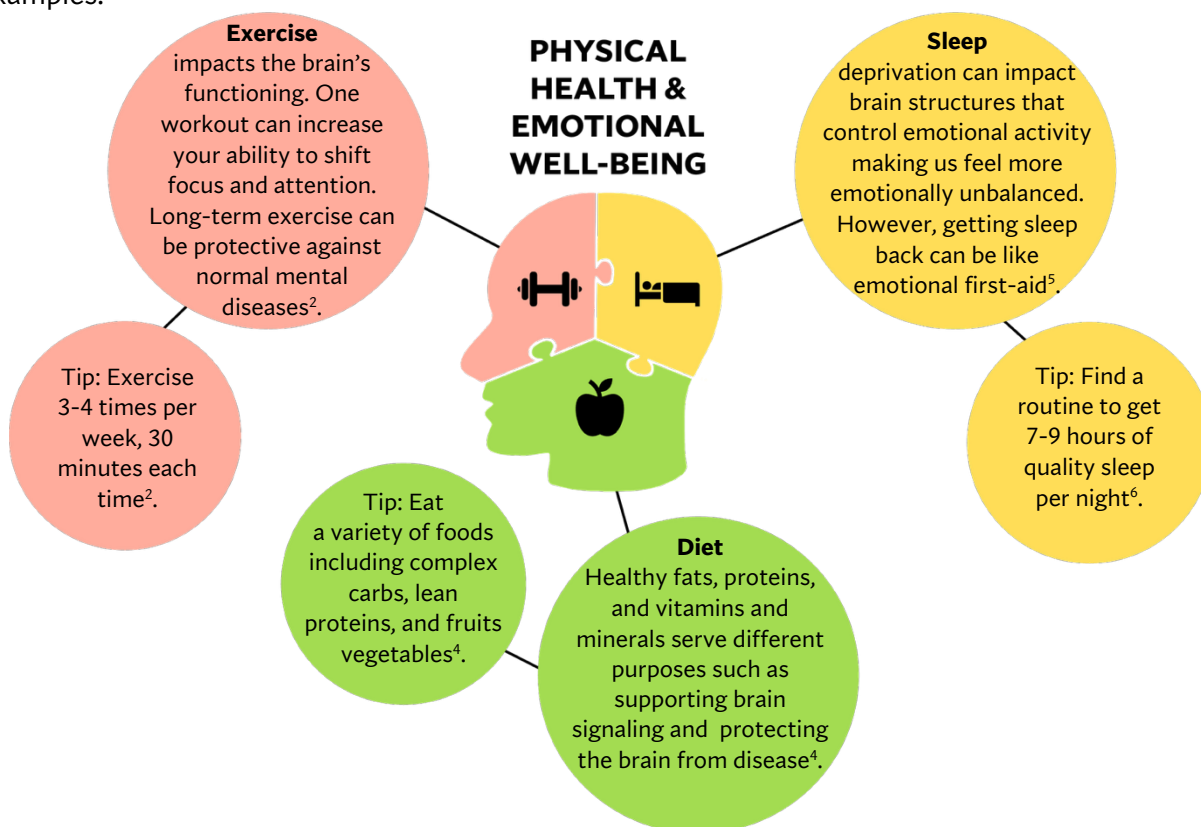
Emotional well-being has many parts that capture how positive an individual feels generally, and about their life overall. It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and goal pursuit

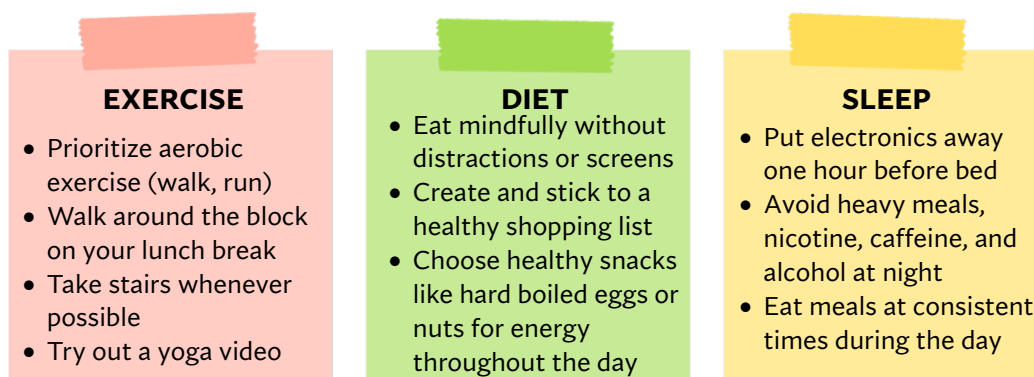
These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and age¹.

How does physical health impact our emotional well-being?

We all hear about the importance of diet, exercise, and sleep to our physical health – but did you know that they also impact our emotional well-being? In the image below, we share some examples.



Creating positive habits around exercise, diet, and sleep improves our overall health, which includes our brain health. Fueling our brain is important, and we can keep it nourished and strong by getting into a good sleep routine, eating a balanced diet, and incorporating movement into our day. These habits can lead to long term brain changes such as strengthening the memory and decision-making centers in our brains. Our brains are flexible. Just like we can make them stronger by creating healthy *physical* habits, we can also change them by creating positive *thought* habits.



Additional Tips for Boosting Your Physical Health

The Flexible Brain

We have the power to alter our brains. One way to do this is by building resilience. Resilience is important; it's how we adapt to difficult or life changing experiences. A definition of resilience is in the green box below.



Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

– [American Psychological Association](#)



We recommend watching a video⁷ by Rick Hanson, PhD that explains how experiences alter brain structure, which can then change thinking. These changes can also happen in the opposite direction; changing thoughts can alter brain structure. It works both ways – and attention is key in making these changes! Focusing on negative things makes those connections stronger. However, shifting attention to focus on positive things builds different patterns in the brains. We can also build our resilience after negative experiences⁸.

Resilience is a complex skill that is not learned overnight. Some people argue that you can be born resilient, which may be partially true, but it is also a skill that everyone must practice if they want to master it. It's often easy for us to fall into a victim mindset and dwell on the negative things that have happened to us. We often get caught in the trap of thinking we don't have the strength to move forward. However, we're all stronger than we think. Rebounding and learning from hard times can make our lives more positive in the long run.

Your Turn!

Your call to action this module involves an Emotional Wellness Checklist created by the National Institute of Health. It includes strategies and activities we can use to enhance emotional well-being. The PDF of the checklist contains six wellness topics: 1. Build Resilience, 2. Reduce Stress, 3. Get Quality Sleep, 4. Be Mindful, 5. Cope with Loss, and 6. Strengthen Social Connections. Each topic contains a checklist of activities you can try. Pull out your Module 2 Handout and flip to page 4 to complete the following activity.



Download the checklist from our website and **choose three** wellness topics to focus on.

In your Toolkit, **identify two** activities from each topic checklist to practice; you should have **six activities in total**.

Plan how to incorporate these activities into your **next month**.

For a Deeper Dive

To learn more, check out the following resources:

Sutter Health

[Eating Well for Mental Health](#)

This article discusses how a healthy, balanced diet can affect your brain and help you feel your best.

National Sleep Foundation

[How is Your Sleep Health Linked to Your Mental Health?](#)

This article discusses the link between sleep and emotional well-being. It also provides tips for improving sleep.

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¹ Park, C. L., Kubzansky, L. D., Chafouleas, S. M., Davison, R. J., Keltner, D., Parsafar, P., Conwell, Y., Martin, M. Y., Hanmer, J., & Wang, K. H. (2023). Emotional well-being: What it is and why it matters. *Affective Science*, 4(1), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00163-0>.

² TED. (2018, March 21). *Wendy Suzuki: The brain-changing benefits of exercise* / TED [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/BHY0FxzoKZE?si=eT4Bt9--FBU71MTj>.

³ Mayo Clinic Staff. (2025, March 26). *Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress*. Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469>.

⁴ TED-ED. (2016, June 21). *How the food you eat affects your brain – Mia Nacamulli* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/xyQY8a-ng6g?si=9fvFKUc9hVcvzl9U>.

⁵ TED. (2020, September 2). *How sleep affects your emotions* / *Sleeping with Science, a TED series*. https://youtu.be/6F8wFkScnME?si=rSJWk_2QyA-tnvjI.

⁶ National Sleep Foundation Staff. (2023, March 8). *How is Your Sleep Health Linked to Your Mental Health*. National Sleep Foundation. ³ Mayo Clinic Staff. (2025, March 26). *Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress*. Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469>.

⁷ Greater Good Science Center. (2011, September 19). *Rick Hanson: Understanding Neuroplasticity* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/CRvMCIpGdE8?si=-KKgxQTcrXAz0p6j>.

⁸ Marano, H. E. (2003, May 1). *The Art of Resilience*. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/200305/the-art-of-resilience>.



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