Staying mentally healthy if you don't have a mental illness.

Experiencing poor mental wellbeing is common as around 45% Australians aged between 16-85 will experience a mental illness at some point in their life and 20% of Australian adults will experience mental illness in any given year. For this reason it is important to consider steps you can take on an individual level to reduce risk of developing mental illness.

A certain level of stress at work is often unavoidable, but if you find it is becoming increasingly difficult to manage your stress levels on a daily basis, it is important to take proactive steps to protect yourself against mental ill-health.

Identifying the possible factors at work that may be causing you stress can help you develop a plan to deal with that stress. Some potential factors that can cause stress at work include:

- High workload
- Poor support from your co-workers and management
- Long hours and insufficient breaks
- Job insecurity
- Workplace discrimination/bullying
- Unrealistic targets or time pressures

These are some evidence-based strategies to help reduce the impact of stress on a daily basis:

- **Get regular exercise:** Implementing regular breaks at work where you exercise or move around is demonstrated to increase self-esteem and productivity, as well as provide a coping mechanism for stress. This can include small interventions such as walking to work or during your lunch break.

- **Get some fresh air:** research demonstrates that spending time outdoors, especially in areas with a green space, can reduce the experience of stress and ultimately improve your health. In particular, being outdoors in down time at work is shown to be the most effective activity for recovering from work stress. This could look like eating your lunch outside in a local park instead of at your desk.

- **Plan out your day:** disorganisation and clutter contributes to stress levels and negative wellbeing. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the day to plan out your tasks and what you want to achieve. Use this time to ensure that long-term projects are accounted for and your time is dedicated accordingly.

- **Eat healthily:** stress places greater demand on the body for nutrients, yet when we are stressed we tend to crave comfort foods or highly processed foods. While comfort foods are fine in moderation, it is important to maintain a nutritious diet during stressful periods to ensure your body is getting the nutrients it requires. There is also preliminary research suggesting that healthy foods such as omega-3 fats and vegetables can regulate cortisol levels, the hormone involved in stress.

- **Stay hydrated:** avoid drinking too much coffee and make sure to drink plenty of water. Research shows that dehydration can increase stress levels.

- **Talk about your feelings:** identify someone you feel comfortable with to talk about your feelings and who you know will be supportive. Research has shown that being open about feeling unable to cope with stress and having open discourse about mental health at work improves agency, control over your problems, and reduces stress. If there is no one at work you feel comfortable discussing your feelings with, make sure there's someone outside of work you can talk to.

- **Foster work relationships:** working in a supportive team is very important for our mental health at work. While we don't always have a choice with who we work with, it is helpful to find a mentor or small group of co-workers whose company you enjoy and who you can trust to discuss your feelings. Having genuine workplace friendships is shown to reduce work stress.

- **Care for others:** caring for others is often an important part of maintaining relationships with those around you. Working life can provide many opportunities to help and support your colleagues and research shows that helping others can make us feel needed and valued.

- **Leave work at work:** it's important to give yourself boundaries between a work life and home life. The normalisation of mobile phones and laptops has created a 'job-to-home' spill-over, blurring the lines of when to stop working. Try to avoid checking work emails after work hours or during the weekend.

- **Take a mental health day:** mental health sick days are just as important as physical sick days. Feeling mentally unwell at work can reduce your productivity and increase risk of developing more serious mental health problems. Taking even just one day off can leave you feeling recharged and ready to go back to work.

- **Don't ignore stress:** failing to manage stress can result in burnout and further mental health issues. Untreated stress can result in burnout or lead to other mental health issues. Be sure to recognise your limits and practise stress management techniques regularly.

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Source:
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mental health **at work**