

People

Maeve's seven simple steps to happiness

Psychologist Maeve Halpin tells **Anna Coogan** how seven easy-to-follow lifestyle changes can lead to us feeling more positive

WHEN we're anxious and depressed, we tend to stop doing the very things which we should be doing to improve our mental health," says Maeve Halpin, a Ranelagh-based counselling psychologist and author.

She has been counselling people in distress and who are depressed for over 25 years, and has seen a 'significant increase' in the number of people reliant on anti-depressants and tranquillisers so that they can keep going.

"Medication has a role, and can get people out of a very dark place," she says. "But once out of that place, they can do a lot for themselves which will have a very beneficial effect on their mental health."

She has found that when people are down, they tend to do the very opposite of what is good for them — such as turn to cigarettes or alcohol for stress relief. Or stop eating healthily because they lose their appetite due to feeling stressed.

She has compiled a new book on the seven natural elements of good mental health, and which is designed to help combat the devastating effects of depression.

"Three half-hour periods of exercise which gets the heart pumping every week has been shown to be as effective as a mild anti-depressant in lifting our mood," Maeve says.

How to be Happy and Healthy — the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health, has been compiled by Maeve, with contributions from other mental health experts.

The book outlines steps which anyone suffering from depression or anxiety can take to restore feelings of hope and equilibrium — and once again leave them feeling like they are able to cope with the unpredictable demands of life.

Exercise is one of them, and another is a good diet. A nutritional imbalance caused by poor food choices can lead to a dip in our mood, and eventually to depression.

"I cannot overestimate the difference changing a diet to fresh nutritious food will make," Maeve says. "By moving away from processed foods and refined sugar and caffeine, a person will significantly increase their feelings of wellbeing."

Her food recommendations are easily assimilated into the average diet—including fish,

avocados, hummus, grains and brown rice.

A good diet and regular exercise will lead in turn to a good night's sleep — another element which is vital for good mental health.

"Sleeping tablets have a place, for example, if someone hasn't slept in three days," Maeve says.

"But you can improve your chances of getting a good night's sleep by switching off all technology and turning off the telly, and giving yourself time to wind down," she says.

Another of the seven natural elements of good mental health is mindfulness.

"So many of us are walking heads, and live in our heads all the time," Maeve says.

"So if we're not focused on regrets from the past — which we can do nothing about — we're worrying about our future, and about things which may indeed never happen," she says.

"All these thoughts can build up negative feelings in our bodies. The remedy is to slow down and be present in our daily lives and the right here and now."

Compassion is another element which has been found to have a very positive effect on mental health.

"We're so judgemental, especially when it comes to ourselves," Maeve says. "We're right in with criticism the first chance we get."

"Yet think about how kind we are when someone else makes mistakes. And if it happens to ourselves, we beat ourselves up for not having made a different decision," she says.

"Self-compassion can be a tough thing to master when you feel under a lot of pressure. Yet there are huge benefits in showing yourself some understanding," Maeve says.

"And it also helps you to be more forgiving and compassionate towards other people."

On average, people go to counselling for five to eight sessions. Counselling aims to provide a safe and confidential environment in which a person can talk freely about the issues which are troubling and undermining them.

"None of us is supposed to cope alone, and for a lot of people the sense of tribe or community or a strong social network is no longer there, and they're not talking to anyone," Maeve says.

"Counselling provides an opportunity to unburden, and to let go of anger and resentment, and to take a more measured response," she says.

Last but not least, daily meditation has been found to improve a person's mood.

Maeve herself meditates for 20 minutes most days. "You think all the busyness of your life is who you are."

"Yet while sitting still, we still our mind, and discover different levels to ourselves. And that it's all about putting things in perspective," the busy psychologist says.

How to be Happy and Healthy — the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health, is published by Ashfield Press.



BE HAPPY: We can eat and exercise our way to optimism according to psychologist Maeve Halpin. Photo: David Conachy

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