

LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module


'Healthify' your lifestyle
(food, exercise, sleep)





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How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback
CEDARS – Counselling and Person Enrichment Section (CoPE)
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Main Module

'Healthify' your lifestyle (food, exercise, sleep)

Introduction

People often view their physical and mental wellbeing as two totally separate things. Nothing could be further from the truth; they are fundamentally linked! People with mental health problems tend to eat and sleep poorly, and exercise less. And vice versa. Luckily, the connection also works in the positive way: exercise, a healthy diet and proper sleep can improve mood, reduce stress and anxiety and help prevent mental health problems.

So today, you will...

- Get tips to stay physically active
- Get tips to eat well by overcoming the most common barriers students face
- Get tips to improve your sleep
- Choose to do the sections that are relevant for you, and skip the others!



Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to a healthy lifestyle. What would you like to achieve after doing this module?

Let's go!

Get a move on

It won't surprise you that regular exercise has a very positive impact on your health. You stay physically fitter, sleep better, and exercise can improve your mood and reduce your stress. Some people love exercising, while others have to convince themselves to work out every time.




How is this for you? Do you exercise regularly or not, and how do you feel about it?

If you're already a fitness freak, this chapter might not be very relevant to you. It is mostly aimed at getting you to move regularly, so if you already do so feel free to skip ahead to the next chapters by scrolling down and clicking 'Next'.

If you're still reading, that means you would like to get some tips to get moving. Getting enough exercise can be done by breaking it up into two main types:

1. Lighter daily activity
2. More intense exercise, once or twice a week

Before we go into it: what are your specific goals with regards to physical exercise?



What do you think you would gain if you moved more? Think of physical as well as mental/emotional benefits.


So let's go get you those benefits!

Light daily activity

The trick to moving daily is choosing something that fits into your day, is not too intense and that you can keep up for months on end. It can be the smallest thing: walking to the grocery store instead of cycling. The aim is to move for about 20-30 minutes a day.

Below are some examples of light activity, tick the ones you could do and add your own ideas:

- Going for a walk
- Light dancing
- Yoga
- Light strength training (with weights at home)
- Relaxed cycling
- Light home workouts
- Cleaning
- Going for a leisurely swim
-



Now make a plan for yourself. What will you do in the coming weeks to get at least 20 minutes of movement every day? Make it as concrete as possible. (answer A)

NEXT LEVEL HACK

Moving outdoors and getting some fresh air is especially beneficial. Next time you feel stressed or worried, try taking a walk in the park. It will more than likely do you a world of good!

Extra tips to do daily exercise

Try to incorporate physical activity into your existing routine. For example, go for a walk every day after lunch, or do a short home workout in the morning before showering.

There are many free sites or apps you can take advantage of, such as

- Yoga: <https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene>
- Dancing tutorials: <https://www.youtube.com/user/DanceTutorialsLIVE>
- Home workout apps: Sworkit; Seven: 7-minute workout
- Work out plan offered by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam:
<https://sportcentrumvu.nl/nieuws/blijf-fit-en-train-thuis-met-sportcentrum-vu/>
- And you can find countless free sports videos on Youtube

Take every excuse to move. Do you have to go to the supermarket? Walk there (and take an extra detour). Do you want to hang out with someone? Make it a cycling date and explore the area together.

Weekly physical exercise

It is also recommended to do a somewhat more intense exercise once or twice a week. This will raise your heart rate more (compared to light activity) and that has additional (health) benefits.

Here are some examples of more intense exercise, tick the ones you could do and add your own ideas:

- Running / jogging
- Intense cycling
- Doing cardio or HIIT lessons (at home or at the gym)
- Playing football / basketball / tennis / hockey
- Bootcamping
- Longer, intense dancing (such as dance lessons)
- (Kick)boxing
- Swimming faster and longer
-

Now choose one or two activities to include in your schedule. What are you going to do exactly in the coming months? Make sure that the things you choose are feasible for you.

(answer B)

Now plan them in. Define fixed times per week to do these activities. You could start with once a week, and bump it up to twice in a few weeks. Which day(s) and at what time will you exercise?

Sticking to it

Making plans is often easy, sticking to it is a bit more difficult. That is why we're going to look at possible barriers that might prevent you from carrying out your plans.


First, a question: what is currently preventing you from doing some form of physical activity every day? What circumstances, feelings or thoughts?

You just made this plan for light daily physical activity: (refer to answer A on p. 5)

And possibly also for more intense physical activity: (refer to answer B on p. 6)

Now go over the next few weeks in your mind. What could happen that might prevent you from carrying out these plans? These can be external things (it is raining, an important exam you have to study for), but also internal things (certain feelings or thoughts, such as not feeling like it or low energy).





Write down all the possible barriers you can think of:

Now come up with ways to overcome these barriers. What could you do if this happens, to still get some exercise? Write down a possible solution for each barrier.

Examples of barriers and solutions

I don't feel like it > I'll find a 'workout buddy' who can motivate me or work out with me, or who I can call when I need some tough love.

It is raining > If I can't exercise outside, I will do a YouTube cardio workout at home.

I'm too tired > I will always exercise in the morning instead of in the afternoon or evening because I have the most energy in the morning.

I have to study > I make a weekly schedule in advance (see module 'Ruined routine') in which I include both studying and exercise so that I have time for both.

I'm so comfortable on the couch > I'll put on my favorite dance song to give myself an energy boost to get up.

NEXT LEVEL HACK


Sometimes, we need to create a little external pressure. For example, find a 'workout buddy'; someone you can work out with. Or sign up (and pay) for some classes, if you hate wasting money that might just be enough incentive to go!

Eat well & enjoy

The second basic pillar of physical health is diet. We all know that we should eat healthy: lots of vegetables and fruits, not too much junk food, going easy on the alcohol and all that jazz. So this chapter isn't so much aimed at telling you **what** to eat, rather we want to help stay out of the traps from 'The Student Diet'.

When you eat fried food but it has vegetables in it





What do you think of your diet? Do you eat fairly healthy, or is there room for improvement?

Just like in the previous chapter, this might not be relevant for you if you're already eating well and don't have much to improve in that regard. In that case you can skip this chapter. Still, it might pay to check out the common pitfalls that you might face during your studies.

The Student Diet

The Student Diet is an unhealthy eating pattern that can arise due to several studies-related factors.

Which food-related factors apply to you already or might apply to you at some point this year?

- You don't have time to cook / prepare healthy food
- The cheapest foods often aren't the healthiest (and you're on a budget)
- You don't have great cooking skills yet (especially if you just started living on your own)
- You have lots of social interaction involving snacks and drinks
- In stressful times, it's easier and quicker to go for junk food
- You 'eat or drink your feelings': comforting yourself with unhealthy stuff
-

Here are some tips for each of the factors mentioned above. Read on the ones you run into most often and learn how you can deal with them.

No time

- **Collect quick recipes**

There are a ton of websites (or apps or cook books) for quick & easy recipes. Google is your friend! Make sure to save any recipes that appeal to you in a place that is easily accessible - this step is crucial! Then, if you aren't sure what to eat on a given day, you can browse your collection and pick something you feel like!

- **Meal prepping**

Meal prepping is a process in which you cook or prepare a ton of food in one go, and then separate it into several portions to store in the fridge. You can then simply grab one portion every day, without having to spend any time cooking. Google meal prep inspiration or recipes to find ones that appeal to you (and that you have the facilities for!), pick 1 day a week to prep (such as Sunday afternoon), and save yourself a bunch of time the coming days while still eating healthy, home cooked food.

No money

- **Collect affordable recipes**

This tip is basically the same as the 'quick recipe' one - do a Google search for 'cheap' or 'budget' recipes. And don't forget to save the recipes you find somewhere accessible, otherwise you'll never remember to cook any of them!

- **Find the cheaper shops (or markets)**

In the Netherlands, it's easy to default to a big supermarket chain such as Albert Heijn or Jumbo. However, these are also relatively expensive. At Lidl or Aldi, you can often find cheaper alternatives to any ingredient. And even better: smaller Turkish, Surinamese or Arabic shops often have great deals on fruit and veg. So go for a little 'supermarket treasure hunt' in your area and see what you can find.

No skills

- **Cook with a friend**

If you're not used to cooking and all of a sudden attempt a million and one new dishes, it can be daunting. It's easier to build your skills up one dish at a time. And what better way to learn something new is by cooking with a friend? Simply suggest to cook one of your friend's dishes together so you can learn in the process. Pro tip: keep notes of each step, so you can easily replicate the dish by yourself later.

- **Make YouTube your friend**

There are infinite easy and delicious recipes out there, but they are especially engaging on YouTube. Simply find a channel that makes the kind of food you like to eat, choose a recipe to try out and go wild. This way, you can slowly build up your repertoire of dishes and techniques.

Social eating/drinking

- **Bring an alternative**

Almost any social gathering will involve snacks and alcohol. Of course we're not going to tell you to skip the party, but what you can do is to consider alternatives. Instead of bringing chips/crisps, you could bring carrots and humus. Instead of sweets, bring fruit. And instead of having a mix drink with Coke or Sprite, try it with sparkling water.

- **Set boundaries (and express them!)**

There's also the possibility that you want to drink less (or not at all), but that you feel social pressure. In that case, there's a three step process you can apply. If you struggle with this, there's an exercise for this a little lower on the page.

Stress eating

- Prepare easy and healthy snacks

Stressful times often go hand in hand with chaotic or busy times. It is in those times that we feel we don't have time to prepare or mental space to think about eating healthily. It's much easier and quicker to grab some junk food. A solution to solve the 'no time' issue, is to stock up on quick and easy snacks that are also healthy. Breakfast can be some frozen fruits (defrost within seconds in the microwave) and some yoghurt. Lunch could be a ready-made salad from the store. Afternoon snack: a bag of carrots and some humus. Just make sure you have these ingredients at home, and the amount of junk you eat will probably go down.

- Mindful eating

One great way to reduce stress is - you guessed it - mindfulness or meditation. And did you know you can turn even 'eating' into a mindful activity? It's a super simple process of directing all your attention to the food and your sensations. First, look at the food. Pay attention to the colors, shape and size of the food. Smell it, try to distinguish the smells of different ingredients. Then have a bite and focus on the taste, temperature, texture. Listen to the sounds as you chew or bite into something. Eat your meal with care (no screens!) and notice how much your stress has gone down afterwards.

Emotional or comfort eating

- Get to know your triggers

Identifying your emotional eating triggers is the first step to breaking habitual comfort eating. Be on the lookout for certain feelings or situations that can make you eat your feelings. Do you crave sweets when you're sad? Fatty foods when you're stressed? Start paying attention to how your emotions influence your diet, so you can take action as soon as the trigger presents itself.

- Do a body scan

Another way to stop emotional eating, is by learning to do a 'body scan'. This is a simple technique in which you 'scan' your whole body to see what you're physically really feeling, from head to toe. There's an exercise for this a little lower on the page.

You've now seen lots of different tips on how to avoid common dietary pitfalls. Which tips appealed to you? How can you stay away from 'The Student Diet'?

Below are two optional exercises, feel free to skip them if you don't struggle with that thing!

Optional exercise: set boundaries (and express them!)

If you feel social pressure to eat/drink/do drugs even though you don't really want to, you can follow these 3 steps to set and express your boundaries.



1. Set clear and concrete goals for yourself.

Think of an upcoming social event. For example, do you want to drink absolutely nothing? Only a certain type of drink, or only a certain amount?

Write down your goal with regards to eating/drinking/doing drugs at the upcoming (social) event:

2. Prepare for pressure

Being mentally prepared for possible pressure can make it infinitely easier to stick to your goals. Take a moment to think about all the kinds of pressure you might face.

Write down all the things that people might say or do to pressure you into eating/drinking/doing drugs.

3. Deal with the pressure

Lastly, you come up with ideas on how to deal with that pressure. Below are some examples you can use as inspiration.

- Say you don't drink / will not be drinking tonight.
- Say 'No, thank you' and instantly change the topic.
- Ask a friend beforehand to support you (for example to step in when people pressure you)
- Leave the situation (you might need to visit the restroom, for example)
- Give a reason, such as "I want to get up early tomorrow"

Whatever you say or do, do it with confidence. If you come across doubtful, people might press on, whereas they might back off if you state something with confidence.

For each of the things you wrote down in the previous step, come up with a way to deal with it:

Optional exercise: do a body scan to prevent eating when you're not hungry

A lot of the time, we're totally caught up in our thoughts and emotions, and lose the connection with our physical body. We find ourselves eating something not because we're hungry, but maybe because we're bored or lonely. So before you start snacking or eating unhealthily, do a body scan and pay special attention whether you're actually hungry, or whether it's something else you need.



To do a body scan, simply close your eyes and pay attention to all the things you're physically feeling. An example, yours truly (while writing this) did a body scan and found:

- Her feet felt hot and clammy inside her socks and shoes
- Her bum was hurting from sitting in an uncomfortable chair for too long
- Her hair was tickling her face a little
- Her shoulders were pulled up and tight
- Her mouth was a bit dry

Try it right now, and write down all the sensations you discover during your body scan. Start at your feet and move up bit by bit:

And that wraps up this chapter on healthy diet!

Like sleeping beauty

Everyone sleeps badly from time to time, especially during stressful times (such as the night before an important exam). But sometimes sleeplessness persists and becomes a problem. There are different types of sleep problems: not being able to fall asleep, waking up in the middle of the night, and waking up much too early.

If you're already sleeping well, this chapter might not be as relevant for you and you can simply skip it.

MORNING: want to sleep
AFTERNOON: dying to sleep
NIGHT: can't sleep



If you're still reading, you likely do experience some issues with sleep. What exactly are your sleep problems?

Which negative consequences do you experience from poor sleep?

- Feeling tired
- Getting annoyed more quickly
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling sad or down
-

While there are several types of sleep problems, 3 factors generally have a major impact on sleep. Let's go over each of these.

1. Lifestyle



A healthy diet and enough physical exercise are very important for good sleep - which were covered in the previous chapters of this module. But did you know that the times when you eat or exercise are also important? Eating right before going to bed is not a good idea, because there can be all kinds of substances in the food that can keep your body awake. The same goes for physical movement: exercise makes you alert and keeps you awake, so it is better not to exercise just before going to sleep.

You may already know that caffeine can also interfere with your sleep. Caffeine can be found in many foods and drinks, such as coffee, black tea, chocolate and cocoa, cola and some other soft drinks. It is best to avoid eating or drinking caffeinated drinks at least 4 hours before going to bed.

And lastly, nicotine (in cigarettes) can also make you alert and cause you to stay awake. It's best not to smoke in the last hour before going to bed.

What is your lifestyle like and how does it influence your sleep? Think of your diet, exercise, caffeine and nicotine.

Now think of 1 to 3 small things you could do to improve your lifestyle and possibly also your sleep.

2. Bedroom



The second factor that influences your sleep is your bedroom. Think of the following factors:

Noise	Light
Do you often wake up because of noise? Then try to insulate your room as best you can (such as that crack under the door), or wear earplugs, for example.	Light wakes us up, so it's important that your bedroom is sufficiently dark. For example, you can hang special light blocking curtains or use a piece of cardboard to cover any spots where light shines into your room.
Temperature	Fresh air
We sleep best when it is neither too hot nor too cold. If you often get too hot at night, consider a thinner blanket. If you tend to get cold, sleep in warmer sleeping clothes or buy a thicker blanket.	Fresh air promotes good sleep. If your bedroom is stuffy, you can leave the window ajar at night.

Which of these factors bothers you sometimes?

Noise Light The temperature isn't right Not enough fresh air

What could you do to improve your bedroom and sleeping environment?

NEXT LEVEL HACK

You want your body to associate bed with sleeping so that you automatically get sleepy when you lie down in bed. If you also use your bed for other activities such as eating, watching TV or studying, your body learns that this is not a place to sleep. So try to use your bed only for sleeping (and for sex).

3. Evening ritual



Especially if you have a lot on your mind, it's not always easy to turn these thoughts off and fall asleep instantly. An evening ritual helps you unwind and relax before going to bed. In addition, it also helps to make your sleep rhythm consistent by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day.

First determine what time you want to go to bed and what time you want to get up:

Your evening ritual starts about one hour before bedtime. During that time, you'll unwind from your busy day so that your body and mind are ready for sleep.

Don't

- Do physically demanding activities
- Eat anything, or take in caffeine or nicotine.
- Look at screens (TV, computer or laptop, phone, tablet etc)

Examples of what you can do

- Read something
- Take a nice shower
- Listen to a podcast or (calming) music
- Have a light chat with a housemate.

First, describe what you currently do before going to bed, and what you might want to stop doing.

What would you like your evening ritual to become? Write down what you want to do in that hour and be as concrete as possible.

As with most things, the evening ritual will only work if you are consistent. Don't give up too quickly if you don't achieve the desired result instantly: things like these take time!



Hack wrap-up



Awesome, you made it all the way to the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

Let's recap what you wanted to achieve with regards to a healthier lifestyle on p. 2.

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- Today you got tips to stay physically active and made a plan for yourself for light daily and more intense weekly exercise.
- You learned about the common dietary pitfalls students face and got tips to avoid them.
- You got tips to improve your sleep by improving your lifestyle, bedroom and evening ritual.



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Stress less & relax more' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).