

Presentation: Foundations of well-being

There are everyday activities, habits, and routines men can put in place to enhance their personal and relational well-being. Placing a focus on developing habits that contribute to personal health and wellness are important for everyone, not just men who are dealing with the legacy of sexual abuse. However, a focus on developing and maintaining a solid base can be particularly useful for men who have been sexually abused.

1 Exercise:

Exercise and leading an active lifestyle are linked to positive mental health. Exercise has the ability to change your state of mind in both the short and long term, in ways that give you more energy for dealing with life's challenges. Exercise can provide a sense of mastery, and a connection with our bodies. All adults benefit from at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity each day. If you can't do this every day, it will still help you to try and exercise fairly regularly. This exercise does not have to be done all at once; you can break it down into sessions of at least 10 minutes.

Different types of activity suit different people. Some people prefer team sports, while some people like individual sports. Some people prefer to play competitively, others like a more social environment. Some people prefer exercise rather than games or sports. The main thing is that you find something that is fun, or that gives you a sense of achievement.

Facilitate discussion on the exercise habits of group members. How much exercise or physical activity do you engage in as part of your daily/weekly routine? What exercise do you enjoy? Some men can get into a habit of over-exercising, do you have the right balance?

2 Eating well:

Eating well, and drinking enough fluid, is about providing your body and mind with the nutrients that keep you active and your mind alert, as well as about enjoying the food you eat. There are many nutritional guides to consider, and daily milestones to achieve—e.g., so many servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Facilitate discussion on eating habits. Are you mindful about what you eat, or do you eat in an automaton-type fashion? What about over-eating, or under-eating? Do you enjoy preparing meals and eating, or is it simply a chore? Where are you when you are eating well, and where do you find it difficult to eat well?

3 Sleeping:

Sleeping helps you recover from the previous day and get ready for the next one. It helps you think more clearly, manage difficult situations better, and feel more energetic.

The most important part of sleep is the 'deep sleep' phase, which is the first 5 hours after you fall asleep. It's nice to sleep for 8 hours, but it's not always needed (and some people don't like sleeping that long). However, regularly getting less than 5 hours sleep a night can be a problem. Also, stress can get in the way of a good night's sleep. There can be a cycle of worry, where anxiety about not being able to sleep makes it even harder to relax. Being worried about having nightmares can also make it hard to relax and get to sleep.

Facilitate discussion re: sleeping habits. Many men who have been sexually abused report disturbed sleep. How many hours of sleep are you getting each night? How much is deep sleep? How many hours would you like to get? Introduce strategies that support sleep.

4 Staying connected with others:

Staying connected to others has a positive effect on your general well-being. Feelings of depression can thrive on isolation and loneliness. The more social roles you have with other people—be it neighbours, co-workers, friends—has a positive correlation to mental health. It is useful to try and make time to catch up with people, and to avoid being isolated.

Some guidance for facilitating this topic could include asking about the range of people in the lives of participants that share different levels and kinds of connection. For example:

- A person you might have a coffee or drink with...
- A person you might share a meal with...
- A person you might do something fun or relaxing with...
- A person you could tell that you are participating in this group...

Some additional considerations:

- Not everyone in your life has to know everything about you, including your experience of abuse (discuss around the theme of: 'If people really knew who I am, they wouldn't want to be around me').
- It is worth it to make an extra effort to connect with supportive people who give you extra energy.
- It might be useful to take a break from relationships that seem draining.
- Some people who are in your life may not meet the definition of trustworthy.

Reaching out and doing things for others also has the benefit of developing our own well-being. It is not unusual to lose sight of the fact that you have something to offer. For some men, accepting help becomes easier if they can also do something in turn that helps someone else. Some further questions:

- What are ways in which we reach out to others? (e.g., volunteering, offering to help a friend or neighbour, making time to listen to someone you know who is having a hard time, etc.)
- How does helping others help you?
- How does it fit in with the kind of person you are or want to be?

5 Mindfulness:

There are a lot of ways to define what mindfulness is. For our purposes, mindfulness is about paying attention to things about yourself and your environment that would normally go unnoticed. Mindfulness allows us to step away from negative thoughts and feelings that often seem so compelling. Practising mindfulness is useful in and of itself, not just when you are having difficulties. You can incorporate it into your everyday routines, such as practising mindful walking or mindfully drinking tea or coffee. By consciously using mindfulness throughout as much of your day as possible, you increase your awareness, and enhance your sense of control and choice.

Yet, mindfulness practice in general can go against much of men's everyday experience of what to do about problems and difficulties. In particular, to notice an unpleasant thought, feeling, or situation, and to deliberately *not* do anything 'about' it, challenges the habit of being pro-active and tackling problems head on.

Men sometimes report that being invited into mindfulness practices can initially increase distress levels, as they actually begin to notice and pay attention to just how much discomfort and pain they are 'carrying around'.

6 Relaxation:

The ability to gently slow your breathing, relax your muscles, and calm your self is a useful life skill. Men who have been subjected to traumatic experiences, such as sexual abuse, can find relaxation difficult. At one time, staying alert and constantly checking for danger might have been necessary in order to keep safe and reduce harm. Learning to simply take some quiet time-out, and not be focused on 'getting something done', can help you to relax and feel fresh and energised.

Some people find certain routines and hobbies relaxing, like gardening or going for walks. Other people employ short, focused, relaxation-based exercises with a specific purpose in mind—usually to slow down your breathing or relax when you are tense. People who have experienced trauma find that imaginative relaxation—focusing on an image or thought that is calming and soothing—works as well as body-centred approaches.