



The Menopause & lifestyle change

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INTRODUCTION

The Menopause, and why lifestyle change is so important.

The menopause transition is a really important time for women (it's called 'the Change' for a reason). If you're entering this phase of your life, now's the time to look after yourself, prioritise your health and accept that you may need a little support along the way.

Menopause brings a noticeable (and often unwelcome) change in your metabolism, and this, combined with ageing, means you're more likely to develop chronic health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia or osteoporosis.

The good news, however, is that by taking simple steps and adopting positive lifestyle changes you can turn this around and follow a happier and healthier path.

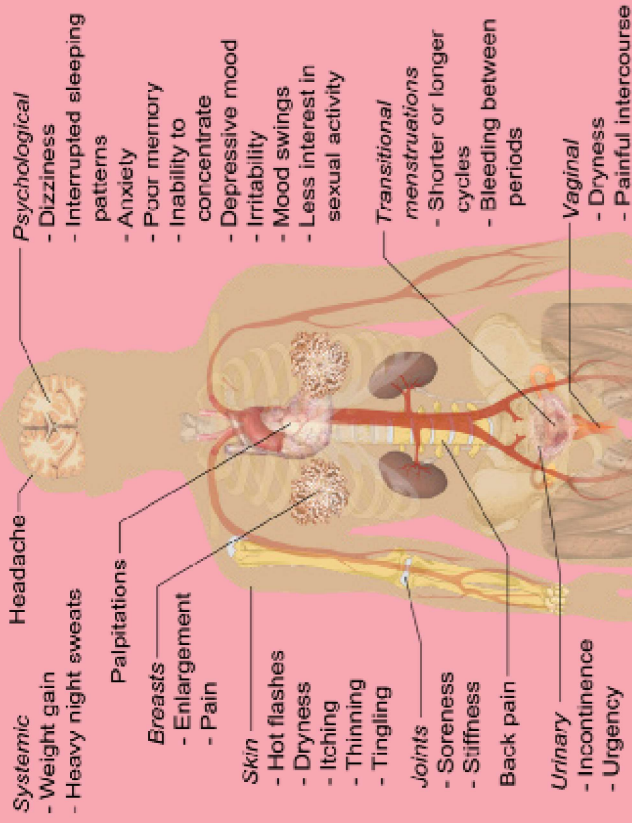


OUR BODY

What happens to our body when we enter the perimenopause/ menopausal years?

Oestrogen is used by all sorts of different cells, so when levels start fluctuating, it can cause a myriad of unexpected symptoms throughout your body. Symptoms tend to last an average of seven years, but in some women they can hang around a lot longer, which is why it's good to get to grips with them early on.

Symptoms of Menopause



WHAT ARE THE LONGER-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF MENOPAUSE?

Before we focus on solutions and empowering change, let's look at what's going on in your body.

Heart

Hormonal changes mean that fat is more likely to accumulate around your middle and this blocks the body's insulin from working effectively.

We need insulin to reduce our blood sugar, so if it's not working properly, you can end up with increased levels of blood sugar. This is harmful to everywhere in the body, most significantly the heart and brain.

At the same time, the normal ageing process naturally results in reduced muscle tissue. Muscle is a key area for storing excess sugar so if our muscle levels fall (decreasing our "sugar storage space") this sugar is converted into fat and stored (unfortunately) around our waists.

The combination of hormonal changes and natural ageing increases your risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD).

CVD is one of the leading causes of death in the UK (in women as well as men). Luckily, many of the risk factors for CVD are modifiable so if you make changes, you can significantly reduce this risk.



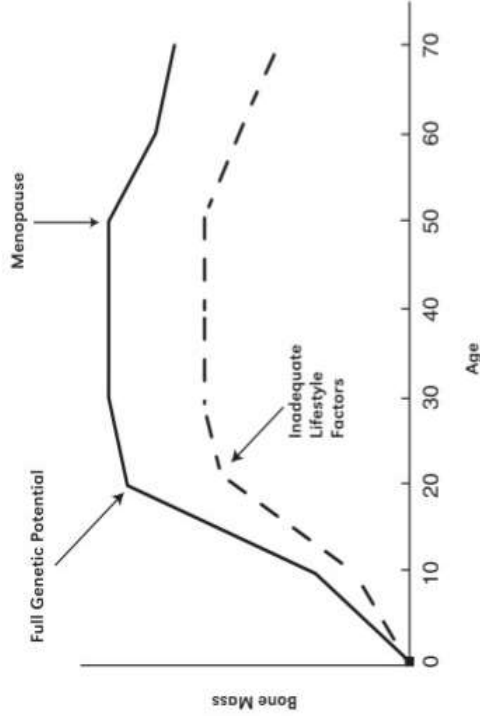
Bones

In menopause, oestrogen decreases sharply. Oestrogen is needed to create bones, and so less oestrogen, means less bone. At the same time, ageing causes muscle wastage, which also leads to bone loss. Around the time of menopause, women lose about 7% of their bone each year, but by the time they reach 65, this slows down to 2% per year.

Bone loss results in brittle bones and when this is advanced, it's called osteoporosis. If you have brittle bones, then you're more likely to break them. This is important because broken bones can cause significant suffering and even death.

One in two women over 50 will break a brittle bone (although interestingly the figure for men is a lot lower – 1 in 5). In the UK there are 79,000 hip fractures every year – 28.7% die within 12 months and 53% can no longer live independently. This is why it's so important to do everything we can to improve our bone strength.

This graph below shows how important lifestyle measures are for bone health. By implementing certain lifestyle habits, you can improve your bone mass potential. It's great to start late, but even better to start early. The important thing is to be consistent and keep going!



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Bone Mass Versus Age with Optimal and Suboptimal Bone Acquisition.
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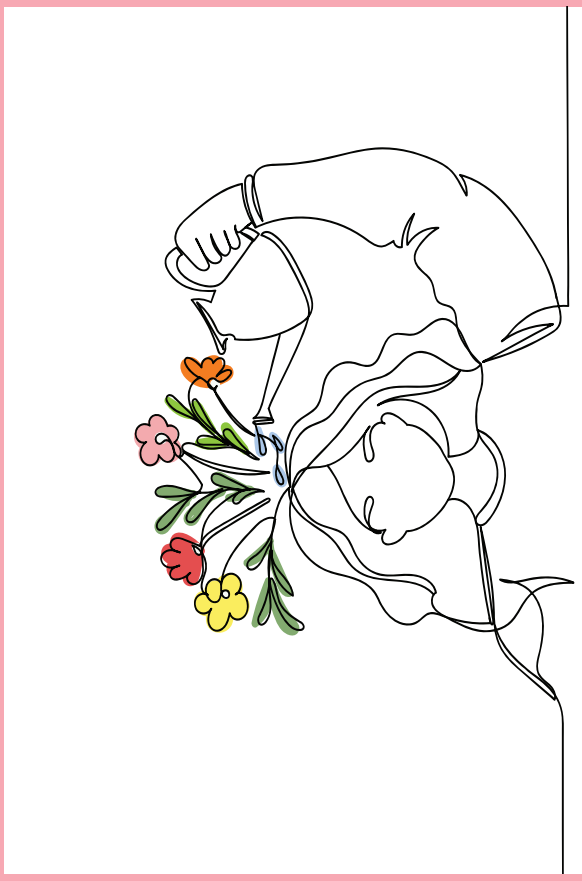
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Source Heaney et al., Osteoporosis Int, 2000
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Brain

The time around menopause or perimenopause can also bring mental health challenges. Women frequently present with anxiety, depression, brain fog, poor concentration, loss of interest in everyday activities and often feel as though they've lost their identity. If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, implementing lifestyle habits can be a real gamechanger.

Women also have a greater risk of developing dementia during their lifetime – in fact they're twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's Disease than men! One reason could be because women live longer than men, but we still don't understand why there's such a marked difference. Other theories are that it could be linked to hormonal changes or lifestyle differences.

As you enter perimenopause, it's a brilliant time to consider ways to improve and stimulate your brain health. After all, who doesn't want a life where they feel mentally as strong as possible?



RISKS

The greatest risks are the things that we can control – and it's never too late to benefit from making lifestyle changes.



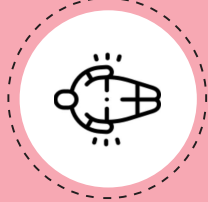
High blood pressure



Smoking



High cholesterol



Obesity



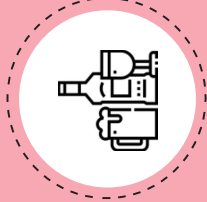
Poor diet



Diabetes



Lack of exercise



Alcohol

THE POWER OF LIFESTYLE

Implementing behaviours consistently can have transformative effects on your health.



Nutrition



Movement



Sleep



Emotional Health

NUTRITION

When it comes to nutrition, I'm sure you probably feel like you've heard it all before. Maybe you're fed up with people trying to tell you how and what to eat? And maybe you feel like you don't need help?

Do any of these phrases ring a bell? Health professionals hear them a lot in clinic.

"My diet is actually pretty good already"

"Healthy food is more expensive"

"It's exceptionally hard to eat better"

"I don't have time"

"My health problems make it hard for me to be healthy"

"There are so many opinions on diet out there, it's hard to know who to believe"

Please take a look at this information, which I hope will inspire and motivate you to make changes to your diet. Or at least consider the need to make changes. It's not easy. Really, it's not. But it can make a HUGE difference to how you feel in both the short and long-term.

What we eat affects our body in so many different ways. Eating badly clogs up blood vessels, weakens bones and releases chemicals that make us feel even worse.

WHAT'S YOUR GUT TELLING YOU?

Some of the benefits of eating better are down to improving the gut microbiome. You may've heard of this, but what is it?

The gut microbiome is the collection of bacteria and other microorganisms that live in our gut. Each person has a unique microbiome and what we eat directly affects the quality of it. A healthy and diverse microbiome promotes good physical and mental health. When the right type of food is digested by microorganisms, it can help protect against heart disease, type 2 diabetes, inflammatory diseases, cancer and obesity. This is because the microbes play an important role in stimulating the immune system, breaking down harmful products, making vitamins and extracting nutrients from our food.

Conversely the wrong kinds of food – which are abundant in our Western diets – can damage this delicate microbiome. It might seem strange that what we eat can directly affect our mental health – but it really can. Nerve cells in the gut respond to healthy (mainly plant-based) foods and release neurochemicals which act on the brain.

A healthy gut microbiome also affects how hormones work. There is a collection of gut bacteria known as estrobolome which changes the body's circulating oestrogen levels and can affect how well HRT works for you.

Everyone has a unique gut, which will thrive on a specific diet that's right for you. It can be useful to experiment with what, how and when you eat and switch things up as you go along.

TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR GUT MICROBIOME:

Cut down on processed food

People often say that they don't eat any processed food, but most food bought in a packet is in fact processed. It's almost impossible in our society not to eat processed foods. Consider looking at the ingredient list on the back of the pack – the more ingredients there are, the more processed it is. A good, general rule is 'the fresher the better' and ideally choose foods that don't have an ingredient list.

Reduce refined carbohydrates

You will find these nasties everywhere in Western culture – they cause the gut to release damaging stress chemicals. We're talking white bread, white pasta/rice, biscuits and cake.

Up your intake of whole foods

These are foods that have not been meddled with by humans and are completely free from additives – think chickpeas, lentils, quinoa, beans, pulses and brown or wild rice.

Increase Fibre Intake

Fibre is the perfect fuel for your microbes – they use it to make chemicals that lower your cholesterol. Ideally you should consume at least 30g a day. Good examples of fibre are vegetables, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds (it's present in all plant foods).

Eat a more diverse selection of vegetables (especially those that are brightly coloured)

Eat the rainbow

You may've heard the phrase, 'eat the rainbow'. This means having a good mix of brightly coloured whole foods on your plate (food colourings don't count!). Vibrant vegetables contain antioxidants (vitamins and minerals which can protect your body from damage). The antioxidant determines the colour, so eating a wide range of fruit and vegetables is a great way to increase your antioxidant intake.

DIETARY ESSENTIALS

Complex food made simple

Healthy Fats

The information around fats is confusing and often misinterpreted, but the good news is that healthy fats offer brilliant benefits for brain and heart health. Healthy fats promote good blood vessel health and include olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds. The fats to avoid are saturated fats (which are abundant in processed foods), as these have damaging effects on our blood vessels.

Omega 3

Omega 3 (a healthy fat) plays a particularly important role in brain health and it's good to ensure you're getting enough of this, either by eating at least two portions of oily fish a week (SMASH – salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herring) or taking omega 3 supplements

There are some great plant-based sources of omega 3, including flaxseed/linseed, chia seed and walnuts and vegetarians may want to consider taking an algae-oil omega 3 supplement. Research shows that processed food promotes omega 6 fats, so by reducing them we can cut the amount of omega 6 in our system, while also increasing our omega 3 levels.

Protein Intake

Protein is vital in our body to build, repair and regulate. It is used to build bones, muscles, skin, hair and nails, repair damaged tissue and make hormones and enzymes, and is essential to our daily functioning. Aim for 1-1.2g of protein per kg of body weight every day. Foods high in protein include meat, fish, tofu, eggs, seeds, nuts, legumes, beans, lentils, milk and cheese.

Vitamins

Lots of different vitamins are required for our bodies to function properly. If you stick to a predominantly plant-based, whole food diet, you will get enough of these vitamins without having to supplement. There are a few listed below that are particularly important for bone and brain health.

B12, B6, folate

These are important for brain health. You'll get plenty of them from regular consumption of green leafy vegetables, but if you often go without for a few days, it's a good idea to supplement.

Alcohol

Alcohol aggravates hot flushes and affects sleep so it's a good idea to reduce your consumption. The Government guidelines for alcohol consumption recommend no more than 14 units a week, spread over 3 or 4 days. However, there's no 'safe level' for alcohol intake. Drinking regularly can increase the risk of certain cancers, heart disease, strokes, liver disease and brain disease. Drinking less will certainly help you stay healthy for longer.

Vitamin D

This is important for bones and many of us are deficient as we need the sun to make it. It's recommended you take a 400-800iu daily supplement between October – March (or all year round for those with darker skin or who spend most of the day inside).

Calcium

This is also important for bone health. Most people will be getting adequate amounts, but if you're not sure, you can use a 'calcium calculator' online to work it out.

Caffeine

Caffeine exacerbates hot flushes so reducing consumption, can improve symptoms. It stays in your system for a long time so if you consume it after midday, it can also affect your sleep pattern – another good reason to cut down!

OTHER NUTRITIONAL TIPS

While there's no specific menopause diet, there's some evidence that certain foods such as soy, chickpeas, lentils, beans, leafy green vegetables and berries can improve menopausal symptoms.

A recent study showed that women who ate a gut-friendly diet were 30% less likely to suffer from hot flushes and disturbed sleep.

Consider increasing the gaps between meals. This gives your gut time to rest and allows your body to repair. This is sometimes called intermittent fasting and can include many different approaches. Different approaches suit different people at different times. It's good to start with a 12-hour rest overnight (for example stop eating at 7pm and restart at 7am) and then build up to longer if you can.

Recent research has revealed some useful ways to reduce blood sugar spikes when eating. Blood sugar spikes can make us feel unwell (brain fog, fatigue, headaches) and also cause damage to various body systems, particularly those affecting heart, brain and metabolic health. More research and understanding in this area is needed, but for now, here are some useful tips to control your blood sugar spikes.

Apple Cider Vinegar

Consuming apple cider vinegar 10 minutes before you eat. There are other foods that have similar effects, including cinnamon, which is a great accompaniment to porridge!

The order or meals

Eating meals in a certain order – first the fibre (e.g. vegetables), then the protein (e.g. meat, fish, tofu), then the carbohydrate (e.g. potato, rice, pasta, beans).

Move after eating

Gently moving your body after eating. This could be going for a walk, pumping your calf muscles, jumping up and down or dancing – whatever you choose!

MOVEMENT

Exercise is hugely beneficial for long-term health

If you understand the reasons why it's so good for you, it may just inspire you to make some changes. If the same benefits could be found in a pill, everyone would be taking it.

Instead of exercise, let's talk about body movement. Hands up who thinks exercise means going to the gym for an hour, which requires time and money? Wrong! Body movement is a way of thinking differently about exercise. What's most important is intentionally moving your body in certain ways throughout the day, at times that fit in with your busy life, not joining a gym!

Strength training

This doesn't necessarily mean lifting heavy weights at the gym, it simply means gradually increasing the strength of your muscles.

Increasing muscle strength has a multitude of benefits. Not only does it increase your metabolic rate and the ability to burn fat (resulting in body fat loss), but it also increases your bone mass density, which creates stronger bones and reduces the risk of broken bones.

It releases neurochemicals which help repair damaged brain cells and is a powerful way to maintain brain health.

Strength training can be achieved by lifting weights (either at home or in a gym) or using your own body weight as resistance.

Aerobic movement

This can incorporate many activities such as:

Weight-bearing, high-impact exercise e.g. running, dancing, tennis, gymnastics.

Weight-bearing, low-impact exercise e.g. walking, cross trainer, step machine.

Non-weight-bearing e.g. swimming, cycling.

All are beneficial for cardiovascular and mental health.

Restorative Movement

e.g. yoga and Pilates, which are great for mind and body.

These are beneficial for improving strength and flexibility (which in turn helps to reduce falls as we age).

It also usually incorporates breathing techniques, which can help with stress management and day-to-day mental health.



EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Perimenopause can be a tough time for women. Hormonal fluctuations can have a huge psychological impact, while at the same time, there can be a lot of life pressure. It's a time when women have increased responsibilities with work, elderly parents and children, and also may have to deal with traumatic life events.

This information sheet specifically covers lifestyle interventions. Some people may also require further input in the form of specific therapy or medication. It's always worth speaking to a medical professional about how you're feeling.

It's hugely beneficial to create time (even if that's just 10 minutes a day) to do something for yourself. Carving out some me time every day is a good way of telling yourself that you are important. It's also an opportunity to reset your nervous system and put things into perspective. This is not to belittle any of your problems or experiences – life can be tough. However, taking a little bit of time for yourself can be transformational.



Examples of activities which are proven to have a positive impact on mental health include:

The key is finding activities that you enjoy. If you repeat an activity for 10 minutes every day, after a few weeks, it becomes a habit. You may then be able to gradually increase the amount of time you spend doing it.



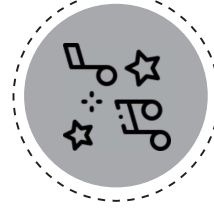
Journaling



Breathing practices



Body movement & breathing



Listening to music, dancing or playing an instrument



Being out in nature



Learning something new

SLEEP

Are you having trouble sleeping? You're not alone. Sleep disturbance is one of the most common symptoms reported by perimenopausal women.

This includes struggling to get to sleep, waking up multiple times in the night and waking early. There are many reasons why this can happen, the most common being night sweats, frequent urination, anxiety and depression.

A poor night's sleep can trigger a whole chain reaction of challenges:

- Lower mood and higher stress levels, which can impair sleep further.
- Reduced levels of the hormone leptin (which suppresses hunger), so you're more likely to make poor food choices and ultimately, gain weight.
- Trouble thinking and concentrating.
- Reduced sex drive.
- If this is a sustained issue, it can also affect long-term memory and increase the risk of heart disease.

SLEEP & LIFESTYLE

How can sleep be improved through lifestyle measures?

- Consistency. Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning.
- Implementing a calmer bedtime routine – dimming lights, no screens, an evening breathing/yoga practice, reading a fiction book.
- Keeping the bedroom temperature cool.
- Reducing caffeine intake (coffee, tea, energy drinks) – caffeine is a stimulant and hangs around the body a long time after consumption, so avoid it after midday.
- Reducing alcohol intake – alcohol impairs the quality of sleep.
- Avoiding large meals before bed.
- Getting body movement during the day.
- Getting outside during the day.

Many women need additional help with sleep. These include:

- HRT for night sweats
- Medication to help with anxiety, depression and urinary symptoms
- Psychological therapies

MINDSET IS KEY

How to implement lifestyle change

There's so much information out there and it can feel overwhelming. While it's simply not possible to make lots of changes all at once and make them stick, it is possible to do it gradually and make it last a lifetime.

It's easy to talk to yourself in a negative way (we all do it).

Any of these sound familiar?

"This is who I am; I can't change."

"I've always been bigger. I'll always be like this."

"I've always been bad at sport; I can't exercise."

"These changes are for other people"

"I can't do this."

It may be a surprise to you, but there is an alternative way to think – and everyone can access this. If we tell ourselves, we can do something, it opens a whole world of possibility. If we tell ourselves this every day, we will eventually start to believe it, and from this belief comes positive change.

.....
Adopting a positive growth mindset is powerful and helps you see that anything is possible.
.....

GROWTH MINDSET

FIXED

I DON'T THINK I CAN DO IT

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO IT

I DON'T LIKE CHALLENGES

THIS IS TOO HARD

I'M NOT SMART ENOUGH

I ALWAYS MAKE MISTAKES

FLEXIBLE

I'LL KEEP TRYING

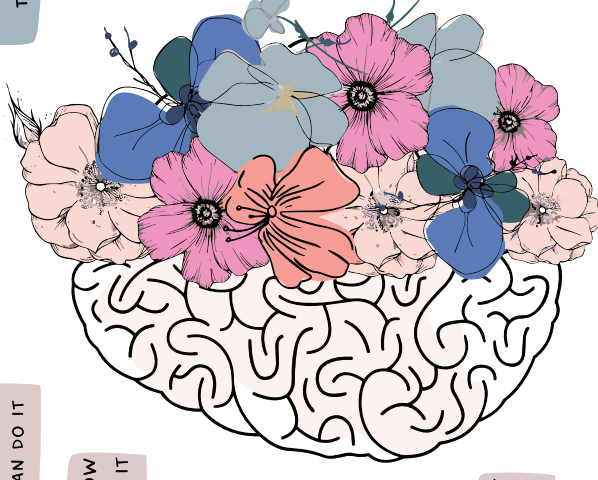
I'LL FIGURE OUT A DIFFERENT WAY

CHALLENGES HELP ME GROW

IF I KEEP PRACTICING IT WILL GET EASIER

I'LL GIVE IT MY BEST EFFORT

I CAN LEARN FROM MY MISTAKES



WHY

Think about why you want to make the change and this will motivate you.

You could even write down your 'why' and stick it somewhere you'll see it every day (on the fridge, your mirror, your bedside table etc.).

It might be a good time to sit in stillness and think about what your health and life goals are.

For example, I want to"

"Live a life that's as long and healthy as possible to watch my grandchildren grow up"

"Reverse my diabetes"

"Be stronger"

"Feel happier"

"Minimise my chances of getting dementia"

SMART GOALS

Using 'SMART' goals is a useful way to set out achievable changes. Pick 1 or 2 things to change at a time. Any more than this and you'll feel overwhelmed and less able to achieve them.

Using Yoga as an example of a SMART goal:

Specific – I'm going to start yoga

Measurable – I'm going to do 10 minutes every day

Achievable – I can fit in a 10-minute practice daily

Realistic – I can do this at home using YouTube

Time limited – I'm going to do this for a month and then see how I feel at the end

Once you've achieved your SMART goal, you'll feel good, and possibly even inspired to introduce another healthy lifestyle change.

Show yourself some self-compassion. If you don't achieve what you set out to achieve, don't beat yourself up! Think about the obstacles that got in your way and how you could change your goal to make it more achievable. Everyone fails at goals, and that's OK. If we're kind to ourselves, we're more likely to succeed in the future.

Use positive affirmations around lifestyle changes to encourage and inspire belief in yourself. Think: "I am capable of achieving anything I put my mind to."

FIRST STEPS

Here are some examples of how you can get started.

Nutrition

Start by looking at what you are eating and cutting out some processed food.

Body movement

You don't need a gym and you don't need lots of time! Try doing planks or star jumps while you're waiting for the kettle to boil. Or lunges and knee ups while your food is cooking. Or dance to music with the kids. If you have the luxury of a gym membership or 30 minutes of spare time – use it! It's the best investment you'll ever make.

Emotional health

Set aside 10 minutes every day to be still (without a phone) and do something just for you. It could be a bath, breathing, yoga, writing...whatever works for you.

Sleep

Try and go to bed and get up at roughly the same time every day. Avoid caffeine after midday and try to reduce your alcohol consumption.

REMEMBER

Change is hard.

But YOU can do this.

It's OK to have setbacks along the way.

Be kind to yourself.

This is worth it!