

Research Paper

## Healthy Living, Healthy Mind: The Impact of Daily Choices on Mental Well-being

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### ABSTRACT

Mental health is a critical component of overall well-being, influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. Recently, lifestyle factors—diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management—have emerged as significant contributors to mental health outcomes. This study examines the role of these modifiable factors in shaping mental health, drawing from empirical research and theoretical frameworks that highlight their preventive and therapeutic potential. A review of dietary patterns reveals that nutrient-rich diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, are associated with lower risks of depression and anxiety, likely due to their anti-inflammatory properties. Physical activity, similarly, has been shown to alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety through neurochemical pathways and social interactions. Sleep quality and duration are essential for emotional regulation, with insomnia linked to mood disorders. Finally, stress management strategies, including mindfulness and relaxation techniques, offer protective effects against chronic stress-related mental health problems. Understanding these lifestyle elements' influence on mental health can inform public health policies and individual interventions, emphasizing preventive measures over symptom-focused treatments. This paper underscores the importance of adopting healthy lifestyle practices as a proactive approach to mental health care.

**Keywords:** *Healthy Living, Healthy Mind, Daily Choices, Mental Well-being*

Mental health is a multifaceted concept encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being, fundamentally shaping how individuals perceive and interact with the world, respond to stress, build relationships, and make life decisions (World Health Organization, 2014). A balanced mental state enables individuals to effectively navigate daily challenges, fostering resilience, productivity, and a higher quality of life. However, mental health issues—such as depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders—have become increasingly prevalent worldwide, posing considerable social, economic, and public health challenges. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression alone affects over 300 million people, making it a leading cause of disability globally (WHO, 2017). In light of this escalating burden and its broad-ranging impact, there is a pressing need for strategies that prioritize not only treatment but also prevention. Lifestyle-oriented approaches have shown significant promise in this regard,

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offering accessible, modifiable, and holistic solutions for enhancing mental health outcomes (Berk et al., 2013).

Historically, the focus on mental health treatment has often been pharmacological and symptom-focused, addressing mental health issues once they have already manifested. However, recent research suggests that preventive approaches that include lifestyle modifications may offer substantial benefits. The role of diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management in mental health is increasingly underscored, with growing evidence pointing to these modifiable lifestyle factors as key influencers of mental health outcomes. These factors represent a practical and proactive approach to mental health care, empowering individuals to make daily choices that can safeguard and enhance their mental health over the long term (O'Neil et al., 2014).

One of the significant developments in mental health research has been the rise of lifestyle psychiatry, a field dedicated to exploring how lifestyle behaviours influence mental health. Lifestyle psychiatry highlights the preventive and therapeutic potential of lifestyle changes, positioning them not merely as supplements to traditional treatment but as core components of mental health care (Firth et al., 2019). Unlike traditional pharmacological treatments that aim to alleviate symptoms, lifestyle changes enable individuals to actively engage in practices that protect and promote their mental well-being, contributing to improved emotional resilience and cognitive function. This shift from a reactive, symptom-focused approach to a proactive, preventive approach represents a transformative perspective in mental health care.

In particular, lifestyle psychiatry has explored the biological, psychological, and social mechanisms through which lifestyle factors impact mental health. Dietary habits, for example, can directly affect brain function through nutrient intake, which impacts neurotransmitter synthesis, neuroinflammation, and the gut-brain axis. Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats—like the Mediterranean diet—are associated with a reduced risk of mood disorders due to their nutrient density and anti-inflammatory properties (Jacka et al., 2010). Physical activity, likewise, plays a critical role in maintaining mental health by stimulating the release of endorphins and serotonin, which help alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety (Schuch et al., 2016). Similarly, sleep quality and duration are essential for emotional regulation and cognitive health, with sleep disturbances often co-occurring with mental health disorders (Baglioni et al., 2016).

Stress management, another key lifestyle factor, directly influences mental health by impacting the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and cortisol levels, which can affect mood regulation and resilience. Practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation techniques offer effective ways to manage stress and reduce its negative impact on mental health (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). These lifestyle behaviours do not function in isolation but instead interact to produce cumulative effects on mental health, underscoring the importance of adopting a holistic approach to mental health care.

The biopsychosocial model of health provides a useful framework for understanding how these lifestyle factors interact to shape mental health. This model posits that biological, psychological, and social factors combine to influence mental health outcomes, suggesting that a holistic approach that incorporates lifestyle changes alongside traditional treatment modalities may be the most effective way to address and prevent mental health issues (Engel, 1977). Additionally, the stress-vulnerability model suggests that individuals with

certain genetic or psychological predispositions are more likely to develop mental health disorders when exposed to stressors, further highlighting the value of lifestyle changes that reduce exposure to these triggers (Zubin & Spring, 1977). By supporting mental resilience and reducing stress vulnerability, lifestyle modifications hold promise as preventive tools that address root causes rather than symptoms alone.

Given the multifactorial and interdependent nature of mental health, integrating lifestyle changes into mental health treatment and prevention strategies is both timely and essential. This integration allows for a shift from a predominantly reactive healthcare model, focused on treating illness, to a proactive approach that emphasizes mental health maintenance and resilience-building. Public health policies and clinical practice could thus benefit from a broader recognition of lifestyle psychiatry's potential, promoting educational campaigns and community programs that encourage healthier lifestyle practices. By understanding the power of diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management to influence mental health, individuals and healthcare providers alike can leverage lifestyle changes as effective tools for building mental resilience and fostering long-term well-being.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of lifestyle and mental health has become a focal point of research, underscoring the influence of daily behaviours—such as diet, physical activity, sleep quality, and stress management—on mental well-being. As the global prevalence of mental health disorders continues to rise, researchers have increasingly focused on lifestyle-oriented interventions to both treat and prevent mental illness (Firth et al., 2019). This literature review synthesizes findings from recent studies on the four primary lifestyle domains and their impact on mental health outcomes, highlighting significant advancements in the field of lifestyle psychiatry.

#### 1. Diet and Mental Health

Numerous studies have documented the substantial role that diet plays in mental health, particularly in relation to mood disorders and cognitive function. Nutritional psychiatry, an emerging field within lifestyle psychiatry, emphasizes the role of diet quality in mental health, linking nutrient-rich diets with improved psychological outcomes and diets high in processed foods and sugars with increased risk of mental health issues. The Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes whole grains, lean proteins, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats, has been associated with a lower risk of depression and anxiety. Jacka et al. (2010) conducted a landmark study demonstrating the positive correlation between Mediterranean diet adherence and mental health, highlighting how anti-inflammatory foods in this diet can reduce neuroinflammation, a contributor to mood disorders.

Further, the gut-brain axis has emerged as a key area of interest in understanding the connection between diet and mental health. This bidirectional communication system, linking the gastrointestinal system with the central nervous system, suggests that gut microbiota—the community of bacteria residing in the intestines—may influence brain health and mood regulation (Sarkar et al., 2018). Fermented foods, probiotics, and Fiber-rich diets are linked to a healthier gut microbiome, which has been shown to enhance mood and cognitive function. For instance, a study by Foster and Neufeld (2013) found that participants who consumed probiotics showed improvements in mental health markers such as reduced stress and anxiety. The dietary role in mental health is further corroborated by findings that Western diets, characterized by high levels of saturated fats, sugars, and

processed foods, are associated with an increased prevalence of depressive symptoms (O'Neil et al., 2014).

### **2. Physical Activity and Mental Health**

The relationship between physical activity and mental health has been extensively documented, with exercise emerging as one of the most effective non-pharmacological treatments for mental health disorders. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins and other neurochemicals that promote a sense of well-being, while also reducing levels of stress-related hormones such as cortisol. A meta-analysis conducted by Schuch et al. (2016) highlighted that regular physical activity significantly reduces the risk of depression by improving mood regulation and reducing inflammation. Furthermore, exercise has been shown to positively impact self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and improve cognitive functioning, particularly in those with existing mental health conditions (Rosenbaum et al., 2019).

Different forms of physical activity contribute to mental health in varied ways. Aerobic exercises, such as running, swimming, and cycling, are effective for mood elevation and cognitive improvement, while strength training has shown benefits in reducing anxiety and enhancing self-image (Craft & Perna, 2004). Group-based physical activities also promote social interaction and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, which are commonly associated with mental health challenges. Interestingly, a study by Peluso and Guerra de Andrade (2005) emphasized the synergistic benefits of combining physical activity with nature exposure, such as hiking or outdoor walking, for enhanced mood and stress relief. These findings underscore the need for integrating exercise into routine mental health interventions as a preventive and therapeutic tool.

### **3. Sleep and Mental Health**

Sleep is an essential physiological process that plays a critical role in maintaining mental health. Disturbances in sleep, such as insomnia, poor sleep quality, and irregular sleep patterns, are strongly associated with mental health disorders, particularly depression and anxiety. A meta-analysis by Baglioni et al. (2016) found that sleep disturbances are both a symptom and a predictor of depression, suggesting a bidirectional relationship between sleep and mental health. Sleep deprivation has been shown to impair cognitive function, emotional regulation, and resilience, making individuals more vulnerable to stressors and negative mood states.

Sleep hygiene—practices that promote consistent and restorative sleep—has been advocated as an effective intervention to improve mental health. Elements of good sleep hygiene include maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, creating a sleep-conducive environment, and limiting exposure to stimulants before bedtime. Studies have demonstrated that individuals who practice sleep hygiene experience lower levels of stress and improved mood stability (Harvey et al., 2011). Additionally, disruptions in circadian rhythm, the body's natural sleep-wake cycle, have been linked to mood disorders, with research indicating that maintaining a regular sleep schedule is crucial for mental health stability (Walker, 2017). These findings suggest that sleep hygiene interventions should be integrated into mental health care to improve psychological outcomes.

### **4. Stress Management and Mental Health**

Stress is a universal experience, and the way individuals manage it can have profound effects on their mental health. Chronic stress has been linked to a wide range of psychological issues, including anxiety disorders, depression, and burnout. The stress

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response, regulated by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, involves the release of cortisol, which, when sustained over time, can impair the brain's structure and function, affecting memory, mood regulation, and resilience (McEwen, 2007). Effective stress management is thus crucial for maintaining mental health, and various approaches have been shown to mitigate stress-related harm.

Mindfulness and meditation practices have gained significant attention as effective stress management tools. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a program developed by Kabat-Zinn (2003), teaches individuals to engage in mindfulness to reduce stress and improve emotional regulation. Numerous studies have shown that mindfulness practices can lower cortisol levels, enhance self-awareness, and foster a sense of calm, all of which contribute to improved mental health. Additionally, cognitive-behavioural techniques, such as cognitive restructuring and relaxation exercises, are widely used to help individuals manage stress by altering negative thought patterns and promoting adaptive coping strategies (Beck, 2011).

Another promising area within stress management is the role of social support in mental health. Social connections and support networks serve as buffers against stress, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting a sense of belonging. A study by Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) found that individuals with strong social connections had a 50% higher likelihood of survival, regardless of other health factors, underscoring the protective effect of social relationships on mental health. These findings support the inclusion of stress management techniques and social support as integral components of mental health care.

### **5. Integrative Approaches and Lifestyle Psychiatry**

Given the interconnectedness of diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management, adopting a holistic approach to mental health care is increasingly recognized as essential. Lifestyle psychiatry, a growing field that examines the effects of lifestyle choices on mental health, promotes a shift from symptom-focused treatment to preventive strategies that address underlying lifestyle factors (Berk et al., 2013). This approach not only empowers individuals to take an active role in their mental health but also provides sustainable, long-term solutions that may reduce dependence on pharmacological interventions.

Lifestyle psychiatry integrates evidence from the biopsychosocial model, which posits that biological, psychological, and social factors collectively influence mental health (Engel, 1977). By addressing these factors, lifestyle psychiatry aims to provide comprehensive mental health care that goes beyond symptom management. Firth et al. (2019) conducted a meta-review on lifestyle psychiatry, concluding that interventions targeting lifestyle factors are effective in both treating and preventing mental health issues. Their review highlights the cumulative benefits of lifestyle changes on mood regulation, cognitive function, and resilience, which collectively contribute to improved mental well-being.

Furthermore, public health initiatives that promote healthy lifestyles on a community level have been shown to improve mental health outcomes across populations. Programs that educate individuals on the importance of diet, exercise, sleep, and stress management provide accessible resources for mental health care, potentially reducing the burden on traditional healthcare systems (Bauer et al., 2014). Integrating lifestyle psychiatry into public health policies could thus offer a cost-effective and sustainable solution to the mental health crisis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study will employ a quantitative research design utilizing surveys to assess the relationship between lifestyle factors (diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management) and mental health outcomes (such as stress, anxiety, and depression) in a sample of 140 participants. The methodology will ensure reliability, validity, and ethical considerations throughout the research process.

### ***Participants***

A total of 140 participants will be recruited for this study. The participants will be adults aged 18-50 years, selected using convenience sampling from local community centres, workplaces, and educational institutions. The age range was chosen to capture a broad demographic, considering that mental health issues span across life stages, and the lifestyle factors assessed are applicable to this age group.

To ensure a balanced and diverse sample, the participants will include both men and women from varied socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Participants with existing severe mental health conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder) will be excluded to reduce confounding variables that could affect the outcomes. Additionally, individuals currently undergoing psychotherapy or psychiatric treatment will not be included to avoid the overlap of treatment effects and the lifestyle-based intervention in this study.

### **Inclusion Criteria:**

- Adults aged 18-50 years.
- Ability to understand and provide informed consent.
- No current severe psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder).
- Willingness to participate in the study and complete questionnaires.

### **Exclusion Criteria:**

- Individuals under the age of 18 or over the age of 50.
- Individuals diagnosed with severe psychiatric disorders (such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder).
- Pregnant or lactating women (due to potential hormonal influences on mental health and lifestyle).

### ***Research Design***

This study will use a cross-sectional survey design. The participants will complete self-administered questionnaires to gather data on their lifestyle behaviours and mental health status at a single point in time. The cross-sectional nature of the study allows for an analysis of correlations between lifestyle factors and mental health, providing a snapshot of the relationship between these variables.

### ***Variables***

The primary independent variables will be the lifestyle factors, which include:

- **Diet:** Participants will complete a Food Frequency Questionnaire (FFQ) designed to assess dietary patterns and food intake frequency. The questionnaire will categorize food consumption into different groups, such as fruits, vegetables, processed foods, and high-fat/sugar items.
- **Physical Activity:** Physical activity will be assessed using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ), which measures the frequency and intensity of exercise and physical activity across the past week.

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- **Sleep Patterns:** Sleep will be evaluated using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), which assesses the quality, duration, and disturbances of sleep over a one-month period.
- **Stress Management:** Stress management techniques will be evaluated using a modified version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), focusing on the coping mechanisms participants engage in, such as relaxation techniques, meditation, and time management.

*The dependent variables will be the mental health outcomes, specifically:*

- Depression (measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), a widely used scale to assess depressive symptoms).
- Anxiety (measured using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)).
- Stress levels (measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)).

### **Data Collection**

Data will be collected through online and paper-based surveys. Participants will be invited to complete the survey during a designated time frame, with clear instructions on how to fill out the questionnaires. The online format will be distributed through email or social media platforms to ensure accessibility, while the paper-based surveys will be available for participants who prefer them. The surveys will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, and participants will be reminded to answer all items honestly and thoroughly to ensure high-quality data.

### **Procedure**

1. **Recruitment:** Participants will be recruited through various methods, including flyers, social media advertisements, and local community outreach. An online sign-up form will be provided to obtain initial demographic information and assess eligibility. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before they begin the survey.
2. **Pre-Survey Information:** Before starting the questionnaires, participants will be briefed on the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. They will also be informed about the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time.
3. **Survey Completion:** After providing informed consent, participants will proceed with completing the lifestyle and mental health questionnaires. The questionnaires will be delivered in a randomized order to minimize response bias.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study will be obtained from an institutional review board (IRB) to ensure that the research adheres to ethical standards. Several ethical guidelines will be followed:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants will be fully informed about the nature of the research, and their written consent will be obtained prior to participation. They will be informed about their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.
- **Confidentiality:** All participant data will be kept confidential, and identifying information will be removed from the datasets. Results will be reported in aggregate form.
- **Debriefing:** After completing the survey, participants will receive a debriefing about the study, including a summary of its purpose, their involvement, and how their data will be used.

**Limitations**

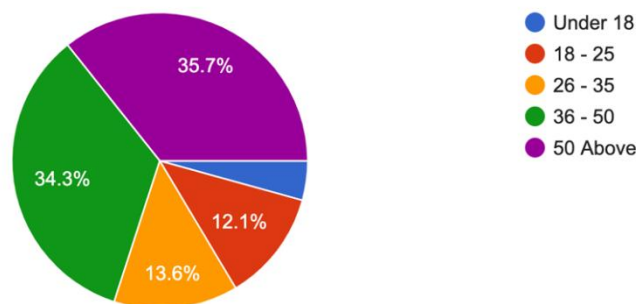
While the study will provide valuable insights into the role of lifestyle factors in mental health, several limitations should be considered:

- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study’s cross-sectional nature means that causal relationships cannot be inferred. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to assess causality more definitively.
- **Self-Reported Data:** The reliance on self-reported measures for diet, physical activity, and stress management may introduce bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate certain behaviours.
- **Sample Size:** Although 140 participants are a sufficient sample for exploratory analysis, larger sample sizes could yield more robust results and improve the generalizability of the finding

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

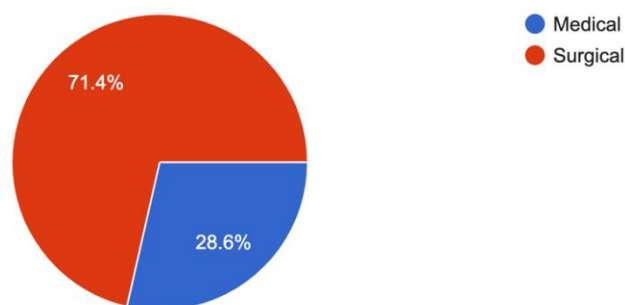
**Age**

140 responses



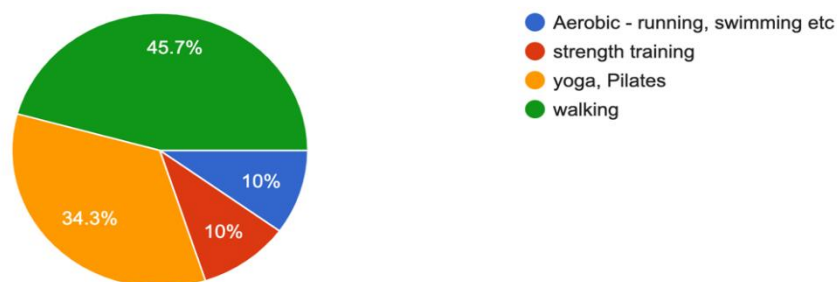
**Diagnosis**

140 responses



**5. What type of exercise do you most frequently engage in?**

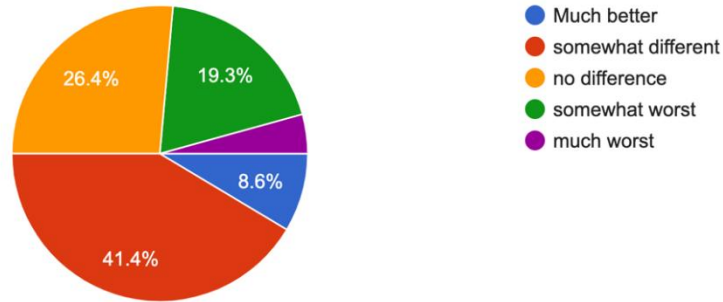
140 responses



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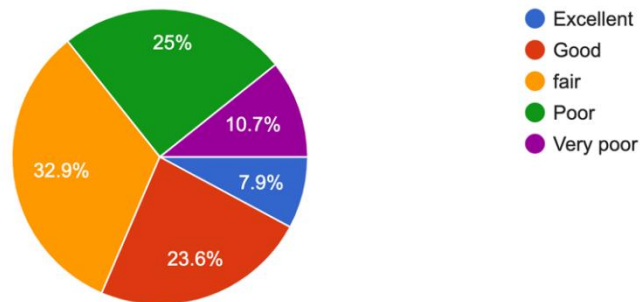
6. After exercise, how would you rate your mood and energy levels.

140 responses



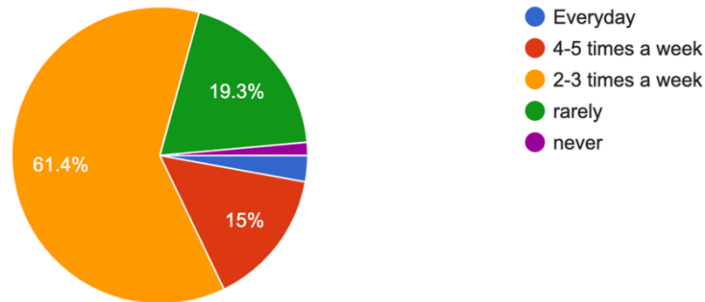
8. How would you describe the quality of your sleep?

140 responses



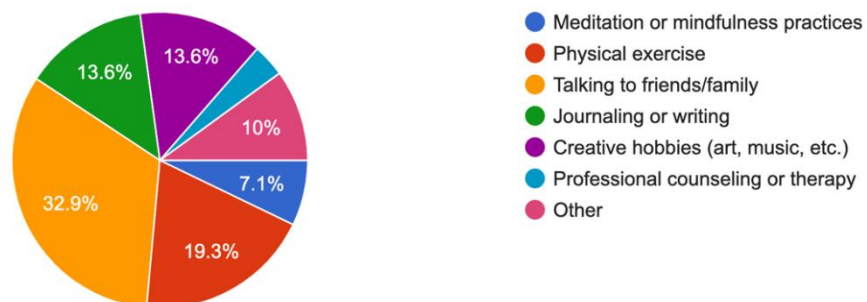
11. How often do you feel stressed during a typical week?

140 responses



12. Which of the following stress-management techniques do you use?

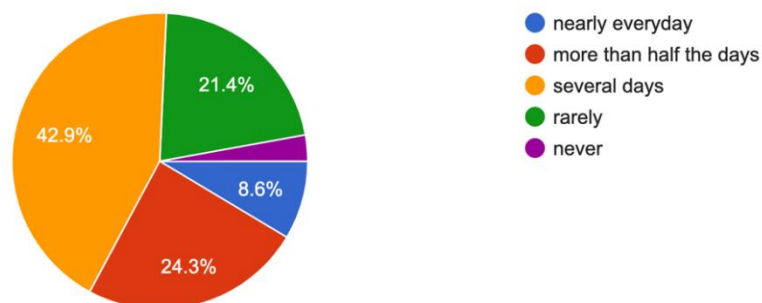
140 responses



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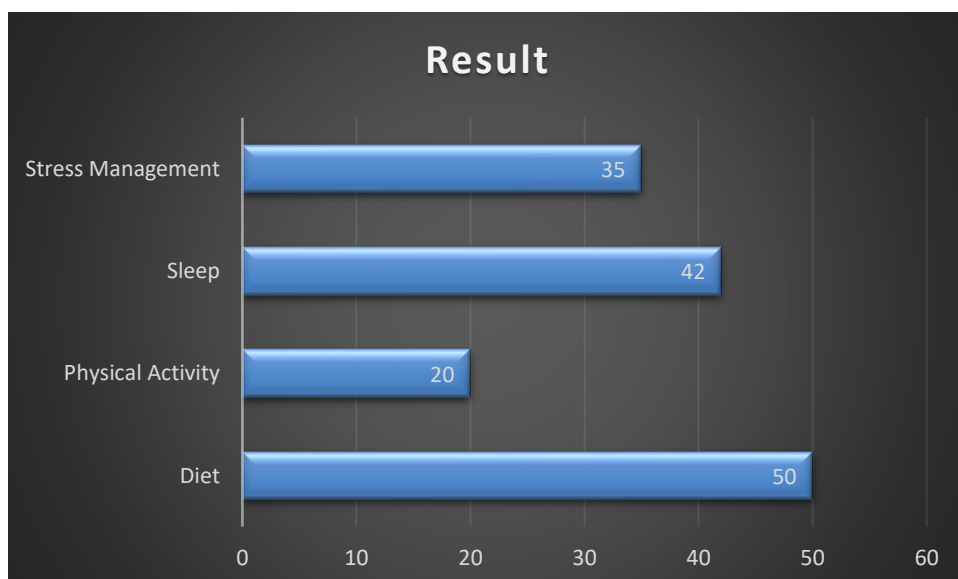
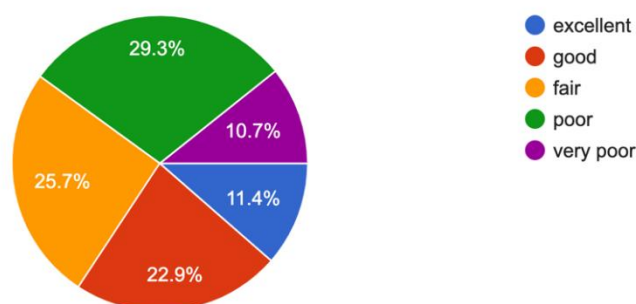
16. How often do you feel anxious or on edge?

140 responses



17. How would you rate your overall mental well-being at this moment?

140 responses



It is evident that many individuals experience a diminished quality of life due to irregular dietary habits, inconsistent sleep schedules, lack of physical activity, and poor stress management. These lifestyle factors contribute significantly to mental health challenges, leaving individuals feeling overwhelmed and disconnected. A poorly balanced diet, disrupted sleep patterns, and insufficient exercise can all negatively impact mood, cognitive function, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, without effective stress management techniques, people may struggle to cope with daily pressures, leading to heightened feelings of anxiety and depression. In contrast, a well-rounded lifestyle that includes a balanced diet,

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regular physical activity, adequate sleep, and healthy coping mechanisms can significantly enhance mental health. When individuals prioritize these aspects of their daily routine, they often experience improved mental clarity, better emotional regulation, and a greater sense of overall well-being. Therefore, the quality of one's lifestyle is intrinsically linked to mental health, highlighting the importance of adopting healthy habits to foster resilience, reduce stress, and enhance life satisfaction. This underscores the need for a holistic approach to mental health that addresses not only psychological and emotional factors but also the broader lifestyle behaviors that shape well-being.

### CONCLUSION

This research underscores the critical role that lifestyle factors—such as diet, physical activity, sleep, and stress management—play in shaping mental health outcomes. The findings demonstrate that individuals who maintain a balanced and healthy lifestyle are better equipped to manage stress, reduce the risk of mental health disorders, and experience improved emotional well-being. In contrast, poor lifestyle choices, including an irregular diet, lack of physical activity, poor sleep habits, and ineffective stress management, contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and overall reduced quality of life.

Through the analysis of these lifestyle factors, it becomes clear that mental health cannot be viewed in isolation from daily behaviors. Lifestyle psychiatry, which emphasizes the impact of these factors, offers a valuable framework for mental health promotion and prevention. By prioritizing lifestyle modifications, individuals can empower themselves to enhance their mental well-being, potentially reducing the need for pharmacological interventions and promoting long-term resilience.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of public health strategies that encourage healthier lifestyle choices as part of mental health interventions. The integration of lifestyle improvements into mental health care could provide a more holistic and sustainable approach to improving well-being, preventing mental health issues, and reducing the burden of mental health disorders globally.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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