

Using plans to maintain your mental health and well-being

This leaflet explains how to use plans, called implementation intentions, to maintain your mental health and wellbeing. They have been found to help us turn an intention to do something into doing it. We all intend to do things, for example to be more active, eat well, stop smoking, but it is much harder to do it. Just think of the New Year's resolutions you have made in the past and not carried out! As one person once said:

“I know what to do to stay well, but I just don't do it”

It can be even more difficult to do the things we know will help us when we have a low mood or are feeling depressed but they can help us through a difficult and stressful time. So, this leaflet is about helping you to keep doing things that will maintain your mental health and wellbeing.

What are Implementation Intentions (or IMPS or plans as we will refer to them)?

IMPS are a very specific type of plan and have been found to help people to achieve health-related goals such as doing more physical activity. They are plans which link a cue or situation to a response. The cue can be an external situation such as a time, event, or place, or an internal cue such as a feeling or thoughts. Responses can also be external, doing something, or internal, thinking something. The best way of understanding this is with a few examples:

Cue or Situation	Response
External Cues	
Every Saturday afternoon at 2 pm	Then I will meet up with my friend Sue for a coffee and a chat
Every evening between 6 and 8 pm	Then I will write down all my positive achievements for that day
Every morning after brushing my teeth	Then I will practice my mindfulness exercise
Internal cues (thoughts, feelings)	
If I feel down	Then I will talk with my partner about what is causing me to feel like that
If I can't be bothered to go to the gym	Then I will remind myself of the benefits of going and how much better I feel once I've been and I will look at my list of benefits

It is important that the cues are specific enough to prompt you to carry out the response.

It's important to make sure the cue or situation is specific enough so when it arises it brings to mind the response. For example, “I will do more exercise today” is too vague, but if you have this plan: “I will go for a walk every weekday evening” you are much more likely to remember to do it.

Share your plans with someone.

We suggest you share your plans with a partner, friend or family member, if possible, and of course some of you plans may involve doing things with other people.



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Make sure the plans are realistic and achievable.

There's no point setting yourself up to fail, so make sure the plans are realistic. If they turn out to be too difficult you can always change them. You could also use a barrier to a behaviour as an IMP, for example, the "if I can't be bothered to go to the gym" example on the previous page.

Try keeping a record

Try keeping a record of how the plans are going, how many times you are successful and any barriers to carrying them out. You could use a diary, your smart phone, whatever works for you. You could also use your smart phone for reminders, through the calendar for example.

Don't try to do too many to start with

We suggest you start with up to five plans and see how it goes. You will find that the more you do the plans, the more automatic they become.

Getting started:

Think of up to five things that are important for your wellbeing. They can be anything, but they have to make a difference, so that if you didn't do them your wellbeing would suffer.

Write them down in the form of IMPS, with a specific situation or cue and a response, like the examples.

Cue or Situation	Response

Check on how it is going every so often, at least once a week, and remember it helps to share your plans and progress with someone else if possible. Good luck!

References:

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