



# The Little Book of Brighter Days



Brighter Days

Ways to **practise positivity** for better mental health in Scotland

Connect to  
thrive

Create to  
inspire

Choose to  
slow down

Compassion  
for all

Positivity  
tips

“Don't look back and ask why?  
Look ahead and say why not?”



*“The vast majority of written materials about resilience focus on the first aspect of resilience – what to do when you're faced with a big life trauma; however, it's just as critical to develop resilience for life's every day hassles.”<sup>18</sup>*  
*Paula Davis-Laack, Forbes.com*

## 365 Brighter Days

The 365 Brighter Days campaign, promoted by Breathing Space, Scotland's mental health phone service, encourages practising a positive outlook to life.

Over 8,000 people phone Breathing Space each month with feelings of stress, anxiety and low mood. During tough times in our lives, looking for the positive can be particularly difficult and challenging.

**By following a few simple techniques to practise positive thinking day-to-day, we can all take steps to build resilience, manage stress, and develop coping skills that will serve us at home, in the workplace, and in our communities.**



**Figure 2.** This booklet looks at four areas for developing resilience

## Why practise positivity?

Research suggests that negative emotions narrow our view of the world and make us less open to possibilities. Although helpful at times where we have to take immediate action, negativity can limit our choices.<sup>1,2</sup>

The benefits of positivity are beginning to be revealed by research. **Positivity helps us to build resilience, cope better with stress and be more productive.**<sup>3-5</sup> Studies also suggest possible physical health benefits such as lowered blood pressure and reduced risk of heart disease.<sup>6,7</sup>

Positivity is not easy, it requires practise. You can't stop thinking a certain way, you have to start thinking a new way.



**Figure 1.** Developing a positive mindset

“If you change the way you look at things,  
the things you look at change”



In 2008 the New Economics Foundation set out their Five Ways to Wellbeing; five practical, evidence-based steps that people can take to improve wellbeing<sup>9</sup>

“Throughout our interviews, focus groups and review of the existing literature, social connections were frequently highlighted as one of the most important components, not only of wellbeing, but also of longer term resilience.”<sup>10</sup>

Mental Health Strategic Partnership

## Connect to thrive

People who feel more connected to others have lower rates of anxiety and depression.<sup>11</sup> **Social interactions which give us the opportunity to share our feelings and problems, benefit our health.**

“Feeling connected to each other is a basic human need”

While we may not always be able to control the number of friends we have, we can take responsibility for how we feel and how we connect with others. In the same way that it's possible to feel lonely in a group of people you know, it is possible to feel connected in a group of strangers.



Figure 3. Social connections are one of the key steps to mental wellbeing

“Your life does not get better by chance. it gets better by change.”

## Positive connections

**Meaningful conversations lead to closer relationships.** Although making conversation may come naturally to some, it's a skill that most of us need to develop. An honest, authentic conversation doesn't have to be deep and spiritual but needs to start with asking about the other person and really listening to what they are saying.

Finding common ground can help you both to open up and really engage. Non-verbal signs are important too – not just those that you notice but also those that you are projecting. Make and maintain eye contact, keep a neutral body stance and tone to your voice, and if possible, sit next to the person when you're talking to them.

### Strengthening relationships

- Face-to-face interactions
- Ask others what they need from you
- Reach out to people to get together
- Show appreciation
- Be there for loved ones

### Meaningful conversations

- Smile
- Maintain eye contact
- Neutral tone and body stance
- Really listen
- Open up
- Be authentic

“Don't waste time waiting for inspiration. Begin, and inspiration will find you.” **Create to inspire**

### Activities to inspire

Keeping a diary or journal of thoughts and things that have made you smile can help tap in to your imagination. Many writers and fashion designers keep diaries and journals to inform their writing and creativity, and it's also a good way to unwind.

Exercise can be an enjoyable way to inspire creativity, boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy as well as reducing your risk of stress and depression. Websites such as [classfinder.org.uk](http://classfinder.org.uk) or [visitscotland.com](http://visitscotland.com) can help find the activity or class that best suits you.

Art is a great stress relief tool, even for those who don't consider themselves artistic. It can serve as a good distraction technique, helping you clear your head rather than thinking over problems.

It can also encourage you to get in to a state of mind called 'flow', where you are completely immersed in an activity. This near-meditative state can be achieved through activities such as writing, drawing, photography and even gardening.

**Creative activities can open your mind to new discoveries, which can lead you to new places and ways to engage with the world.** Why not be the person that inspires others to be creative?

### Encouraging creativity

- Go out for a 20 min walk every day
- Allow for more silence in your life - sit quietly
- Visit a museum or gallery
- Listen to live music or watch a play
- Change your routine
- Meet new people
- Read books

## Clearing your mind

Learning to let go of something in your past, or something which you are unable to change or control, can free up your energy and time which can then be used for something better and more fulfilling.

Although sometimes difficult to put into practice, by letting go of an issue or worry, we can take away the power of that thought and free up our emotions. In the long-term this approach can be life-changing.

Letting go may include choosing to forgive (including forgiving yourself!). Research shows that people who forgive, are happier and healthier than those who hold resentments.<sup>12</sup> **Forgiveness is not something we do for other people, it's something we do for our own health and wellbeing.**

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

### Learning to let go

- Accept rather than struggle against the issue
- Choose to forgive
- Focus on what you can influence
- Practice makes perfect - you may have to let go more than once!

### Learning to relax

Learning how to relax takes practice, but over time it can help release tension in your body, clear your thoughts and improve your mental wellbeing. Useful relaxation CDs and booklets can be ordered and downloaded for free from [stepsforstress.org](http://stepsforstress.org)

Meditation can be a good way to encourage some time for quiet calmness and self-reflection and there are many free apps available, such as Insight Timer (available on Android and iOS) to get you started.

### Short mindfulness technique

- Sit with your feet planted on the floor and spine upright
- Eyes can be closed
- Hands in the lap or on your knees
- Bring your attention to rest on the sensations of the body - feet on the floor, pressure on the seat, breaths in and out
- Gently encourage the mind to focus on these physical sensations and not your thought processes

### More information on mindfulness

- Look up the mindfulness section under 'Five steps to mental wellbeing' on [NHSinform.scot](https://www.nhs.uk/health/wellbeing/)
- Visit [Bemindful.co.uk](https://www.bemindful.co.uk) for online courses

*"People who are more mindful have greater awareness, understanding and acceptance of their emotions, and recover from bad moods more quickly. More mindful people have less frequent negative thoughts and are more able to let them go when they arise."*<sup>13</sup>

Mental Health Foundation

## Choose to slow down

Rushing through endless to-do lists can lead to heightened feelings of anxiety and stress. Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present and aware of where we are and what we are doing right now. It can help us to enjoy life more and understand ourselves better.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts and feelings we can begin to see our thoughts as 'mental events' which have no control over us. This type of awareness can help us to identify stress or anxiety at an early stage and helps us deal with them better.

**Although not everyone finds mindfulness easy, with practise it can help you notice the world in a new way.**

*Learn from the past, look to the future but live in the present.*

*Taking time to do nothing often brings everything into perspective.*

## Pausing for breath

When stress overwhelms your nervous system, your body is flooded with chemicals which prepare you to 'fight or flight'. To combat this, it is possible to get your body into a 'relaxation response', which can help to bring your mind back to a state of equilibrium.

One way of doing this is through deep breathing exercises which can help to slow your heart rate, relax your muscles, lower your blood pressure and increase blood flow to your brain.

Relaxation does not have to take up a lot of your time. **Giving yourself space and distance from your normal routine and thoughts, even for just a few minutes, can be calming and help you to feel more in control.**

### Calming breathing technique

- Make yourself as comfortable as possible.
- If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.
- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five. You may not be able to reach five at first.
- Without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from one to five again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for three to five minutes.

## Volunteering

Find out opportunities for volunteering in your local community at [volunteerscotland.net](http://volunteerscotland.net) or for young people aged 16 to 30, try [projectscotland.co.uk](http://projectscotland.co.uk)

## Kinder communities

The Carnegie UK Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation are exploring the power of everyday relationships and what we can do to encourage kinder communities<sup>14</sup>

## Compassion for all

Our emotions influence how happy or unhappy we are. If our circumstances are good but we are feeling anxious or angry, we won't be happy. Similarly, if we are feeling strong positive emotions such as love or compassion, we can be happy even in difficult times.

Although it is negative emotions and their consequences which are often reported widely in society, positive emotions can be just as powerful.

Empathy and kindness may not always benefit others directly but studies show that leading a compassionate lifestyle can benefit both our emotional and physical wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> **Taking care of others is not only kind but is actually an effective way of taking care of ourselves.**

### Relating to others

- Sometimes just being there, rather than problem-solving is enough
- Show empathy
- Make time for others
- Volunteer
- Offer a hug

**“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”**

**“Compassion for others begins with kindness to ourselves.”**

## Caring for self

Self-compassion means extending kindness, care and understanding toward oneself. Sometimes mistakenly seen as an act of self-indulgence or self-pity, it can allow us to accept areas of weakness and improve emotional wellbeing.

Self-judgement can lead to feelings of anxiety, insecurity and even depression. Having self-compassion can mean recognising the difference between making a bad decision and being a bad person.

Studies have shown that self-compassion can improve social connectedness, happiness, emotional intelligence and life satisfaction.<sup>16,17</sup> **People who practise self-compassion can accept their failures, move past them, and try again.**

## Steps to self-care

- Focus on what you can control
- Reminisce about good times
- Dance it out
- Breathe
- Improve your sleep
- Enjoy nature
- Trust your instincts
- Don't be afraid to say 'no'
- Be kind to yourself

## Reducing stress responses

*You might not realise it, but stress can lead to the muscles in your body tensing up. Taking a moment to recognise this and actively relaxing these parts of your body can help.*

*Yoga, Tai chi and Pilates are great low-impact activities that focus on improving your balance and core strength, with evidence suggesting they are also beneficial for depression, anxiety and stress.*



## Your tips to inspire positivity

We asked through Facebook for tips to inspire positivity, here are your suggestions:

Today is a great day to have a great day



Yoga, mindful breathing or meditation



Getting lost in a book



Making a plan for things to look forward to



Indulging yourself in something you enjoy that is purely for you



Staying connected with family and friends



Say it with a smile!



A good ol' cuddle or walk with your dog



Going out and about and meeting others if you can



Capturing photos of nature's finest



Singing or dancing along to a favourite upbeat song



A nice walk anywhere!



Keeping a diary of things that make you smile



Doing something for others



Exercising to be kind to your mind and body



Practising self-care. Know that you matter, your feelings are valid and that you are loved!



Hugs!



If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.

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### Breathing Space provides:

- an alternative and easily accessible 'first stop' service
- assistance at an early stage in order to stop problems escalating
- empathy, understanding and advice through active listening
- hope when none exists
- direction for those who do not know where to seek help.

You are not alone, talking about how you feel is a positive first step in getting help.

**To take some Breathing Space, call 0800 83 85 87.**

