

Kinship Carers VICTORIA

November 2026

Edition #9

Wellbeing magazine

The MIND & BODY edition

Dear Kinship Carers,

The Board of GPV/KCV takes the opportunity to thank you for your service to your own family and to Victoria's families in general.

This wellbeing magazine is the ninth in the series, and it is an attempt to encourage you to look after yourselves. We hope you enjoy reading it and take its messages to heart.

The advice in the magazine has been derived from many different sources, and we hope you will find it can be applied to your situation as a kinship carer. We would be pleased to hear any feedback you have.

With warmest regards from the GPV/KCV Board members.

Kinship Carers Victoria
Phone: 0499 969 234
Email: admin@kinshipcarersvictoria.org
www.kinshipcarersvictoria.org

This guide has been developed with some financial support from Carer Kafe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY





GPV/KCV acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of our great land and offers respect to Elders, past and present.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that Aboriginal culture existed in Australia before European settlement and consisted of many community groups. Further, we acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that laws and policies of the past have inflicted grief and suffering on our fellow Australians and regrets the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

GPV/KCV believes that a society that is inclusive of all is crucial to individual and community wellbeing and will behave with respect towards all, irrespective of their race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background.

GPV/KCV acknowledges 13th of February as National Apology Day, the anniversary of then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivering the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008.

GPV/KCV will take steps that promote a happier and healthier future for Indigenous Australians, particularly the children and young people.

In this issue



Move Daily: Small Habits, Big Relief

Physical movement is the fastest way to change your mental state. A brisk five-minute walk, a simple stretch or a few yoga poses can break this cycle. Article: Seven simple movement exercises may help improve mental health and reduce stress

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Breathwork: Your Nervous System's Brake Pedal

Slow, deep breathing tells your brain you are safe. This practice instantly slows your heart rate and activates your parasympathetic nervous system. Article: The benefits of breathwork and how to do it Page 7

Prioritise Your Sleep: Protect Your Rest

Quality sleep is the foundation of mental clarity and emotional resilience. To sleep better, you must prepare your brain for rest. Try to keep a strict sleep schedule by waking up at the same time every day. Article: Get the sleep you need - Small changes for better rest Page 9





Digital Detox: Reclaim Your Attention Span

Social media feeds are designed to capture your attention and trigger comparison fatigue. Constant scrolling keeps your brain in a state of high alertness. Dedicate just two hours each evening to a total digital detox. **Article:** Digital detox. Beat the scroll - Simple ways to break free from your phone Page 11

Stay Connected for Better Wellbeing/ Combatting Loneliness



Human beings are wired for social connection, yet modern life often isolates us. Texting is convenient, but it lacks the emotional depth of real-time interaction. Hearing a familiar voice or seeing a friendly face lowers anxiety and reinforces your support system. **Article:** How to recognise and combat loneliness for better wellbeing **Page 15**



The Power of Music for Better Wellbeing

Music holds a special place in our lives, forming an integral part of human culture for centuries. Whether we passively listen to our favourite songs or actively engage in music-making by singing or playing instruments, music can have a profound influence on our socio-emotional development and overall wellbeing.

Articles: The transformative power of music in mental wellbeing **Page 18**

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Spend Time Outside: Reset in Nature



Spending time in green spaces drastically reduces stress hormones and lowers blood pressure. Nature provides a calming sensory experience. Walk to a local park, sit under a tree, walk on grass barefoot or sit in your garden. Just 20 minutes outside can clear your head, improve your focus and restore your mental energy. **Article:** Spend time in nature or outside to reduce stress and anxiety **Page 26**

Seven simple movement exercises

may help improve mental health and reduce stress

You don't have to go for a run or hit the gym to benefit from exercise … A few minutes of light, simple movement can have a noticeable impact on wellbeing and mental health – so take matters into your own hands and get moving.

These basic, easy-to-do, gentle movements can keep your body active without being too strenuous or complicated, regardless of your fitness level.



1 Walk it out

Walking is gentle on your body and can be done almost anywhere. Take a stroll around your neighbourhood for some fresh air and natural light, which can further lift your spirits. You can even turn it into a meditation if you want. Either way, walk at your own pace, focus on your breathing, notice your surroundings and let go of any tension.

2 Get your stretch on

When you're feeling stressed or sitting for long periods, your muscles can get tight and sore. Stretching releases that built-up tension and increases blood flow throughout your body.

Focus on areas where tension tends to accumulate, like your neck, shoulders, and lower back: roll your shoulders, stretch your arms overhead or reach down to touch your toes, as these can help ease stiffness.

3 Combine breath and movement

Pairing deep breathing with light movement can help relax your body and calm your mind, slow your heart rate and reduce feelings of stress or anxiety.

Take a deep breath in through your nose, raise your arms above your head, and slowly lower them as you exhale through your mouth. Repeat this for a few breaths, paying attention to how your body feels as you move.

4 Try chair yoga

If you spend a lot of time sitting at a desk, sneak in some movement without even leaving your seat. Chair yoga involves gentle stretches and poses that can be done while sitting, making it perfect for work breaks or days when you're feeling extra stiff or tired.

Try seated twists, forward folds, or lifting your arms above your head and gently stretching your sides. This can help relieve tension and boost circulation.

5 Explore moving meditation with tai chi or qigong

Tai chi and qigong are ancient Chinese practices often described as "moving meditations". Both practices focus on slow, flowing movements combined with deep breathing that can help reduce stress, improve balance and calm the mind.

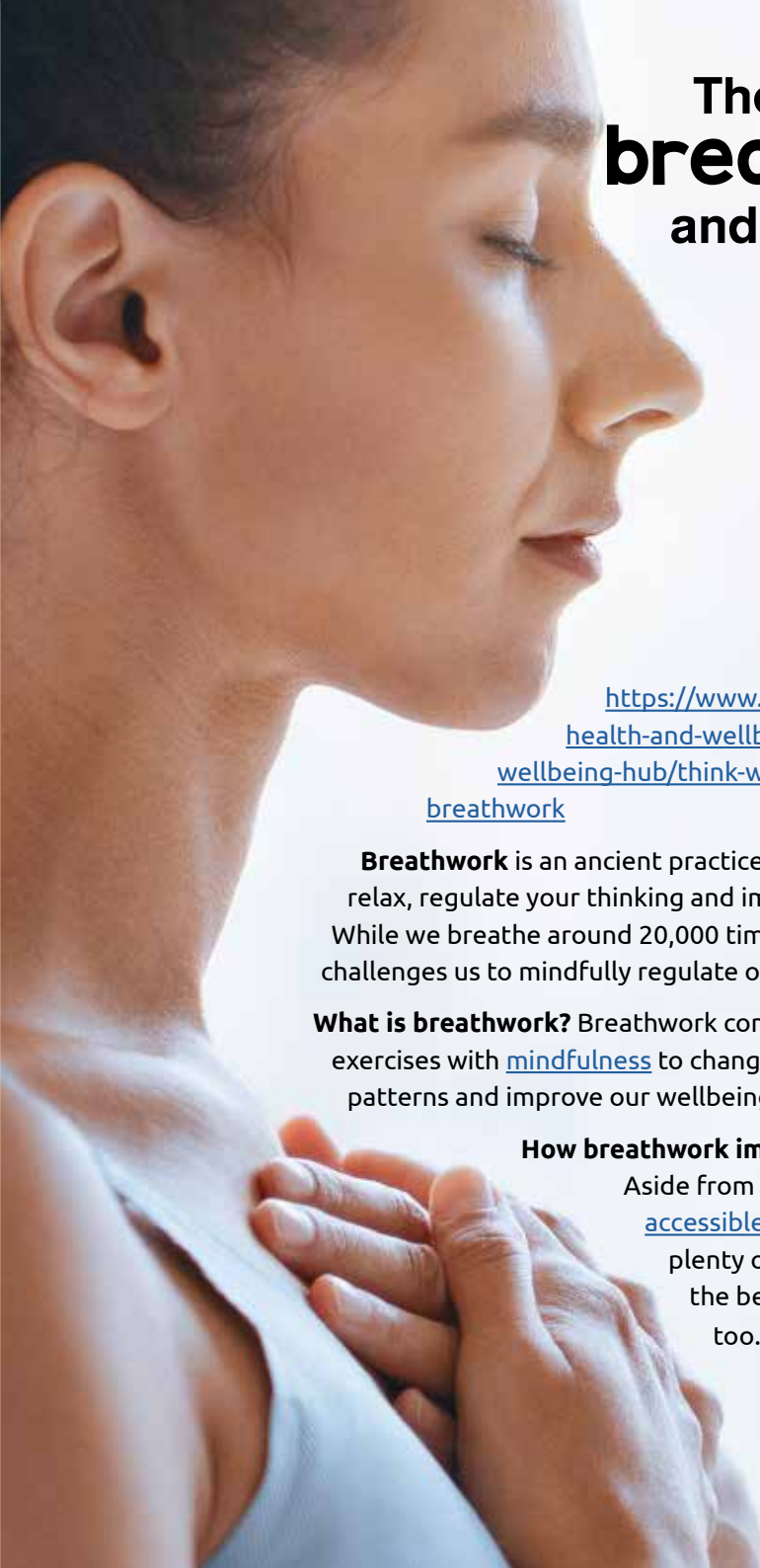
6 Practise some gentle yoga poses

Some simple, gentle yoga poses can be enough to release tension and boost your mood. Poses like child's pose, cat-cow, and legs up the wall are great for calming your nervous system and helping your body relax. Yoga stretches your muscles, and also encourages deep breathing, which can reduce feelings of stress or anxiety.

7 Have a dance party (or enjoy a dance class)

Dancing is one of the most joyful ways to move your body, and it doesn't have to be structured or serious to be effective. Put on your favourite song and move around for just a few minutes to release pent-up stress. It doesn't matter how "good" you are – just let loose and have fun.





The benefits of breathwork and how to do it

https://www.aia.com.au/en/health-and-wellbeing/health-and-wellbeing-hub/think-well/benefits-of-breathwork

Breathwork is an ancient practice that can help you relax, regulate your thinking and improve your health. While we breathe around 20,000 times a day, breathwork challenges us to mindfully regulate our breathing.

What is breathwork? Breathwork combines breathing exercises with mindfulness to change our breathing patterns and improve our wellbeing.

How breathwork improves our health

Aside from being a free and accessible practice, there's plenty of evidence to support the benefits of breathwork too.

Overall, breathwork can:

- boost mood
- reduce stress and deepen relaxation
- reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression
- decrease high blood pressure
- help with symptoms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- improve alertness, focus and memory
- increase heart rate variability
- promote creativity
- support sleep
- soothe emotions associated with grief and trauma.

But wait – there's more. Breathwork can even improve our quality of life over time. As we age, problems can arise such as tissue deterioration, largely due to a lack of proper circulation, which can be easily improved by our breathing.

Breathwork exercises to try

With so many techniques around, it can be hard to know where to start. Here are three simple popular methods for beginners and how do these at home:

Box Breathing

What it does: Relaxes your mind and body by calming your nervous system.

How to do it: Inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, exhale for four seconds. Repeat as often as you'd like.

4-7-8 Breathing

What it does: Reduces anxiety and supports sleep by triggering your body's relaxation response.

How to do it: Inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, exhale for eight seconds. Repeat several times.

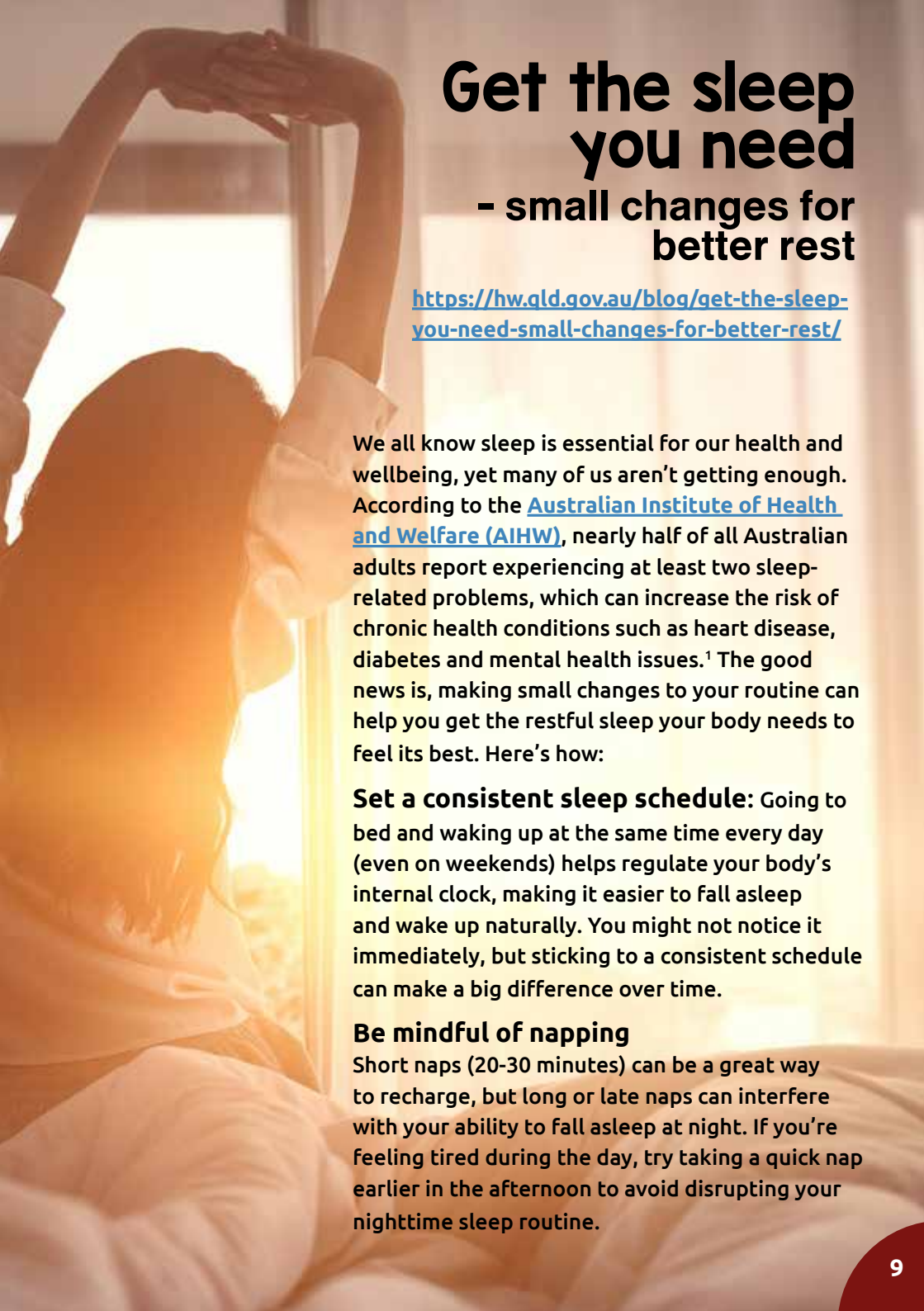
Coherent breathing

What it does: Reduces stress, improves mood and supports your overall health by breathing at a pace that supports cardiovascular function.

How to do it: Inhale for six seconds, exhale six seconds.

The beauty of breathwork is its simplicity: it's easy to do and doesn't take long to reap the benefits. Starting small and practising even once or twice a week can improve your wellbeing now and in the future. While it can take a few attempts to get into the swing of breathwork, this free and simple practice can improve your health in big ways.

Most people can do breathwork, but if you've had a stroke or have an existing cardiovascular issue, consult with your doctor first.



Get the sleep you need

- small changes for better rest

https://hw.qld.gov.au/blog/get-the-sleep-you-need-small-changes-for-better-rest/

We all know sleep is essential for our health and wellbeing, yet many of us aren't getting enough. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), nearly half of all Australian adults report experiencing at least two sleep-related problems, which can increase the risk of chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and mental health issues.[1] The good news is, making small changes to your routine can help you get the restful sleep your body needs to feel its best. Here's how:

Set a consistent sleep schedule: Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day (even on weekends) helps regulate your body's internal clock, making it easier to fall asleep and wake up naturally. You might not notice it immediately, but sticking to a consistent schedule can make a big difference over time.

Be mindful of napping

Short naps (20-30 minutes) can be a great way to recharge, but long or late naps can interfere with your ability to fall asleep at night. If you're feeling tired during the day, try taking a quick nap earlier in the afternoon to avoid disrupting your nighttime sleep routine.

Clear your mind before bed:

Stress and anxiety are some of the leading causes of sleepless nights. If your mind is racing, try practising relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or gentle yoga before bed. Writing down your thoughts in a journal can also help clear your mind and ease the tension of the day.

Set-up a sleep-friendly environment

Your sleeping environment should be a peaceful sanctuary. Keep the room cool, dark and quiet, as these conditions help promote better sleep. Try introducing some white noise like a fan or an online soundtrack if outside noise is an issue.

Create a relaxing bedtime routine

A calming bedtime routine signals to your body that it's time to wind down. Try activities like reading, listening to soothing music, or practising relaxation techniques. Avoid stimulating activities, such as watching TV or scrolling on your phone, at least an hour before bed. The blue light from screens can interfere with your body's natural ability to produce melatonin, the hormone that makes you feel sleepy.

Get active during the day:

Regular physical activity can promote better sleep, but timing matters. Exercising too close to bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep, so aim to get some movement in earlier in the day. Even a short walk or light stretching can be enough to help you feel more relaxed when it's time to sleep.

How much sleep do we actually need?

The amount of sleep you need depends on your age and lifestyle. While each person is different, these guidelines[2] can help you determine how much rest is right for you:

- Newborns (0–3 months): 14–17 hours
- Infants (4-11 months): 12–16 hours
- Toddlers (1–2 years): 11–14 hours
- Preschoolers (3–5 years): 10–13 hours
- School-age children (5–13 years): 9–11 hours
- Teenagers (14–17 years): 8–10 hours
- Adults (18–64 years): 7–9 hours
- Older adults (65+ years): 7–8 hours

Small changes = big impact

Improving your sleep doesn't require drastic changes overnight. Start by making one or two small adjustments to your routine and gradually build on them. Whether it's going to bed 15 minutes earlier or turning off screens an hour before bedtime, every step you take is one closer to better rest and improved wellbeing.

Sources

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Digital Detox: Beat the scroll

Simple ways to break free from your phone

https://hw.qld.gov.au/blog/beat-the-scroll-simple-ways-to-break-free-from-your-phone/

We live in a digital age where our phones are woven into nearly every part of daily life –from work and communication, to entertainment and relaxation. While phones offer many benefits – such as staying connected, learning new skills, and finding support – many of us are using them far more than we intend, especially when it comes to social media and the endless pull of doom scrolling.

According to new consumer research conducted by Health and Wellbeing Queensland, one in four stay up past midnight on screens nearly every night. Too much screen time can impact our focus, stress levels, sleep quality, and evwen our relationships. In this article, we'll explore why it can be hard to break free from scrolling, how it affects our wellbeing, and practical strategies for how to reduce time on your phone and reconnect with the world around you.

How scrolling our phone affects our health

Smartphones are designed to keep us engaged, and the brain plays a major role in why they're so hard to put down. Each time we refresh a feed, open a notification or find something surprising, our brain releases a small hit of dopamine – the neurotransmitter responsible for pleasure and reward. This intermittent reinforcement keeps us coming back for more, making it harder to reduce screen time or be on your phone less.

When phone checking becomes constant and automatic, the brain can be pulled into a repeated cycle of stimulation, reward, and anticipation – which can interfere with creativity, patience and the ability to stay present.

Screen time and young people

Research shows that excessive phone use is associated with reduced attention spans and impaired working memory, particularly among young people. A 2019 study published in *JAMA Paediatrics* found that increased screen time in pre-school aged children was linked to lower structural integrity in brain white matter, which supports learning and language development.[1] This can manifest years later to phone addiction in teens, whose brains are still developing and may be more sensitive to reward-based habits.

It's important to acknowledge that it's not just the amount of screen time young people get, but also *what* they are consuming that can impact their health. An umbrella review of over 100 meta-analysis studies found that watching educational content and/or viewing content with a parent had better outcomes for young people in terms of learning, literacy, body composition and mental health than general screen use did.[2]

Doom scrolling and stress

So, what's happening in our brains when we endlessly scroll through YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram? Doom scrolling, as it's known, ramps up the brain's stress response. As we consume alarming news, emotionally charged content, or rapid-fire entertainment, the *amygdala* (the brain's fear and emotion centre) becomes highly activated. This can lead to elevated cortisol levels – the hormone associated with stress and anxiety.

A study published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* found that frequent social media use was strongly associated with increased anxiety and reduced wellbeing.[3] Another study from the University of Essex showed that even having a smartphone nearby can reduce feelings of interpersonal connectedness, suggesting that phones subtly interfere with meaningful social engagement.[4]

Sleep quality takes a hit too. Exposure to blue light in the evening disrupts melatonin production, making it harder to fall asleep and achieve deep rest.[5] Doom scrolling before bed also floods your brain with emotional content that keeps it alert rather than relaxed. Over time, poor sleep contributes to irritability, low mood, reduced motivation and difficulty concentrating – fuelling the cycle of boredom that makes doom scrolling even more tempting.

This trifecta – dopamine spikes, cortisol activates and disrupted sleep – creates a loop where doom scrolling on social media becomes both the cause of stress and the temporary escape from it.

Tips on how to reduce screen time

If you're looking to decrease your screen time, or make screen time more meaningful and productive, you're not alone. Here are practical tips for how to be on your phone less:

1. Turn off non-essential notifications

Notifications are one of the biggest triggers for compulsive checking. Disable alerts for social media, games and entertainment apps to reduce the temptation to check your phone.

2. Create phone-free zones

Keep phones out of the bedroom, at the dinner table or in study areas. A dedicated charging station outside your room can help, as well as placing your phone on silent during certain times of the day.

3. Use built-in screen time limits

Apps like Screen Time (iPhone) or Digital Wellbeing (Android) offer daily usage caps, downtime features and weekly reports. These can help you set healthy boundaries with your phone.

4. Replace scrolling with intentional pauses



When you reach for your phone out of habit, stop and take a breath. Ask yourself: "What am I actually looking for right now?" Over time, this breaks the automatic reflex of reaching for your phone and endlessly scrolling.

5. Schedule your social media time
Instead of dipping in throughout the day, choose two or three windows when you'll check platforms intentionally – not mindlessly.

6. Keep your home screen minimal
Remove social media apps from your home screen or log out after each session. This changes how immediately you can access it, giving you time to contemplate your intention for using it.

Healthy screen time for kids

Cutting out screen time entirely may not be realistic for most kids, but it is possible to channel screen time in healthy ways. There are plenty of free apps that encourage physical activity and forming healthy habits.

From mindless scrolling to meaningful tapping

Ultimately, breaking free from your phone doesn't require giving it up entirely – just using it more intentionally. With awareness and small changes, you can keep the benefits of using your phone, while also reclaiming your time, your focus and improving your wellbeing.

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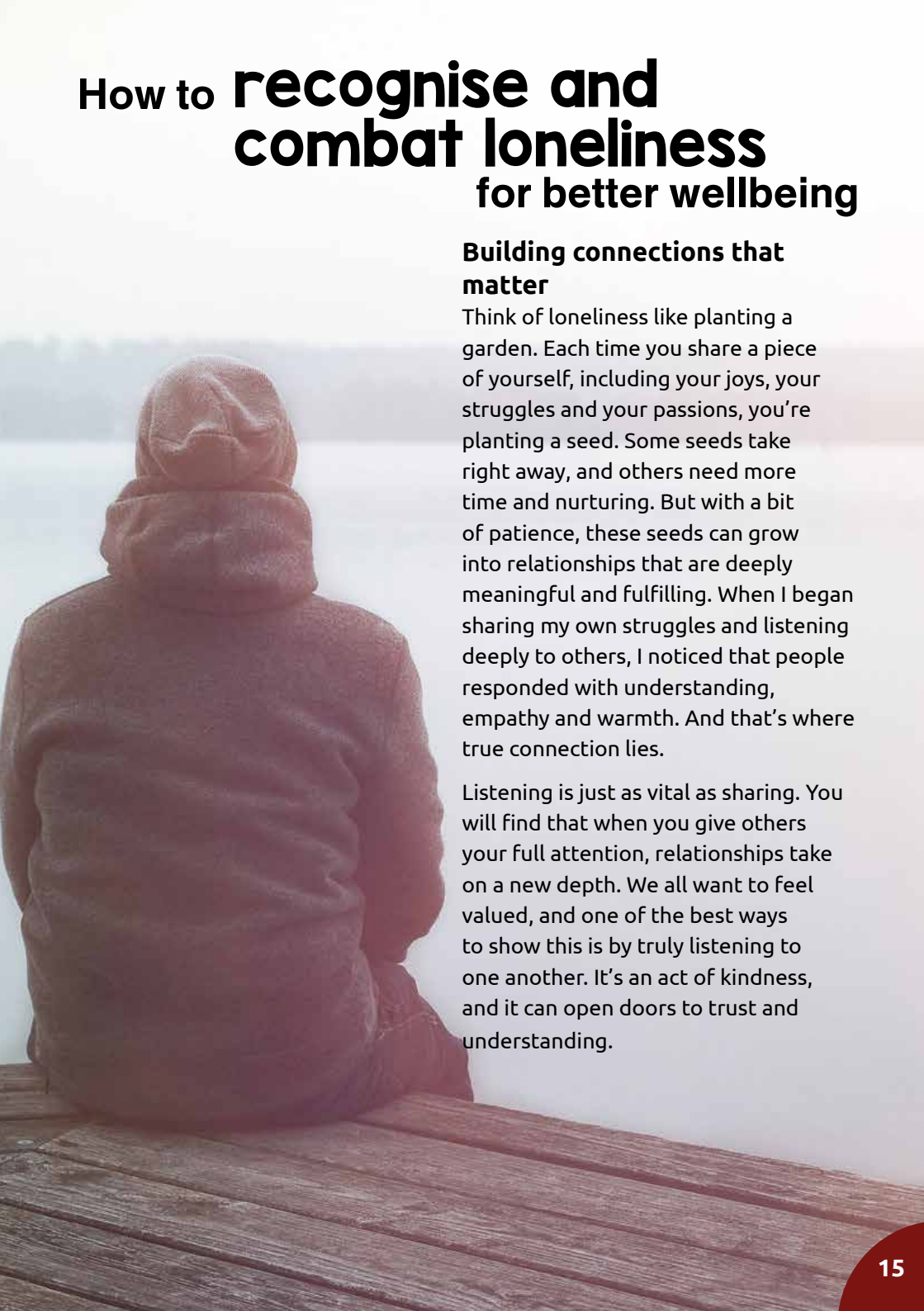
How to recognise and combat loneliness for better wellbeing



Building connections that matter

Think of loneliness like planting a garden. Each time you share a piece of yourself, including your joys, your struggles and your passions, you're planting a seed. Some seeds take right away, and others need more time and nurturing. But with a bit of patience, these seeds can grow into relationships that are deeply meaningful and fulfilling. When I began sharing my own struggles and listening deeply to others, I noticed that people responded with understanding, empathy and warmth. And that's where true connection lies.

Listening is just as vital as sharing. You will find that when you give others your full attention, relationships take on a new depth. We all want to feel valued, and one of the best ways to show this is by truly listening to one another. It's an act of kindness, and it can open doors to trust and understanding.

For those of us who struggle to make connections on our own, there's no shame in seeking out groups or communities that bring people together. Support groups, activity clubs or online communities can be a wonderful way to meet others with similar interests and experiences. Sometimes finding a space where you feel understood can be life changing.

Here are five essential steps to help overcome loneliness and foster meaningful social connections:

1. Recognise and embrace your feelings of loneliness

Acknowledge your loneliness without judgment. Recognising and embracing these feelings is the first step in combatting loneliness and building a stronger mental health foundation.

2. Engage in activities that bring you joy and purpose

Find activities that bring you joy, whether it's a hobby, volunteering, or attending classes. These activities are powerful for reducing loneliness, as they create natural opportunities for connection with others who share similar interests.

3. Prioritise small, positive social interactions

Small, consistent interactions can combat feelings of isolation. Make an effort to chat with a neighbour, barista or colleague. Regular, positive



interactions strengthen your sense of community and decrease loneliness over time.

4. Join supportive groups or online communities

Seek out support groups, online communities, or social clubs with people who share similar experiences or interests. Joining these groups can help you connect with others who understand, easing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

5. Practise self-compassion and positive self-talk

Combat loneliness by cultivating a positive relationship with yourself. Practising self-compassion and using supportive self-talk not only improves mental health but also enhances resilience, making it easier to form meaningful connections with others.

Taking the first step towards connection

Addressing loneliness and building connection is a journey – a gradual, sometimes challenging, journey. But from my own experience, the rewards are worth it. Finding connections that resonate has brought lightness, resilience and a greater sense of purpose into my life. It reminds me that none of us are truly alone; we all have the capacity to reach out and support one another.

If you're reading this and feeling lonely, you should know that you don't have to face it alone. Many people are navigating similar paths, and there's always someone willing to listen and support. Sometimes, that first small step, like reaching out or accepting an invitation, can be the beginning of something beautiful.

Loneliness doesn't have to define us. By reaching out and sharing our journeys, we can build a life filled with connection, kindness and understanding. Connection isn't something reserved for a lucky few; it's a garden we can all plant, nurture, and watch grow. And with a bit of courage and a willingness to take those first steps, we can find ourselves surrounded by relationships that lift us up and bring us closer to our true selves.

https://www.bentcouch.com.au/articles/recognise-loneliness-improve-well-being

The transformative power of music in mental wellbeing

Music has always held a special place in our lives, forming an integral part of human culture for centuries. Whether we passively listen to our favourite songs or actively engage in music-making by singing or playing instruments, music can have a profound influence on our socio-emotional development and overall wellbeing.

Recent research suggests that music engagement not only shapes our personal and cultural identities but also plays a role in mood regulation. A 2022 review and meta-analysis of music therapy found an overall beneficial effect on stress-related outcomes. Moreover, music can be used to help in addressing serious mental health and substance use disorders. In addition to its healing potential, music can magnify the message of diversity and inclusion by introducing people to new cultures and amplifying the voice of marginalised communities, thereby enhancing our understanding and appreciation for diverse communities.

Healing Trauma and Building Resilience

Many historically excluded groups, such as racial/ethnic and sexual minorities and people with disabilities, face systemic injustices and traumatic experiences that can deeply impact their mental health. Research supports the idea that discrimination, a type of trauma,







increases risk for mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Music therapy has shown promise in providing a safe and supportive environment for healing trauma and building resilience while decreasing anxiety levels and improving the functioning of depressed individuals. Music therapy is an evidence-based therapeutic intervention using music to accomplish health and education goals, such as improving mental wellness, reducing stress and alleviating pain. Music therapy is offered in settings such as schools and hospitals. Research supports that engaging in music-making activities, such as drumming circles, songwriting, or group singing, can facilitate emotional release, promote self-reflection, and create a sense of community.

Empowerment, Advocacy and Social Change

Music has a rich history of being used as a tool for social advocacy and change. Artists from marginalised communities often use music to shed light on social issues, challenge injustices, and inspire collective action. By addressing topics such as racial inequality, gender discrimination and LGBTQ+ rights, music becomes a powerful medium for advocating for social justice and promoting inclusivity. Through music, individuals can express their unique experiences, struggles, and triumphs, forging connections with others who share similar backgrounds. Research has shown that exposure to diverse musical genres and artists can broaden perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and foster empathy among listeners especially when dancing together.

Genres such as hip-hop, reggae, jazz, blues, rhythm & blues and folk have historically served as platforms for marginalised voices, enabling them to reclaim their narratives and challenge societal norms. The impact of socially conscious music has been observed in movements such as civil rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights,

where songs have played a pivotal role in mobilising communities and affecting change. Music artists who engage in activism can reach new supporters and help their fans feel more connected to issues and motivated to participate.

Fostering Social Connection and Support

Music can also serve as a catalyst for social connection and support, breaking down barriers and bridging divides. Emerging evidence indicates that music has the potential to enhance prosocial behavior, promote social connectedness, and develop emotional competence. Communities can leverage music's innate ability to connect people and foster a sense of belonging through music programs, choirs, and music education initiatives. These activities can create inclusive spaces where people from diverse backgrounds can come together, collaborate and build relationships based on shared musical interests. These experiences promote social cohesion, combat loneliness and provide a support network that can positively impact overall wellbeing.

Musicians and Normalising Mental Health

Considering the healing effects of music, it may seem paradoxical that musicians may be at a higher risk of mental health disorders. A recent survey of 1,500 independent musicians found that 73% have symptoms of mental illness. This could be due in part to the physical and psychological challenges of the profession. Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Germany found that musically active people have, on average, a higher genetic risk for depression and bipolar disorder.

Commendably, many artists such as Adele, Alanis Morrisette, Ariana Grande, Billie Eilish, Kendrick Lamar, Kid Cudi and Demi Lovato have spoken out about their mental health battles, from postpartum depression to suicidal ideation. Having high-profile artists and celebrities share their lived experiences has opened the conversation about the importance of mental wellness. This can help battle the stigma associated with seeking treatment and support.

Dr Regina James (APA's Chief of the Division of Diversity and Health Equity and Deputy Medical Director) notes "Share your story … share your song and let's help each other normalise the conversation around mental wellness through the influence of music. My go-to artist for relaxation is jazz saxophonist, Grover Washington Jr … what's yours?" Submit to DDHE@psych.org to get featured!

Why singing is surprisingly good for your health

1 December 2025 - David Cox

From boosting the brain to reducing pain, joining others in song can bring some wide-ranging benefits.

From the brain to the heart, singing has been found to bring a wide range of benefits to those who do it, particularly if they do it in groups. It can draw people closer together, prime our bodies to fight off disease and even suppress pain. So might it be worth raising your own voice in good cheer?

"Singing is a cognitive, physical, emotional and social act," says Alex Street, a researcher at the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research who studies how music can be used to help children and adults recover from brain injuries.

Psychologists have long marvelled at how people who sing together can develop a powerful sense of social cohesion, with even among the most reluctant of vocalists becoming united in song. Research has shown that complete strangers can forge unusually close bonds after singing together for an hour.

Singing has been found to improve people's heart rate and blood pressure



Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are clear physical benefits for the lungs and respiratory system from singing. Some researchers have been using singing to help people with lung diseases, for example. (Read more about why your lungs provide an important signal of how you are ageing.)

Singing with others can be more beneficial than singing solo.

Good vibrations

But singing also produces other measurable physical effects. It has been found to improve people's heart rate and blood pressure. Singing in groups or choirs has even been found to boost our immune function in ways that simply listening to the same music cannot. There are different explanations for this. From a biological standpoint, it's thought that singing activates the vagus nerve which is directly connected to the vocal cords and muscles in the back of the throat. The prolonged and controlled exhalation involved in singing also releases endorphins associated with pleasure, wellbeing and the suppression of pain.

Singing also activates a broad network of neurons on both sides of our brain, causing regions that deal with language, movement and emotion to light up. This, combined with the focus on breathing singing requires, make it an effective stress reliever.

"The 'feel good' responses become clear in the brighter sounding voices, facial expressions, and postures," says Street.

There could be some deep-rooted reasons for these benefits too. Some anthropologists believe that our hominid ancestors sang before they could speak, using vocalisations to mimic the sounds of nature or express feelings. This may have played a key role in the development of complex social dynamics, emotional expression and ritual, and Street points out that it's no accident that singing is part of every human's life, whether musically inclined or not, noting that our brains and bodies are attuned from birth to respond in positive ways to song.

"Lullabies are sung to children, and then songs are sung at funerals," he says. "We learn our times tables through chanting, and our ABCs through the rhythmic and melodic structure."

Come together

But not all types of singing are equally beneficial. Singing as part of a group or a choir, for example, has been found to promote a greater level of psychological wellbeing than in solo singers. For this reason, educational researchers have used singing as a tool for promoting cooperation, language development and emotional regulation in children.

Perhaps the most remarkable benefit of singing is that it appears to play a role in helping the brain repair itself from damage.

Medical specialists are also turning to singing as a way of improving the quality of life of those living with different health conditions. Around the world, researchers have studied the effects of joining dedicated community choirs established for cancer and stroke survivors, people living with Parkinson's Disease and dementia, and their caregivers. For example, singing improves the ability of Parkinson's patients to articulate, something which they are known to struggle with as the disease progresses.

Singing also represents a way of boosting general health, as it has been shown to be an underrated workout comparable to a brisk walk. "Singing is a physical activity and may have some parallel benefits to exercise," says Adam Lewis, an associate professor of respiratory physiotherapy at the University of Southampton.

One study even suggested that singing, along with various vocal exercises used by trained singers to hone pitch and rhythm, is a comparable workout for the heart and lungs to walking at a moderate pace on a treadmill.

But researchers are also keen to highlight the often under-recognised benefits of participating in group singing for the psyche of people living with long-term chronic illnesses. Street explains that singing enables these people to focus on what they can do, rather than what they cannot.

"It suddenly brings an equality into the room where the caregivers are no longer caregivers, and the healthcare practitioners are also singing the same song in the same way," says Street. "And there isn't really much else that does that."

Every breath you take

Among those who have been shown to benefit most from singing are people with chronic respiratory conditions, something which has become a major research focus for Keir Philip, a clinical lecturer in respiratory medicine at Imperial College London. Philip cautions that singing will not cure people of these diseases, but it can serve as an effective holistic approach that complements conventional treatments.

"For some people, living with breathlessness can result in them changing the way they breathe, so that it becomes irregular and inefficient," says Philip. "Some singing-based approaches help this in terms of the muscles used, the rhythm and the depth [of breathing], which can help improve symptoms."

One of his most notable studies involved taking a breathing programme

which had been developed through working with professional singers in the English National Opera and using it as part of a randomised controlled trial in long-COVID patients. Over six weeks, the results showed that it improved their quality of life and alleviated some aspects of their breathing difficulties.

Singing appears to be particularly beneficial for the brain as well as the respiratory system.

At the same time, singing isn't risk free for people with underlying health conditions. Group singing was linked to a superspreading event in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the act of singing can emit large amounts of airborne virus. (Read more about how diseases spread as we talk and sing.)

"If you have a respiratory infection, it's best to miss that week at choir practice, to avoid putting other people at risk," says Philip.

But perhaps the most remarkable benefit of singing is that it appears to play a role in helping the brain repair itself from damage. This was illustrated by the story of former US congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who survived being shot in the head during an assassination attempt in 2011. Over the course of many years, Giffords relearned how to walk, speak, read and write, with therapists utilising songs from her childhood to help her regain verbal fluency.

Researchers have used similar approaches to help stroke survivors recover speech, as singing can provide the hours and hours of repetition needed to promote new connectivity between the two brain hemispheres, which is often damaged by an acute stroke. Singing is also thought to enhance the brain's neuroplasticity, which allows it to rewire itself.

There are growing attempts to use singing as a form of therapy to help patients with a wide range of conditions.

There are theories that singing may also help people suffering from cognitive decline because of the intense demands it places on the brain, requiring sustained attention and stimulating word finding and verbal memory.

"There is a gradually growing evidence base for the cognitive benefits of singing in older adults," says Teppo Särkämö, professor of neuropsychology at the University of Helsinki. "We still know little though about the potential of singing to actually slow or prevent cognitive decline, as this would require large-scale studies with years of follow-up."

For Street, all the research demonstrating the powerful effects of singing – whether at a social or a neurochemical level – underlines why it is such a universal part of human life.

One of his concerns, however, is that as people spend increasing amounts of time connected to technology rather than with each other through activities like singing, relatively few people are experiencing its benefits.

"There's a lot we're discovering, particularly with rehabilitation from brain injury," he says. "The studies are just starting to emerge which are showing that singing can have these effects, even for people with significant injury. It makes sense that we can benefit so much from it because singing has always played such an enormous role in connecting communities." Perhaps it's just another reason to enjoy some carols around the Christmas tree this year.



Singing with others can be more beneficial than singing solo

Spend Time in nature or outdoors

to boost feelings of happiness and improve your mood

Spending time in nature can help relieve stress and anxiety, improve your mood and boost feelings of happiness and wellbeing. Whatever you call it – forest bathing, ecotherapy, mindfulness in nature, green time or the wilderness cure – humans evolved in the great outdoors, and your brain may benefit from a journey back to nature.

Our brains have mostly stayed the same. We still have a deep connection with nature, and research shows that if we don't nourish that bond despite our technological advancements, we may be affected in many ways.

Feel better

If you're able to, get back to nature to energise your mind and body. Research has shown spending 120 minutes a week in nature improves health and wellbeing.

If you're feeling blue, try going outside to green, natural spaces. A stroll in the forest or parklands has been shown to help combat depression, and even just the view of the forest from a hospital room helps patients who are feeling down. Head for the hills or just outside your home if you need a boost to your mood.

Stressed: Nature presents scenes that gently capture your attention instead of suddenly snatching it, calming your nerves instead of frazzling them.

Anxious: You probably know that physical activity is good for your state of mind. But did you know that working out in nature helps to reduce anxiety, among other benefits, even more than going to an indoor gym? Consider taking a walk outdoors to get the best mental bang for your buck.



Self-Involved: If you dwell on your problems and just can't stop, a walk through a green space might put the brakes on the thoughts circling through your head. Research shows that a 90-minute walk in nature lowers activity in the part of the brain linked to negative thoughts.

Fatigued: Are you constantly multitasking in life at work or home? You might face a combination of kids, chores and devices vying for your attention. Your prefrontal cortex can only take so much distraction before it needs a recharge. Time in nature has been shown to restore mental abilities.

Uninspired: Changing the scenery is a great way to get the creative juices flowing. Nature offers stimuli that you won't find while staring at a screen. In one study, spending four days in nature improved problem-solving skills by 50%, so try getting out into the great outdoors.

Antisocial: Time in nature can help with your personal relationships, too. Natural beauty results in more prosocial behaviours, like generosity and empathy.

Disconnected: One of the most basic human needs is to feel that you belong and you are part of a larger tribe. Studies show that this concept goes beyond human relationships alone. Time in nature results in a sense of belonging to the wider world that is vital for mental health.

Angsty: At times, you might feel lost, and begin to wonder, "What is life all about?" A dose of awe might remind you just how wondrous the world is. Nature provides trees that were hundreds of years old before you were even born, towering mountains that touch the clouds and a sky full of uncountable stars. When it comes to awe-inspiring awesomeness, nature leaves our jaws dropping and spines tingling, and rekindles the realisation that we're a tiny part of an incredible universe. What's more powerful than that?





Kinship Carers Victoria
Phone: 0499 969 234 | Email: admin@kinshipcarersvictoria.org
www.kinshipcarersvictoria.org