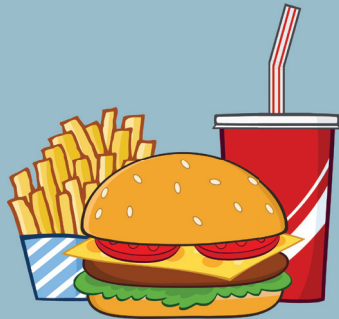


DOES YOUR
'ME TIME'
LOOK LIKE THIS?



Why not self-care
from the inside out?

GO ON, TREAT YOURSELF!

If junk food ads dressed up as 'me time' are landing in your inbox, *Hatty Willmoth* has a list of alternative ways to make you feel good

Junk food is often marketed as self-care. If you're feeling sad, stressed or under the weather, advertisements tell us to treat ourselves with a burger and chips, or pizza and fizzy drinks, delivered right to our door.

Much of this food has been industrially engineered to trigger our 'bliss point', releasing the reward chemical dopamine in the brain — so it may cheer us up initially.¹ It's also cheap and convenient.

But in the longer term, this dopamine hit dulls,² and the fast food we may increasingly crave might harm us.³

Olga Preston, a nutritional therapy practitioner at the Institute for Optimum Nutrition's Brain Bio Centre, says: "Fast foods lack vitamins and minerals, and are usually high in trans fat and sugar, both of which act in synergy to create a state of inflammation."

Junk food has been linked not only to physical disease such as obesity,⁴ type 2 diabetes,⁵ cancer⁶ and early death,⁷ but also to mental illness, including depression.⁸ So if we need cheering up, junk food isn't going to be the answer.



If you're not already prioritising beauty sleep, you might benefit from some unconscious 'me time'. Losing out on sleep raises our risk of all sorts of chronic diseases and mental illnesses. In the short term, we feel groggy, our immune system takes a hit, and we crave fatty and sugary foods. A good snooze can be great self-care.

take up a new
hobby



Unleash your creativity with a brand new hobby. Gardening, for example, has been found to lower symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress in healthy adults,⁹ and it's a great excuse to get outside — but that's just one option of many! Any creative activity can help you to cheer yourself up.

Read

your favourite book or magazine



Reading is a great way to wind down and escape from the hectic realities of everyday life. Non-fiction books and magazines can inform, entertain, educate and inspire us by introducing us to new concepts and ideas (maybe even about nutrition!). But fiction, too, is an excellent way to relax. Escaping into a fictional narrative and delving into the inner lives of imagined characters has been associated with improved empathy.¹⁰

play or
listen to
music



Music's emotive quality makes it so cathartic. It has been used to improve mental wellbeing in a variety of guises, from helping women recover from postnatal depression to alleviating symptoms of anxiety, and providing moments of joy to children in hospital.¹¹ Music groups and classes, such as community choirs, have even been prescribed by the NHS as a means of combatting loneliness and social isolation.¹¹ In brain scans, music seems to 'light up' the whole brain;¹² studies suggest it may aid recovery from brain injury¹³ or stroke.¹⁴



Yoga

Why not stretch out your stress with some yoga? This ancient practice can be as gentle as you like and tailored to what you're feeling. Yoga has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, both immediately after each session and with long-term practice.¹⁵ Find a video online, join a class, or if you're already a pro, freestyle your own session!

GO OUTSIDE



Step into the great outdoors! Whether trekking through forests and hills or sat on a park bench listening to the birds, exposure to green spaces has been linked to longevity, lower levels of stress, and reduced risk of a plethora of chronic diseases. Even tree-lined city streets may have a positive effect.¹⁶ A 2022 study found a link between seeing or hearing birds and up to eight hours of improved mental wellbeing.¹⁷



bathe

Soaking in a hot, bubbly bath isn't just great for feeling clean and pampered; by increasing blood circulation from the core of the body to the hands and feet, it helps cool down internal body temperature. That's what the body does naturally in preparation for sleep, so it helps us feel sleepy. If you time it right (an hour or two before bedtime), a warm bath or shower can help you fall asleep quickly and aid sleep quality.¹⁸

mindfulness



Many of us spend our time worrying about the future or living in the past. Mindfulness is all about cherishing the present moment and noticing little things that make it special. Overlapping with some forms of meditation, mindfulness and gratitude practices have boasted similar benefits.¹⁹ Bringing your focus back to the here and now can help support mental wellbeing.

Dance



Is there any better feeling than dancing around the house when no one's watching? Moving to music is a great way to express how we're feeling and let off steam — even if it may feel silly at the time. Regular dancing can help support good brain health,²⁰ and improve various physical skills such as coordination and muscular control.²¹



MOVE

We all know that exercise is good for our bodies, but it's also great for our minds. Movement releases endorphins in our brains that can make us feel amazing for hours afterwards. So, even if at the time it might not feel like a treat, exercise is future self-care. Plus, it's great for maintaining good heart health and regulating weight and blood sugar. Choose something fun and do it often for best results.²²

meditate



Studies suggest that meditation can alleviate feelings of anxiety, depression and stress, and physical pain, both after a single session and with long-term practice.²³ A 2021 study measured the build-up of the stress hormone cortisol in strands of human hair, and found six months of regular meditation reduced cortisol build-up by 25% on average.²⁴

ME TIME

us time



Who says 'me time' has to be a solo endeavour? Feeling cared for by others is also a great form of self-care, whether that's with a heart-to-heart, silliness and giggles, or just a simple cuddle. Quality time with loved ones can help counter feelings of loneliness, strongly linked with multiple mental health problems.²⁵ Bonus points for sharing a hug: physical affection releases a chemical called oxytocin in the brain, which makes us feel happy and relaxed, and helps strengthen social bonds.



What we eat is fundamental to how we feel; Olga Preston knows this better than most. At the Brain Bio Centre, she helps people use nutrition to support their mental health. Olga says: "B vitamins, omega-3 and minerals including zinc and magnesium are important for mental wellness, helping to reduce anxiety, aid sleep, support cognitive function, etc...Increasing intake of these sources and reducing intake of fast foods is key to supporting mental wellness."

If you want some self-care that nourishes you from the inside out, why not treat yourself to food that's both delicious and nutrient-rich? Watch our *Food for Thought* video series on YouTube to find out more.²⁶

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