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Routines and mental health in everyday life

How familiar, flexible patterns in our days can make room for our needs and support our wellbeing.

11 min read



Routines are familiar activities we return to regularly, such as preparing a meal, winding down before bed or meeting a friend each week. They can support mental health by giving everyday life some structure and making room for our needs. A helpful routine fits our circumstances, allows for change and makes the day more manageable.

What we mean by a routine

A routine is a repeated pattern in daily or weekly life. It may be organised around a time, such as eating lunch during a work break, or an event, such as taking a moment to rest after coming home. It can include several actions or just one familiar activity.

A habit is closely related, but the words describe slightly different things. A habit is an action that can become relatively automatic in a familiar situation. A routine may still require a conscious choice. We can deliberately make time for a weekly conversation even if it never feels automatic.

Most of us already have routines, including ones we have never planned. We might check messages as soon as we wake, skip lunch when work is busy or spend the evening moving between screens. Looking at these patterns can help us notice what supports us and what leaves our needs unattended.

The purpose is to understand how our days work. There is no need to replace every existing pattern or create an entirely new lifestyle.

How routines can support mental health

The National Institute of Mental Health includes sleep, regular meals, physical activity, enjoyable activities and supportive relationships in its guidance on caring for mental health. It also emphasises that self-care looks different for everyone. [1] Routines can help us make space for these needs within ordinary life.

For example, deciding in advance when to pause for lunch can make it less likely that work fills the whole day. A regular conversation can give a friendship a place in a busy week. Preparing a quiet activity for the evening may make the transition from responsibilities to rest more noticeable.

Predictability can also be useful during change. If much of life feels uncertain, a few familiar activities may offer continuity. A person settling into a new country might keep a regular call with someone at home while gradually discovering new places and connections.

These benefits depend on what the routine makes possible. A tightly organised day that leaves no room to eat, rest or connect may provide structure while still being exhausting. It is useful to ask whether a pattern supports our wellbeing, rather than simply whether we follow it consistently.

Sleep and the rhythm of the day

Sleep is one area where regularity can be helpful. NHS guidance recommends going to bed and getting up at similar times when possible, along with allowing time to relax before bed. Its advice also recognises that sleep difficulties can take time to improve. [2]

An evening routine might involve a quieter activity, preparing a few things for tomorrow or choosing when to stop responding to work messages. The particular sequence matters less than whether it suits our needs and circumstances.

There is no universal bedtime routine. Someone working shifts, caring for a baby or sharing a noisy home may have limited control over their sleep. An appropriate plan needs to account for these realities. Persistent sleep problems deserve attention from a healthcare professional, rather than repeated attempts to become more disciplined.

A difficult night also need not become a judgement about the next day. Routines can provide a starting point, but sleep is not something we can guarantee through perfect preparation.

Meals, movement and the basics we can overlook

When life becomes demanding, everyday needs may be pushed aside. We keep working through a meal or spend hours in the same position because stopping feels inconvenient. A familiar pause can give these needs a place before the day becomes crowded.

For one person, that might mean keeping an accessible lunch option ready. For another, it may mean asking the team to protect a break or arranging practical help with food preparation. The support needed will vary with money, health, time and access.

Movement can also be part of an ordinary routine. The World Health Organization recognises physical activity as beneficial for mental health and explains that activity includes walking, wheeling, dancing and other movement in daily life. [3] A useful option is one that fits a person's abilities and circumstances.

This does not require turning the whole day into a health programme. A small adjustment that is available and comfortable may be more useful than an ambitious plan that depends on resources we do not have.

Making room for connection and enjoyment

Some routines are valuable because they bring other people into our lives. Meeting someone after a regular activity, sharing a meal or keeping a weekly call can create opportunities for connection without having to organise everything from the beginning each time.

The arrangement should remain comfortable for those involved. A regular call can be rescheduled; an invitation can be declined. Predictability is useful when it supports a relationship and allows people to express what they need.

Enjoyment also deserves space. Reading, making music, drawing, gardening or spending time in a favourite place can be part of life without needing to produce a result. A routine can protect this time from being used only for unfinished tasks.

If an activity begins to feel like another obligation, its place in the week can change. We may choose a different activity, invite company or leave the time open. The intention is to keep room for what matters to us.

Why starting small can make sense

Plans for a new routine often begin with enthusiasm. We imagine an ideal morning, a completely organised week or a long list of healthier choices. The difficulty comes when the plan meets an ordinary day, with interruptions, fatigue and competing responsibilities.

A smaller starting point gives us a chance to discover what is realistic. Someone who wants more time away from a screen might begin by keeping one meal free of work messages. Someone who wants a quieter evening might choose one familiar activity after finishing work.

It can help to connect a new action with an event that already happens. Putting a book beside the place where we usually sit in the evening, for example, may make reading easier to remember. This is an option to experiment with, rather than a rule everyone needs to follow.

There is no universal deadline for a routine to become familiar. We can pay attention to whether the action is useful and possible, then adjust its timing or size. Adding more is optional.

Keeping routines flexible

A routine should be able to change when life changes. Travel, illness, caregiving and unexpected demands can interrupt even a well-established pattern. Missing an activity does not erase its previous value.

Imagine someone who usually prepares lunch at home. During a demanding week, a simpler meal or help from another person may be the more realistic choice. The underlying need remains nourishment; the way of meeting it can change.

The same applies to rest, movement and connection. A planned walk might become a shorter outing. A meeting might become a brief phone call. Some days may require stopping altogether and returning later.

It is also worth noticing when a routine creates distress. If changing a sequence causes intense anxiety, or repeated actions become difficult to resist and interfere with life, professional support may help. The aim is to support everyday functioning, not make it depend on completing a sequence perfectly.

Routines during periods of low mood or stress

When we are struggling, activities that usually feel straightforward may become difficult to begin. Advice to organise the day can sound simple while overlooking how much effort basic tasks currently require.

A supportive response begins with the person's present capacity. It might involve practical help, reducing expectations or choosing one manageable part of the day to focus on. A friend could bring food, keep someone company or help them arrange an appointment.

Routines can accompany recovery and treatment, but they should not become a test of whether someone is trying hard enough. If low mood, anxiety or sleep difficulties persist or interfere with everyday life, a qualified healthcare professional can help assess what support is needed. [1]

We do not need to wait until a self-care plan has failed before asking for help. An appropriate routine may be easier to develop with support than in isolation.

Creating supportive rhythms in youth work

In a youth group or learning space, a familiar rhythm can help participants know what to expect. Clear starting times, predictable breaks and an explanation of the day's programme make the setting easier to navigate.

A brief opening check-in or a consistent closing moment can offer continuity. Participation should remain optional, and personal disclosure should never be required. Young people can help decide which elements are useful and how they should work.

Shared routines also need to allow for different needs. Someone may require more breaks, a quieter place or an alternative way to participate. It is helpful to explain changes in advance when possible and make room for feedback.

The same thinking applies to staff. A regular supervision conversation or a protected break is meaningful when the organisation provides the time and conditions for it to happen.

A TED Talk worth exploring

Christine Carter and “The 1-minute secret to forming a new habit”

In this TEDxMarin talk, sociologist Christine Carter addresses a familiar experience: starting a new goal enthusiastically, then losing motivation and feeling frustrated. She offers an accessible introduction to rethinking how we approach new habits. [4]

The talk can be a useful companion to this article, especially for readers who tend to set ambitious expectations. It is a perspective on habit formation, rather than a treatment for mental-health difficulties.

WATCH THE TALK

Watch the TED Talk or read the transcript

Christine Carter · TEDxMarin

https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_carter_the_1_minute_secret_to_forming_a_new_habit

Useful resources to read, watch and download

FURTHER RESOURCES

NHS Every Mind Matters sleep guidance

This accessible guide covers regular sleep routines, winding down and creating a comfortable sleep environment. It includes a sleep advice video and a relaxation resource called Beditation. Readers can explore individual suggestions without trying to change everything at once. [2] Read the guide and explore the videos.

<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-fall-asleep-faster-and-sleep-better/>

NIMH Caring for Your Mental Health

A concise overview of self-care and when to seek professional help. It is useful for placing routines within a broader approach to wellbeing, including priorities and support from others. Service information on the page is specific to the United States. [1]

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health>

WHO Doing What Matters in Times of Stress

This free illustrated guide offers ways to cope with stress, including grounding and acting on values. Downloadable language versions, including Italian, and accompanying audio resources are available. Readers may choose a short practice to explore when it suits them. [5] Download the guide and find audio resources.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927>

NIH Emotional Wellness resources

This collection links to information on stress, sleep, mindfulness and coping with loss. It is useful when readers want to explore a particular concern in more depth through public health resources. [6]

<https://www.nih.gov/health-information/emotional-wellness-toolkit>

◆ ONE QUESTION TO KEEP IN MIND

Which part of my day could become a little easier or more supportive? The answer might be a better opportunity to eat, a clearer ending to work or regular contact with someone we care about. It may also reveal a need for practical help.

A routine is useful when it serves our lives. We can keep the parts that help, change those that no longer fit and leave room for spontaneity. The aim is a day with more space for our needs and enough flexibility to meet real life.

Sources

- 1 National Institute of Mental Health. [Caring for Your Mental Health](#).
- 2 NHS Every Mind Matters. [How to fall asleep faster and sleep better](#).
- 3 World Health Organization. [Physical activity](#).
- 4 Christine Carter. [The 1-minute secret to forming a new habit](#). TEDxMarin 2020.
- 5 World Health Organization. [Doing What Matters in Times of Stress](#). 2020.
- 6 National Institutes of Health. [Emotional Wellness Toolkit resources](#).



This content is educational and does not replace professional psychological support. If you or a young person you work with is in distress, please contact a qualified professional or local emergency services.



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