



Mental Wellbeing - a Protective Factor for Physical Health

Background

Mental wellbeing describes how we're thinking, feeling or coping with life. It is influenced by many things including; understanding ourselves, our thoughts and feelings and what matters to us; feeling in control of decisions that impact our lives; having positive relationships with others; feeling connected to our communities and the world around us.

Our physical and mental wellbeing are connected and affect each other. Research shows that stress and other negative psychological experiences can affect our health. However, it is less clear is how changes in mental wellbeing—feeling good and functioning well—impact physical health, and why this happens.

What did we want to find out?

We wanted to understand whether better mental wellbeing is linked to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. We also wanted to find out more about how improvements in mental wellbeing might affect physical processes in the body that influence heart health.

What did we do?

We commissioned the Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research (CAWR) at Cardiff Metropolitan University to carry out a review of the evidence.

The CAWR team searched major scientific databases for peer-reviewed research studies published between 2005 and 2025, focusing on two types: long-term studies tracking wellbeing and cardiovascular outcomes over time, and clinical trials testing wellbeing interventions alongside physical health measures. Results were summarised narratively rather than combined statistically because the studies varied widely. The approach was rapid but systematic, following recommended methods.

What did the review find?

The review included 12 studies from England, Great Britain, the USA, and other European countries. published between 2007 and 2025. Most were observational studies and covered different age groups: three on young people under 18, two on adults under 50, and five on adults over 50 (mainly using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing), one involving UK civil servants aged 39-63, and another including adults across all ages. The majority looked at the general population, and a few examined people with existing conditions such as heart disease or diabetes.

Mental Wellbeing and Cardiovascular Health Are Linked

Better mental wellbeing is associated with:

- Lower cardiovascular mortality
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- Lower disease risk:
 - lower blood pressure,
 - healthier cholesterol levels (lipid profiles show higher HDL-C, lower triglycerides),
 - reduced risk of hypertension.
- Poor wellbeing is linked to increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

Stronger Associations in Older Adults

There is consistent evidence for people aged 50+, with clear links between wellbeing and blood pressure, lipids, and some evidence of better wellbeing predicting lower levels of HbA1c – indicating healthier blood glucose level.

There were mixed findings for adolescents and young adults. Behavioural factors (diet, smoking, physical activity) may play a bigger role earlier in life.

Mechanisms Are Complex and Bidirectional

Evidence suggests that stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline) negatively affect cardiovascular health.

Positive wellbeing may influence physiological processes (including lipid profiles and blood pressure) directly and indirectly through health behaviours (physical activity, smoking, diet). Improvements in wellbeing alone may not guarantee physiological change unless combined with other lifestyle changes.

This indicates that associations between mental wellbeing and physical health are complex, interlinked, and influenced by many factors. This makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions about the causal relationships involved.

More research is needed to better understand the mechanisms that explain how physiological processes change in response to changes in mental wellbeing.

Social Connection Matters

We know that connection to others is important for individual and community wellbeing. Social support has been associated with increased oxytocin – which has stress-buffering effects.

Evidence from this review suggests that feelings of belonging predicted better heart health in young people.

However, it is unclear how changes in mental wellbeing, influenced by social connection, lead to changes in health outcomes and the reasons for this.

Interventions Show Promise but Evidence Is Limited

A very small number of intervention studies which aimed to improve wellbeing and monitored cardiovascular health markers were found.

Gratitude interventions showed small reductions in blood pressure linked to improved life satisfaction.

What does the relationship between physical health and mental wellbeing mean for services?

Mental wellbeing is not just a “nice to have”—it is a protective factor for physical health, especially heart health. Community-based approaches that foster social connection and belonging may be particularly effective for improving both mental and physical health.

Integrating activities that protect and promote mental wellbeing into services can form part of strategies to reduce physical health risks. Services that focus on clinical, behavioural or lifestyle interventions can maximise their impact by embedding mental wellbeing promotion alongside existing activities.

Health care professionals and services that are supporting people with their cardiovascular health should consider:

- Asking service users about their mental wellbeing and measuring wellbeing scores (for example, using the [Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale](#)) as part of routine monitoring.
- Targeting older adults and those with existing risk factors for interventions that combine psychological support with physical activity and diet.
- Bringing community-level action into the service offer. This could involve [social prescribing](#), or other activity that builds social networks, enables peer support, and improves access to community activities to enhance belonging.
- Training staff to understand the link between mental wellbeing and physical health and to promote holistic care.
- Using the [Hapus](#) website to discover a range of useful resources and simple ways to improve mental wellbeing amongst staff and those they are supporting.

Summary based on findings from: Hallingberg, B., Brown, S., Isherwood, K. & Lord, R. (2025). A rapid evidence review on the relationship between improved mental wellbeing and mortality, morbidity and physiological outcomes within cardiovascular disease. Centre for Health, Activity and Wellbeing Research, Cardiff Metropolitan University.