

## The Mind Guide – Lifestyle Medicine

**Will:** Hello and welcome to The Mind Guide, I'm Will Dell.

The Mind Guide is all about mental health and wellbeing, it's produced to coincide with mental health and wellbeing awareness week here at the University of Chester, there's a new episode every day this week. Just a heads up, there's some stuff in the podcast that some listeners might find upsetting, so if that's you or if you've got kids in the room, you might want to sit this one out.

Today's episode is all about lifestyle medicine, that's the small changes you can make to your everyday routine. Today, we're chatting with Colin Dolan to find out how those small changes helped save his life.

And in every episode, we invite you take part in 60 seconds of meditation. That's 0.06 percent of your day to look after your mental wellbeing. All that and more to come on The Mind Guide.

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Mark Edwards is a leading mental health nurse who's worked across the NHS, I asked him for things we can do on a day to day basis to improve our mental wellbeing.

**Mark:** Yeah there's quite a few but one of the more simple tips, and probably one of the most effective is quite a lot of the students that I see and the people I see are having sleep issues, either not being able to fall asleep, waking during the night or waking up and feeling like they've not slept. And this is run by something called the circadian rhythm which is an inbuilt clock we have within our body, but over time, for reasons perhaps because when we're watching too much television at night or we're on an iPad or a phone or playing games our ability to register that we're sleepy that we need to go to sleep it starts to diminish so it needs re-aligning, and one of the easiest ways to do that is immediately upon waking or ten to fifteen minutes after you've woke up that you just expose yourself to sunlight, so that could be going out for a walk to grab a coffee, it could be it could be sitting in front of a window, but anywhere you can get out to natural sunlight can re align the circadian rhythm, so it sounds really simple to go, if you're struggling sleeping the answers in sunlight or daylight, but it's really effective, especially for a lot of the students, that I see by their very nature who have sleep problems and I think that that's a mixture of the social aspects but also assignments or essays are due and there's a bit of time pressure there so, thinking back to my own days as a student, there were very much days or nights where I would work through the night to meet an assignment or an essay deadline and obviously that then has an impact on your sleep quality. So that's one

of the take home tips I'd suggest to people, if they are struggling, whatsoever in their sleep then getting out for a walk for twenty minutes in the morning is perfect.

**Will:** That's a really interesting tip, I don't think many people will have thought of that, about how exposure to natural light can have an impact on your sleep schedule. And I think as well for a lot of students I know, speaking from personal experience, it's easy just to lock yourself away to work on assignments, especially when deadlines are coming up, so I think exposure to some natural light is really important.

**Mark:** Yeah yeah absolutely.

**Will:** You mentioned a little bit there about screen time, so the amount of time we spend on our devices, our phones our iPads our computers, stuff like that. Do you think that can have an impact on our mental wellbeing on a day to day kind of basis?

**Mark:** Yeah absolutely. And I suppose the difficulty is when you start to talk about these things it can quickly as though you're anti-device or anti-technology and absolutely not I use these devices and technology myself. But what I do want to do is raise an awareness, so people are just aware of the amount of time they are spending on devices, if we then tie that into social media, there's a lot of research now that people who use social media for extended periods of time are less happy than those who don't.

**Will:** If there's one tip, if there's one thing that you think, one small thing that we can all do on a regular basis just to make ourselves feel a bit better, or maybe to make those around us feel a bit better, what do you think that would be?

**Mark:** There's two parts to it. So, one of the first things I think to make ourselves feel better, is that we almost need to condition or train our brain to recognise when things are going well. If we think about our own experiences when things are going poor or bad, we tend to think about them, dwell on them, really mull them over and that's okay it can lead to problem solving, but when things are going well we don't seem to have the same thought processes, so recognising what's good in your life. One of the really simple ways to do that is keep a gratitude journal. So there's three really simple questions you can keep, there's some fantastic apps you can use as well. So one of the first questions in the three is 'what have I done for somebody today, to improve their life, or to help their life in some way?' now that can be really simple, it doesn't need to be massive, you don't need to help somebody build a house. Have you held the door for somebody when they were walking through with their shopping, have you maybe let someone go in front of you in the shop who looked like they were in a rush, you know really simple things but what it does is conditions our brain to recognise things that we are doing, and I think, obviously within my area of mental health, what we do see in people who are low in mood is that for some reason they forget the good things they are doing and there's a real focus on the things they

aren't doing. So that's one part, keep a gratitude journal. But also connect with people, so coming back to my point of make it a rule that you see your friends once a week – twice a week – something where you're going to spend some time together doing whatever it is, now if your hobby is playing pool, playing darts, playing football, watching a movie, just be present at that time. Rather than you know – what tends to happen is that everyone gets together, and everyone is on their phones. I think having that deeper connection of going ok well at this time I'm just going to be present I'm going to be here, and we're all going to do that. I think that can lead to a greater fulfilment. So, they're my tips I'd give.

**Will:** Mark thank you so much for your time today.

**Mark:** No, it's my pleasure, thank you.

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**Will:** Someone who's taken on some of those small changes is Colin Dolan.

**Colin:** I am the chief executive of the mental health football association, an organisation that I founded five years ago now which basically promotes the use of football as a form of therapy for anyone who's suffering with mental health problems.

**Will:** Colin has a diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder, he tried to end his life, and then found Everton in the Community Football Project which changed and saved his life. Today, Colin is the chief executive of the Mental Health Football Association.

**Colin:** Well basically, as an organisation we promote the individual organisations up and down the country such as the likes of - the local one to myself here is Everton in the community who run a programme specifically for anyone who's got a mental health problem, it's all based around football. Other than that, they also run various other programmes, for instance right now they're running a barbering course, so people are learning how to become barbers. But there are many, many other aspects to it other than just playing football. It's about the social interaction, it's about the emotional wellbeing, your physical wellbeing and obviously very important there your mental wellbeing.

**Will:** So why do you think playing sports can have a positive impact on our mental wellbeing?

**Colin:** Well first of all the thing that - I myself was a participant on the programme, the Everton programme many years ago and the first thing that I noticed myself, the thing that really hits home to me when I speak to other people is once you're inside the gymnasium or on the football pitch, basically as soon as you cross that white line, you concentrate on your football, it blocks out everything that's going on the hours before it, and the days and months before it as well. Even if it's just for an hour, it just makes you think differently because you're concentrating on your football. Most young men, most old men, when it comes to football you want to win. And you take it seriously, as much as anyone says they want to

have a laugh, you don't like been beaten so you concentrate on the football and it takes away the opportunity for those negative thoughts to come into your head, because you're distracted, it's distracting your mind for a very short time. But it's also the fact that you know you're in a safe and fun environment with people who have had similar life experiences to yourself, from the moment you walk in, you're surrounded by other people who have gone through very, very similar experiences as you've been suffering from for quite some time probably. You wouldn't know by looking at anyone who's suffering with what, you wouldn't have a clue what anyone's diagnosis is. But very soon you get to know people, you make friends, so the support network just within the football group for your mental health is amazing, and it's certainly, from my experience, it's unlike anything I've ever experienced before.

**Will:** In this episode we're looking at the little things we can do, kind of on a day to day basis to improve our mental wellbeing. Do you have any tips?

**Colin:** The way I see it is that you treat every day as a target. And I live by the motto be the best that you can be every day, so setting yourself small goals, targets, something that you can realistically aim for each and every day, for some people that could be going to the corner shop to buy a loaf, for other people it could be getting into work. Because I think a lot of people still forget that the majority of people who have got a mental health problem still have to, unfortunately go into work, even though they're ill they still have to go to work. So that is a challenge in itself. But setting a target every day, to get through that day as best you can be. And talking with other people, always helps, it's said so many times but it's so true that a problem shared is a problem halved, well not so much, but it certainly does give you a little bit more confidence and self-belief that as soon as you sit down to talk to someone you've got something off your chest, you're educating people as well, other people will look out for you and care for you, so the important thing is to talk, set goals and the third thing would be to get access to something whether it just be a simple – go for a walk, whether it be going to play a game of badminton, play a game of football, but get as active as you can be because the exercise is so important, even if you've not had exercise for a number of years, it makes a huge difference to your lifestyle. And if you're suffering with a problem, a mental health issue it really can help you, but that's the areas I would certainly always focus on.

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**Will:** In every episode of The Mind Guide we invite you to join in with 60 seconds of meditation, that's 0.06 percent of your day to look after your mental wellbeing, you can do it at home, in the office, on the train or wherever you're listening to this episode. Today's meditation comes with the sound of the seashore. So, sit back and get comfortable, close your eyes and take some deep breaths in and out.

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Thanks to Mark and Colin for being in this episode, we really do appreciate it.

Michelle Ponting is our executive producer  
Cat Warren is the script advisor  
and Dean McShane is our mental health adviser

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