



THE **HEALTHY TEENAGER'S** GUIDE TO NUTRITION, FITNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

authors



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The first nutrition, mental health, and fitness guide for adolescents, written by dietitians, psychologists and sports instructors.

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1. INSTEAD OF A FOREWORD

Adolescence, seen through your eyes

Although adolescence is a topic frequently discussed by researchers, it becomes truly relevant only when teenagers' lived experience is included in the conversation. Before diving into the specifics of this age period, let's consider it from the perspective of a teenager:

'We are teenagers, our hormones start to take over and trust me, it annoys us as much as it annoys you. We may start to be short-tempered, lazy and sensitive. We can't help it. Any annoyance can trigger us and we may start to act up. We may start living in a mess, our melancholy feelings can weaken us. Eating, cleaning, or even talking could be too draining for us. We don't want to feel this way.'

Gloria Atkinson, 17 ani
(Modern Parent, 2021)



If you can relate, that's totally normal. Even though in many countries, including Romania, you legally become an adult at the age of 18, recent studies show that adolescence may last until you turn 24 (Nelson et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2018; Marquez et al., 2024). Adolescence is the period of transformation lasting from your preteen years until young adulthood.

Emotions, nutrition and sport

Hormonal changes during this time often influence your mood and behavior. That's why it is important for you to understand how mental health is linked to what you eat and how much you exercise. Choosing to eat whole foods ensures optimal energy levels, and engaging in sports can help you manage emotions and reduce stress.

An adequate intake of nutrients can help prevent mood swings and chronic fatigue. On the other hand, sports helps to release pent-up emotions and promotes stress reduction. Physical activity raises the level of endorphins, which contributes to feeling good. During adolescence, when feelings are intense, regular workouts can balance those emotions

Personal development and peer influence

During this period, physical and mental transformations are underway, and reaching that balanced state becomes the key to success in handling the changes. By the end of adolescence, your body will have undergone changes such as growing body hair, voice deepening, or getting a period. All these changes have a big influence on your mood and behavior. Also, your brain develops apace, which helps with impulse control and decision making.

Impulse control is easier when you eat right and you engage in sport. For example, complex carbohydrates and protein provide steady levels of energy and prevent sudden mood swings. Sports, be it individual or in a team, not only reduces stress, but can help you learn about your own abilities and limitations. Taking part in team sports helps you to develop social skills and affords you the support of teammates, while individual sports help you explore your limits and grow your emotional resilience.

Because the frontal lobes - where decision making is happening - are still developing, you may feel that your decisions are sometimes impulsive and emotional. That's totally normal and it's just part of the learning and adaptation process that you go through to better know yourself. Adolescence is intense, and those pent-up emotions can be channeled into positive activities such as exploring new interests or means of self-expression, or they may lead to risky behavior. Teenagers can be vulnerable to smoking, drinking alcohol, or engaging in unprotected sex, but open communication with the adults in your life and being aware of those risks can help set you up for growth and balance.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a unique period, characterized by rapid change and a fascinating journey towards self awareness. Understanding your own feelings and needs is essential to successfully go through this chapter of your life. By eating a balanced diet, exercising and processing your feelings, you can maintain physical and mental health and improve your quality of life. The choices you make now, whether we're talking about healthy food habits or discovering a sport you enjoy, will help you become and stay a balanced, energetic person in the future.

This is the perfect time for you to get to know yourself, to nurture your passions and to foster independence. Use every experience to become your best self!

2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A HEALTHY DIET?

Introduction to macronutrients and their role

At a crucial age like adolescence, when body and mind are in a continual state of change, it is essential for you to understand how the food you eat directly influences your physical and mental development. Macronutrients are the essential components of food that give you not only the energy you need to function daily, but also support the complex processes of growth and development, and your capacity to learn. The three main types of macronutrients are carbohydrates, proteins and fats, and each of them play a singular, vital role in the optimal running of any organism.

Carbohydrates: Essential sources of energy

Carbohydrates, or carbs for short, are the main source of fuel for your body, just like how a car needs fuel to function. The brain, the muscles and the internal organs all use carbs to stay alert and active, which makes them essential for your daily activities. There are two types of carbohydrates:



- **Simple carbs**, which provide energy fast and can be found in foods like fruit, dairy, dessert and other baked goods.
- **Complex carbs**, which provide energy gradually, so it lasts longer, and can be found in foods such as whole grains, legumes and starchy vegetables like potatoes and corn.

These nutrients are important for maintaining your energy levels during a busy day and for supporting your ability to focus at school or during challenging physical activity. Adequate intake of complex carbs, especially those rich in fiber, ensure the gradual release of energy and prevent fatigue or mood swings (*Human Nutrition*, 2020).

Fiber, a type of complex carbohydrate, plays a particular role in digestion and health in general:

- **Soluble fiber** helps to lower cholesterol and blood sugar, and can be found in oats, beans, apples and carrots.
- **Insoluble fiber** contributes to the optimal running of your digestive system, speeding up the movement and processing of waste in the intestines, and can be found in whole grains, nuts and vegetables.

The importance of fiber:

- It promotes healthy digestion and prevents constipation.
- It promotes healthy weight, helping you feel full longer.
- It supports heart health and improves intestinal function

(Universitatea din Houston, 2022)

Protein: the building blocks of the body

Protein is fundamental in body repair, growth, and maintenance. Each part of your body, from muscles to hormones and enzymes, depends on protein to function properly. Think of protein as a builders' team who repairs and maintains your body, helping it grow and recover from intense physical effort or wounds.

Sources of protein:

- **Animal sources:** meat, fish, eggs and dairy products are considered complete protein sources because they contain all essential amino acids.
- **Plant-based sources:** beans, lentils, chickpeas, nuts and tofu. Plant-based proteins can be incomplete but in adequate combinations such as rice and beans, all necessary amino acids are supplied.



Proteins are essential for teenagers' development, supporting muscle growth and cellular regeneration, helping you become stronger and recover faster from strenuous workouts. Diets rich in protein also help optimal brain function and maintain a healthy metabolism
(*Human Nutrition, 2020*)

Fat: an essential source of energy and organ protection

Although controversial, fat is essential for a body's good working order. It protects the organs, it facilitates the absorption of essential vitamins (A, D, E and K), and it is a good source of energy. There are three main types of fats:

- **Saturated fat:** found in animal products and processed foods, such as meat, butter and cheese. Consuming these fats in moderation is important if you want to stay healthy.
- **Unsaturated fat:** this 'good' fat is found in foods such as avocados, nuts, fatty fish and healthy oils like olive oil. It supports heart health and reduces inflammation in the body (*Titchenal et al., 2020*).
- **Trans fat:** it is unhealthy and is mostly found in processed foods like fries, cookies and other baked goods. Trans fat raises the risk of cardiovascular disease and should be avoided as much as possible (*Pyakurel, 2023*).



Why is fat important?

- **Organ protection:** fat forms a protective layer around internal organs.
- **Vitamin absorption:** fat helps the body absorb liposoluble vitamins.
- **Energy:** fat is a dense source of energy, useful especially in strenuous physical training.

Avoid ultra-processed foods rich in trans fat and added sugars to maintain a healthy balanced diet and to support adequate growth in adolescence.

The synergy between nutrition, mental health & sport

An optimal nutritional intake influences not only physical health, but also mental health and sports performance. Complex carbs provide the needed energy for intense workouts, protein promotes recovery and muscle mass growth, and healthy fats contribute to good heart and brain function. This synergy is essential for a balanced mind-body connection, which teenagers need to be equal to the challenge of traversing this age period.

Moreover, regular physical activity contributes to emotional self regulation by releasing endorphins, which help reduce stress and anxiety. At the same time, a balanced diet maintains energy levels, and supports brain function, allowing you to focus and reach your goals in school and sports.

The power of micronutrients - vitamins and minerals

Welcome to the world of vitamins and minerals - those essential nutrients which, even though you eat them in smaller quantities, have a major impact on our health and wellness. They're like hidden superheroes in our food, supporting growth and development and protecting our body against diseases. Each of them has a particular function, contributing to bone health, boosting the immune system, producing energy and stimulating a good state of mind.

Vitamins

Vitamin A (Retinol)

Superpower: Improves sight in low-light conditions, supports healthy skin and immune function.

- **Sources:** carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach - it's like nature's glasses at nighttime.
- **Did you know that:** this vitamin not only improves eyesight but also prevents germs from entering your body and fights infection once it's in (*Tons of Facts, 2018*).

Vitamin C (Ascorbic Acid)

Superpower: : a powerful antioxidant that fights free radicals, helps in wound healing and boosts the immune system.

- **Sources:** fruit and vegetables, especially citrus, bell peppers, strawberries and broccoli.
- **Did you know that:** Vitamin C is crucial for metabolizing fat and transforming it into an energy source (*Bodylogicmd, nd*).

Vitamin D

Superpower: it helps with calcium absorption, it's essential for strong bones and teeth, and supports the immune system.

- **Sources:** sunlight, fortified dairy products, fatty fish like salmon.
- **Did you know that:** the body can make vitamin D from sunlight exposure (*Brikle, 2021*).

Vitamin E (Tocopherol)

Superpower: it protects the cells from oxidative stress and supports skin health.

- **Sources:** nuts, seeds, and vegetable oils - trustworthy protectors of your cells.
- **Did you know that:** Vitamin E can help protect eyes against cataract and macular degeneration (*Khoo, 2019*).

B complex vitamins:

The vitamins that make up the B complex play a crucial role in transforming food into energy, supporting the metabolism and cellular functions.

Vitamin B1 (Thiamine): essential for nerve, muscle and heart function.

- **Sources:** whole grains, meat, fish.
- **Did you know that:** thiamine is needed to make adenosine triphosphate (ATP) - the source of energy at the cellular level (*Cleveland Clinic, 2024*).

Vitamin B2 (Riboflavin): helps to produce energy and in cell function.

- **Sources:** eggs, white meat, green vegetables.
- **Did you know that:** the large intestine produces riboflavin so it can be absorbed and utilized by the body (*Said, 2014*).

Vitamin B3 (Niacin): plays an important role in metabolism and DNA repair.

- **Sources:** meat, fish, beans, leafy green vegetables.
- **Did you know that:** Niacin can help improve cholesterol levels (*Peechakara, 2024*).

Vitamin B5 (Pantothenic Acid): essential for the metabolism of nutrients and synthesizing hormones.

- **Sources:** chicken, beef, oats, tomatoes, broccoli.
- **Did you know that:** its name is derived from the Greek word 'pantou', which means 'everywhere' (*PAN, nd*).

Vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine): helps in the metabolism of amino acids and red cell production.

- **Sources:** fish, liver, vegetables.
- **Did you know that:** vitamin B6 is a coenzyme in over 140 enzymatic reactions (*NIH 2011*)

Vitamin B7 (Biotin): needed to metabolize carbs, fats, and amino acids.

- **Sources:** egg yolk, nuts, fish, dairy products.
- **Did you know that:** biotin is frequently associated with improving hair and nail health, although there is limited proof of it (*Mock, 2014*).

Vitamin B9 (Folic Acid): Crucial for brain function and DNA production.

- **Sources:** leafy green vegetables, nuts, beans.
- **Did you know that:** the folic acid found in supplements is almost entirely bioavailable, while that in food is only partially bioavailable (*Institute of Medicine, 1998*).

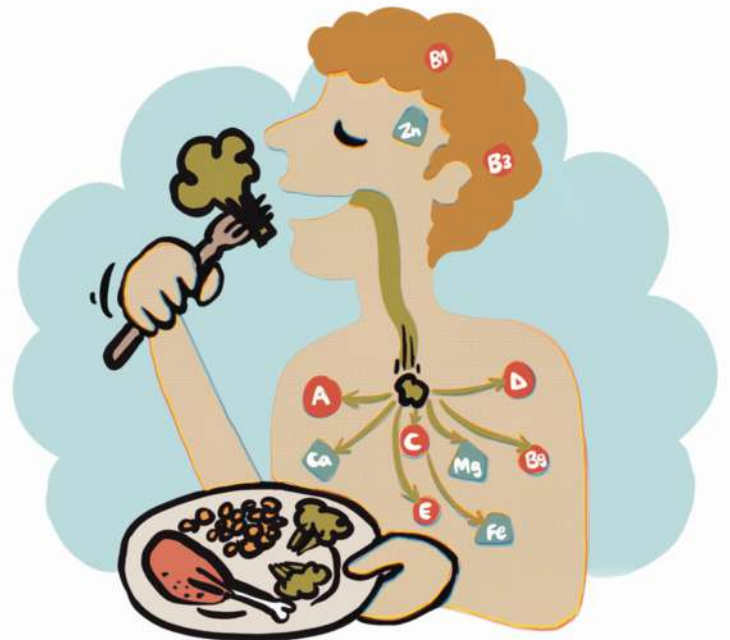
Vitamin B12 (Cobalamin): essential for brain function and red cell production.

- **Sources:** meat, fish, dairy.
- **Did you know that:** vitamin B12 is the only one that contains a metallic element - cobalt (*Institute of Medicine, 1998*).

Minerals

Calcium: helps in the formation and maintenance of strong bones and teeth.

- **Sources:** dairy products, dark leafy greens.
- **Did you know that:** Calcium is the most abundant mineral in the body (*Institute of Medicine, 2021*).



Iron: needed in the production of hemoglobin, which transports oxygen in the body.

- **Sources:** red meat, beans, spinach.
- **Did you know that:** low iron is one of the most common nutritional deficiencies in the world (*WHO, 2020*).

Magnesium: needed for more than 300 biochemical reactions, including protein synthesis and nervous system function.

- **Sources:** nuts, seeds, whole grains.
- **Did you know that:** magnesium plays an essential role in regulating arterial pressure and blood sugar levels (*Rud, 2010*).

Zinc: helps in wound healing, immune system function and cell division.

- **Sources:** meat, shellfish, seeds.
- **Did you know that:** Zinc is absorbed differently by each person depending on their diet and how they combine foods (*WHO, 2004*).

Conclusion

Vitamins and minerals are fundamental for the proper functioning of our body, protecting us from diseases and supporting various biological processes. They not only keep our bones strong and help us fight against infections, but they also contribute to our general wellness.

A balanced, varied diet is key to obtaining all these essential nutrients so that our bodies and minds can function in peak form.

3. THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A HAPPY LIFE: OXYGEN, WATER, AND SLEEP

In this chapter you'll learn that oxygen, water and sleep play a basic part in maintaining physical and mental health. These three factors are the building blocks of life and provide the energy you need to live each day to the fullest. Together they enable each cell, organ and system to function, giving you vitality and the ability to recover and focus. Each has its own 'superpower' and learning how to maximize them will allow you to live at the peak of your form.

Oxygen: life's invisible force

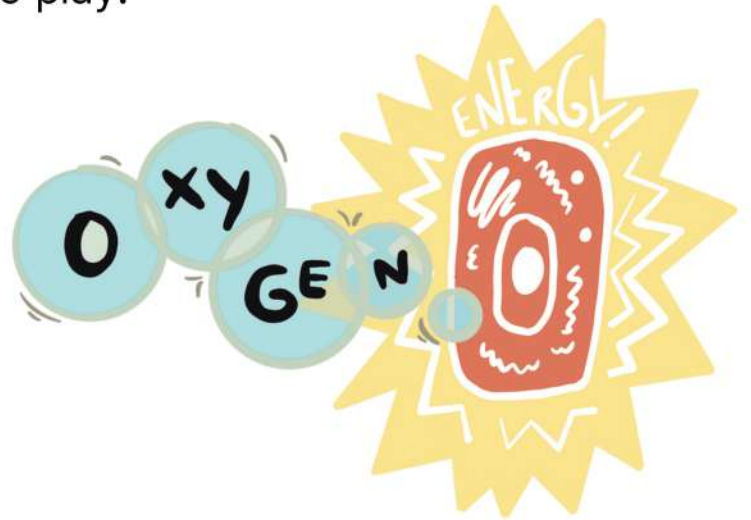
Welcome to the fascinating life of oxygen - the invisible, basic force that brings life to every cell in your body! Without oxygen, your body could not function: it would be impossible to think, play, or grow

- **The superhero of every cell:** oxygen helps cells transform food into energy; without it, there would be no energy - and consequently, no activity either!
- **Essential for survival:** each breath you take sends oxygen through your blood, bringing energy to all body parts, from your brain to your toes.

Imagine your body is a gaming console: that would make oxygen its cable - plug it in and you're ready to play!

The journey of oxygen:

1. **Inhalation station:** air makes its way into your lungs and fills up the tiny air sacs called alveoli. Here, oxygen binds to red blood cells, as if going on a free rollercoaster ride



2. **The highway:** the richly oxygenated blood travels fast throughout the body, delivering the oxygen to every cell, like a high speed delivery truck.

3. **Unloading the cargo:** oxygen is then transferred to the cells, fueling them and helping them produce energy and keep your body running.

Did you know that the lungs contain circa 2414 km of air passageways - about the distance from Cluj-Napoca and Madrid!

Oxygen and exercise:

1. **The warm-up:** when you begin working out, your muscles need more oxygen to produce energy. Your breath quickens, preparing your body, just like you prepare yourself before an important presentation.

2. **The workout:** during strenuous exercise, your body can use up to 10 to 15 times more oxygen compared to your body at rest. Oxygen is the 'battery' that fuels your movements.

3. **The cool-down:** after working out, the body uses extra oxygen to repair muscles and to recover, just like an artist organizing his gear after a show.

Did you know that during a challenging workout your body can use up to 100 times more oxygen than you do at rest
(Trayhurm, 2019).

Water: life's liquid force

Imagine your body is an aquapark where each slide and pool - your cells, blood, and internal organs - depend on water to function properly. Water is essential to your body!

- **A cooling system:** water regulates body temperature through sweating, like an internal AC unit.
- **A cleaning agent:** water helps eliminate toxins through your kidneys, keeping your body clean and healthy.
- **A protective lubricant:** water keeps your joints well lubricated, ensuring smooth movements.

Consequences of insufficient water intake:

- **Mental fog:** dehydration can lead to inability to focus, memory issues, and mood swings. It's like trying to watch a video clip on a very slow internet connection.
- **Fatigue and weakness:** without enough water, your energy levels will drop, making you feel like a phone about to run out of charge
- **Digestive issues:** a lack of water will cause problems with digestion, making it inefficient, which can lead to constipation and physical discomfort

Did you know that approximately 60% of your body is made of water, which means that more than half of you is liquid!

Advice for staying hydrated throughout the day:

1. **Carry a water bottle:** always have a water bottle on hand, and sip regularly.
2. **Flavor up your water:** adding some fruit slices (lemon, apple, cucumber) can make plain water more appealing.
3. **Eat foods with a high water content:** choose fruit and vegetables like cantaloupe, cucumber and oranges, made up of over 90% water.
4. **Set reminders:** gamify your water intake - use apps or set alerts to remind yourself to drink.

Did you know
that losing even 2% of
your body water can
make workouts seem
much harder



Did you know that:

- Food can provide up to 20% of your daily water intake. For example, having a large apple is not only healthy but also hydrating.
- People can live for up to a month without food, but only up to a week without water

- The amount of body water decreases with age: babies have about 78% at birth, and then that drops to about 65% by the time they turn one.
- Adequate hydration improves brain function, increasing your ability to focus and memorize.
- Even slight dehydration will immediately affect your body's performance. Losing 1% to 2% of your body water reduces your stamina when you workout.

Water and oxygen are essential for keeping your body in good working order. You couldn't stay active, focused or healthy without them. Provide your body with the fuel it needs and you'll see that it is easier to keep fit - both physically and mentally!

The secrets of sleep: discovering the benefits of restful sleep

A night time journey: exploring sleep stages

Sleep is not only a break from your daily routine; it is a true adventure for both body and brain. When you fall asleep, your body goes through several stages, each of them important for physical and mental recovery, which sets you up for success the following day.

The sleep cycle:

1. **NREM sleep** (non rapid eye movement) takes up about 75% of the night, and has three stages:

- Stage I: during this transitional stage, as you begin to fall asleep, your body relaxes and your brain waves slow down.
- Stage II: light sleep, when the heart rate and body temperature drop, preparing you for deep sleep.

- Stage III: deep sleep, essential for recovery and the release of growth hormones, which helps growth and tissue repair.

2. **REM sleep** (rapid eye movement) takes up about 25% of the night, and this is when you dream. This cycle is crucial for memory consolidation and emotion processing. Your brain is just as active in this stage as it is when you're awake, and this is when most dreams take place.



Did you know that during REM sleep your brain is incredibly active and uses up as much energy as it does when you're awake (*Suni, 2023*).

Benefits of a good night's sleep:

- **It stimulates brain function:** sleep improves your focus, decision making, and creativity.
- **It boosts the immune system:** adequate sleep helps the body fight more efficiently against disease.
- **It improves your mood:** a good night's sleep reduces mood swings and chances of depression

Remember: teenagers who don't get enough sleep are more predisposed to anxiety and have more difficulty handling school and social issues (*Suni, 2023*)

Enemies of sleep:

1. **Screens:** the blue light emitted by phones and tablets is similar to daylight and it tricks the brain into thinking it's time to wake up.

2. **Caffeine and sugar:** consuming either caffeine or sugar before bed can disrupt sleep, keeping you awake long after you need to be up

3. **Stress and worrying:** overthinking and anxiety can keep the brain on high alert, preventing the relaxation that's needed to fall asleep.

Advice for restful sleep:

1. **Create a bedtime routine:** doing things like reading or listening to soothing music can signal your body that it's time to relax.

2. **Keep your bedroom dark and cool:** both of these promote deep sleep.

3. **Keep the same hours:** going to bed and waking up at the same time regularly helps set your circadian rhythm

Did you know that elephants sleep standing up during NREM, but laying down during REM? It's their way of protecting their bodies during deep sleep.

How to create a sleep-friendly environment:

- **Keep your room cool:** the ideal temperature for sleep is between 16 and 20 degrees Celsius (60 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit).
- **Avoid loud noise:** if your surroundings are noisy, try to use a white noise machine or ear plugs.
- **Total darkness:** use blackout curtains or an eye mask to keep light out and increase your chances of restful sleep.
- **Relaxation time:** try some light stretching or reading about an hour before bed.
- **Steady schedule:** keep the same hours even on the weekend, so you can regulate your circadian rhythm.
- **Journaling:** if you have thoughts or worries that keep you up, write them down and let it go, so you can relax.

Did you know that establishing a bedtime routine sends a powerful message to your brain, preparing it for sleep like props on a set help the actors remember their lines
(Sunj, 2023)

Why is sleep important for teenagers:

To function at peak capacity, your brain needs enough sleep. This is not just a passive break, but an active process when the brain stores and orders memories, it recovers, and sets up for success the following day.

Emotional balance, mental acuity and health in general depend in large part

on establishing good sleep hygiene, especially for teenagers. So give your body the rest it needs and see your focus, mood, and energy levels go up so you can face the day successfully!

4. ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS AND LEARNING TO READ LABELS

Ultra-processed foods: their impact on health and strategies to avoid them

Ultra-processed foods are industrially formulated products that are significantly different from natural whole foods. They often contain additives like colorings, flavorings and artificial preservatives, besides being chock full of added sugars, salt and trans fat. Frequent use of these foods can have harmful effects on health, especially for teenagers.

The damaging effects of ultra-processed foods:

1. Low nutritional quality: ultra-processed foods such as pre-packaged croissants, potato chips or soda are typically poor in nutrients like vitamins, minerals or fiber. Although high in calories, they bring little nutritional value.

2. **High in trans fat:** trans fat is considered harmful to health. It can be found in fried foods, margarine and baked goods, and is linked to an increase in cardiovascular disease and other serious health concerns.

3. **Increased risk of obesity and other chronic conditions:** frequently eating ultra-processed foods such as frozen pizza, cake and cookies, can lead to weight gain and obesity, which can negatively impact chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes or cardiac health.

4. **Negative effect on mental health:** studies show that a diet high in ultra-processed foods correlates with an increased risk for depression and anxiety in teenagers. The lack of essential nutrients, combined with blood sugar fluctuation, can significantly impact mood and mental health (*Bittencourt Mescoloto, 2024*).

The importance of reading food labels

Reading food labels is crucial to making healthy choices and avoiding the trap of ultra-processed foods. Here's a few reasons why you should read labels:

- **Ingredient awareness:** labels show the contents of a product. For example, cookies or pre-packaged croissants can contain trans fat or added sugars. By reading the label, you can avoid these harmful ingredients.
- **Nutritional information:** labels offer information about the fat, sugar and caloric amounts. For example, pre-packaged baked goods or potato chips often have a high trans fat amount, hidden under names like 'partially hydrogenated oils'.
- **Portion control:** labels often list several small portions per pack, which is how much we tend to eat. Reading the labels can help you control how many portions, or calories, you eat, and thus avoid overeating.

- **Identifying sugars and trans fat:** both of these can appear under different names on the label, such as 'glucose-fructose syrup' or 'partially hydrogenated oils'. Knowing these terms helps you avoid harmful ingredients (EFSA, n.d.)

Reading food labels gives you control and empowers you to make healthier food choices, for a balanced diet and a healthier lifestyle

5. INDEPENDENCE IN THE KITCHEN: ABILITIES YOU NEED TO EAT HEALTHY

The purpose of this guide is to help you to develop your culinary skills, your independence and your confidence in your own food choices. You'll learn that cooking is not only a necessary skill, but also a fun, creative task that will enable you to eat healthy while saving money. Here are some basic skills and strategies so you can handle yourself both in the kitchen and at the supermarket.

Basic skills and safety in the kitchen

- **Master knife skills:** learn to chop and slice safely. A well sharpened knife and a stable cutting board are crucial for safety.
- **Master basic cooking skills:** practice stirring, sauteing, blending and learn how to use kitchen appliances like the stove or a blender
- **Season with confidence:** start with basic seasonings like salt, pepper, or garlic, and then progress to using complex spice and herbs mixtures as you feel more comfortable in the kitchen

Smart shopping: how to handle a supermarket run

- **Read the labels:** learn to understand nutritional information to avoid products with harmful additives or added sugars.
- **Be mindful of location:** supermarkets often place more expensive products at eye level, so don't forget to check the lower shelves for reasonably priced alternatives.
- **Choose fresh produce:** inspect fruit and vegetables by looking at their color, texture and smell, making sure they're ripe and fresh.



Cooking at home gives you control over your nutritional intake and allows you to prepare balanced, healthy meals. Methods like baking, steaming or grilling help to retain nutrients and render using unhealthy fat unnecessary.

Recipes for an active lifestyle:

- **Simple, quick recipes:** choose to prepare versatile, easy to make meals that fit in with a busy schedule.
- **Practice light-heartedly:** cooking can be fun - try new recipes and don't be discouraged if they're not perfect on the first try!

Parental involvement:

- **Cook together:** transform making dinner into a family activity, learning from each other
- **Plan meals as a team:** Decide on the menu and write up the shopping list together.

Benefits of home-cooked meals:

1. **Ingredient and portion control:** cooking at home you can choose the healthiest ingredients and pay attention to portion size.
2. **Fewer calories and added sugars:** people who eat home cooked meals tend to consume fewer calories, sugars and fats compared to people who eat out.
3. **Family bonding:** eating together improves relationships and lets you spend quality time with your loved ones.
4. **Developing a palate for healthy food:** teenagers who are involved in meal prep are more likely to develop preferences for healthy food.



5. **Savings:** cooking at home is more economical than eating out of getting takeout.

6. **Life skills:** cooking teaches you important lessons about nutrition, meal planning and budgeting, preparing you to function independently as an adult (Sztainer, D, 2010).

Conclusion: Cooking at home is not only a basic life skill, but also a way to cultivate your independence, to nurture healthy eating habits and to enjoy the creativity of meal preparation.

6. MIRRORTALK: MENTAL HEALTH AND BODY IMAGE

This chapter will entice you to explore how your own perception of your body influences how you feel about yourself and how you treat yourself. We're going to discuss how you can develop a healthy body image and a strong sense of self esteem while being constantly exposed to the unrealistic expectations and fat shaming promoted in the media. You are going to scrutinize how social pressure and cultural expectations can influence not only our eating habits, but also our mental health.

Moreover, this chapter offers you practical strategies to resist stereotypes and nurture a body-positive self image. We'll talk about 'diet culture' and how to keep a healthy, balanced perspective with regard to food. Undertaking this self-discovery and self-acceptance journey will help you cope with external pressures and establish a self image that's rooted in respect and acceptance of diversity.

Understanding body image and self esteem

It's a good idea to examine how your attitude toward your body affects your mental and physical wellness. Your self-perception profoundly influences your self esteem and your health in general.



So often, the beauty standards portrayed in the media are unrealistic and unattainable, which can lead to feeling inadequate and being too critical of yourself (*Brown et al., 2016*). That's when it's useful to remember that you are worthwhile in your own unique way. Rather than focus exclusively on your appearance, try to appreciate what your body can do. According to Puhl and Brownell (2003), your body is an amazing tool, deserving of respect, whether you use it to do daily tasks or you engage in special activities like sports or dance.

Here are some strategies that can help you nurture a body-positive image:

- **Strengths over looks:** notice what your body is good at - could be that you're a fast runner or a spry dancer, or perhaps you're stronger than you look.
- **Health over size:** focus on health indicators - how much energy and mental acuity you have, rather than paying attention only to how much you weigh.
- **Self-acceptance:** learn to appreciate who you are beyond how you look. This will improve your self esteem, and over time, it will contribute to creating an environment where body diversity will be accepted and appreciated (*Puhl et al., 2012*).

Recommendation: talk to your family about body image issues, and encourage them to share their experience. Debate how our perception of beauty is influenced by the media and how important it is to accept diversity and all the ways in which we're different.

Dealing with weight-related issues, such as feeling judged or stigmatized

It is discriminatory to treat people differently or unfairly because of their weight. If anyone mocks or puts you down because of your weight, it's really important to know that's wrong and it doesn't say anything about who you are. Feeling stigmatized or rejected can lead to sadness, alienation and even food-related disorders (Emmer et al., 2020).



Keep in mind that your weight does not define who you are, what skills or moral values you have, and it doesn't dictate your worth.

Biological factors that influence weight:

Did you know that: hormones play a crucial role in body weight? If your hormones are imbalanced, this can influence how easy or difficult it is to lose or gain weight (Brown et al., 2016).

- **Genetics:** Just as you inherit traits like eye color, you can inherit traits related to body shape. Some people are genetically predisposed to gaining weight, so it's important to know that your weight is not necessarily something you can control.

- **Metabolism:** : Each person burns calories at a different rate - some faster, some slower (Pearl et al., 2018).

Psychological consequences:

- **Mental health impact:** Being put down for your weight can cause anxiety, sadness or even depression (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009).

- **Social alienation:** Feeling uncomfortable as a result of feeling judged for your weight can lead to avoiding certain interactions or social events, even those you had previously enjoyed; this in turn can worsen feelings of loneliness (*Puhl et al., 2017*).

Cultural perspectives:

- **Mass media impact:** have you noticed that movies, tv shows and magazines often feature a certain body type? Seeing that 'perfect' body type everywhere can make us think that it is the only beautiful body type, but of course that's not true (*Tomiyaama et al., 2018*).
- **Cultural diversity:** Different cultures have different ways of looking at body weight. Beauty standards differ, and judgements about how healthy different body types are also diverge based on where in the world you are (*van Amsterdam, 2013*).

To create a more inclusive environment, it's important to combat weight-related stigma and ostracism. Understanding the different reasons for body type diversity and weight variance can help you practice empathy toward yourself and others. Continue to talk about ways to accept and celebrate body type diversity.

Recommendation: Talk to your family about what you've learned about fat shaming. Analyze how these perspectives have changed your thinking on the matter, and brainstorm ways to eliminate stereotyping and preconceived notions.

Diet culture

Diet culture is a set of norms and beliefs that glorifies being thin, and equates success and self worth with how much you weigh. This in turn influences our self perception and our relationship with food and eating, because these attitudes are pervasive in social media, commercials, and real life. Understanding this trend and avoiding its pitfalls is essential for your physical and mental health.

How does diet culture affect your life?

- **Misleading ideas:** Diet culture promotes the myth that happiness and success depend on having a particular body shape, encouraging rapid weight loss even by unhealthy or dangerous methods (*Puhl & Himmelstein, 2018*).



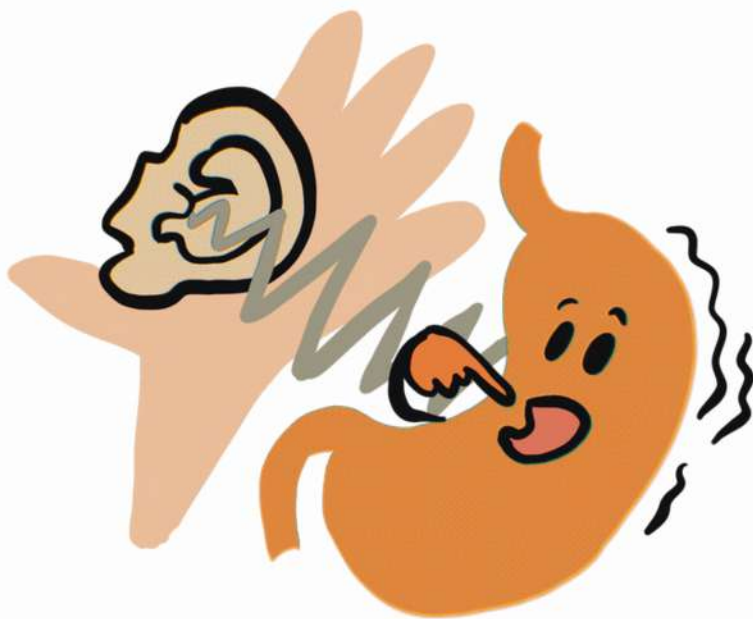
- **Risky habits:** Restrictive diets and unhealthy food habits are often encouraged, which can lead to eating disorders and a dysfunctional relationship with food. It's a much better idea to listen to your body's cues and focus on nutritional balance (*Puhl & Himmelstein, 2018*).
- **The joy of eating:** Eating should be a pleasant, nourishing experience, not a source of guilt and stress (*Hudnall, 2020*).

Negative consequences of diet culture:

- **Mental health:** the pressure exerted by this trend can cause anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Those of us whose body type falls outside the narrow beauty standard promoted by diet culture can develop a negative body image and low self esteem (*Hatzenbuehler, 2009*).
- **Physical health:** Restrictive dieting often leads to nutritional deficiencies and weight fluctuation, which in turn impacts metabolism and causes serious long term health issues (*Pearl et al., 2018*).

How to resist the pressure of diet culture:

1. **Health over appearance:** Focus on health rather than weight. Health comes in all shapes and sizes (*Emmer et al., 2020*).
2. **Focus on function:** Appreciate what your body does, not only how it looks. Function and health trump any esthetic considerations (*Deci & Ryan, 2013*).
3. **Listen to your body:** Pay attention to your body's cues for hunger and satiety. Eating should be a natural reaction to those cues, rather than a set of imposed diet rules (*Hudnall, 2020*).
4. **Identify emotional eating:** learn to cope with your feelings without reaching for food (*Carraça et al., 2011*).



5. **Enjoy food:** Feed your body and appreciate the wealth of food diversity without feeling guilty for it (*Teegardin, 2012*).

6. **Take mass media with a grain of salt:** Be aware of the messaging going around mass media and analyze critically how they influence your self perception (*van Amsterdam, 2013*).

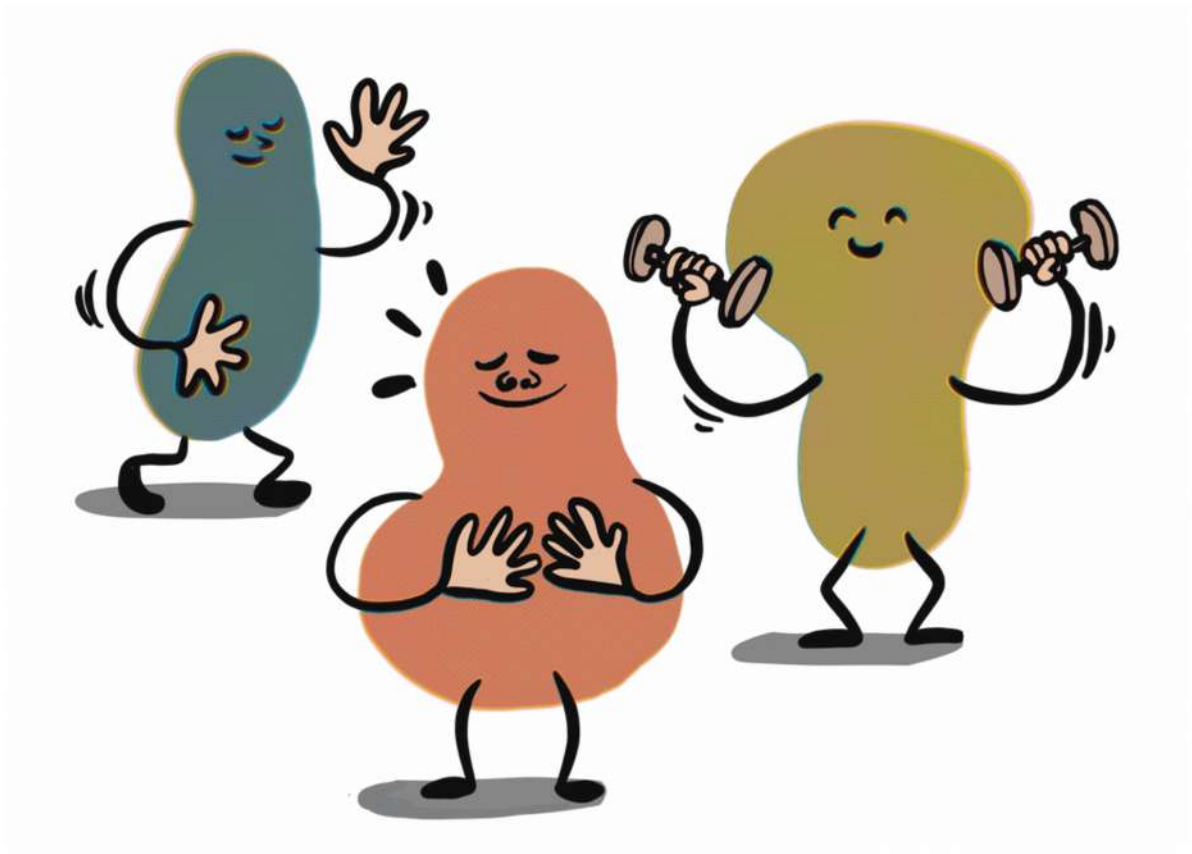
7. **Choose positive media sources:** Follow people and publications that promote diversity and body positivity (*Pearl & Puhl, 2018*).
8. **Community support:** Surround yourself with people who support healthy eating and body positivity (*Pear & Puhl, 2014*).

9. **Speak out against diet culture:** Help others around you to understand the pitfalls of diet culture and teach them to practice acceptance (*Hagger et al., 2014*).

Conclusion

Understanding body image, identifying stigmatization due to weight and resisting the pressure of diet culture is essential for your healthy, balanced development. Focus on what your body can do and on your health in general, rather than physical appearance.

Your body is an amazing tool deserving of respect and appreciation.



The consequences of extreme dieting and eating disorders

Extreme diets can seem a fast solution to that dream body, but they can cause serious health problems. It's essential for you to have balanced eating habits and avoid the pitfalls of these diets.

Reasons why extreme diets are dangerous:

- **Lack of essential nutrients:** Eliminating entire food groups, like carbs or fat, can deprive your body of the vitamins and minerals needed to function properly (*Pearl & Puhl, 2018*).
- **Încetinirea metabolismului:** Dietele cu foarte puține calorii încetinesc metabolismul, făcând pierderea în greutate mai dificilă și predispunând corpul la acumularea rapidă a kilogramelor după finalizarea dietei (*Hudnall, 2020*).
- **Digestive issues:** extreme diets can cause bloating, constipation or other problems, which can mean your body is not getting sufficient nutrients (*Hudnall, 2020*).

Emotional effects of extreme diets:

- **Constant worry about food:** restrictive diets can make eating stressful and take the joy out of it (*Puhl et al., 2012*).
- **Mood changes:** drastic food restrictions can cause anxiety, depression and mood changes (*Hudnall, 2020*).
- **Social isolation:** excessive focus on eating can lead to avoiding social activities, impacting relationships and the desire to interact with others (*Puhl & Brownell, 2003*).



Common eating disorders:



- **Compulsive eating disorder:** compulsive eating followed by guilt or shame (American Psychiatric Association, 2023).

A balanced diet is key for physical and mental wellness, and avoiding extreme diets will protect your health for the long term.

The mind-body connection: How eating influences your emotional state

Your diet plays an essential role in your mental health. Eating feeds not only your body, but affects the way you feel. A balanced diet can help you manage your emotions, reduce stress and improve focus.

- **Anorexia nervosa:** extreme restriction causing dangerous weight loss (American Psychiatric Association, 2023).
- **Bulimia nervosa:** excessive eating followed by vomiting (American Psychiatric Association, 2023).

Your health matters
more than your
appearance.

Foods that improve your mood:

1. **Fish rich in omega-3s:** salmon and sardine support brain health and prevent depression.
2. **Fresh fruit and vegetables:** these contain vitamins and antioxidants which protect your brain and improve your mood.
3. **Fiber rich foods:** whole grains and legumes regulate blood sugar, preventing mood swings.
4. **Dark chocolate:** it has antioxidants which stimulate serotonin production, improving your mood.
5. **Fermented foods:** yogurt and kefir support intestinal health, which has a direct effect on mental health.



A nutrient dense diet will not only bolster your physical health, but your mental health as well. Eat a varied diet to feel good every day.

Coping with stress by eating certain foods

Stress is part of life, but eating the right foods can help you manage it more efficiently. Eating nutrient dense foods can reduce anxiety and improve wellness.

Foods that combat stress:

- **Avocados and nuts:** rich in healthy fats, it can help even out your mood.
- **Citrus and vitamin C:** vitamin C reduces the level of cortisol, the stress hormone.



- **Berries:** chock full of antioxidants, which protect your brain from the effects of stress.
- **Green tea: it has l-theanine,** which has a calming effect on the brain.
- **Bananas and other foods containing magnesium:** magnesium reduces anxiety and improves sleep quality.

Conclusion:

eating right not only supports your physical health but it provides the resources you need to face stress and daily challenges. A diet rich in fruit, vegetables, nuts and green tea will bolster your emotional balance and mental health.

7. MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS AND YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Feelings and their influence on your behavior

Have you ever wondered why your emotions are so fickle? One day you're full of energy, and the next, everything seems draining. This fluctuation is normal, because your emotions are influenced by a variety of factors, including nutrition and physical activity. More and more researchers confirm that how we feed ourselves and how much we move affects not only our body, but also our mind and our emotions.

What are emotions?

Emotions are your brain's natural responses to everyday events and activities. They vary from joy to sadness, from excitement to anxiety, and influence the way you think and act. Sometimes it can be difficult to understand exactly what you're feeling, because emotions are a complex mix of sensations and thoughts.

For example, when you eat healthy and you consume a variety of nutrients, such as omega-3s from fish, your brain works better, which improves your overall mood.

Conversely, eating ultra-processed foods or unbalanced diets can amplify negative emotions such as anxiety or irritability, diminishing your ability to cope with stress.

How does your brain affect emotions?



Your brain is always on alert, keeping your body ready to face any situation. Before an important exam, for example, your body may begin to react: your heart beats faster, your palms sweat. These reactions are your body's way of showing you that you're invested in that situation, and they can actually be regulated when you exercise regularly. Exercise releases endorphins, also known as 'happiness hormones', which can rapidly improve your mood.

How can you understand and manage your emotions?

Understanding your emotions is an important prerequisite for managing them. They are clues for what goes on in your body and mind, and this is closely related to how well you feed yourself. A balanced diet, rich in essential vitamins and minerals, contributes to and improves mental health. For example, foods high in magnesium, such as almonds or spinach, help reduce anxiety and manage your emotions.

Moreover, exercise not only strengthens your body but also plays an essential role in emotional balance. Regular exercise helps release tension and stress, improving mental acuity. If you feel overwhelmed, try going for a run or to the gym - it can totally change your perspective!

Emotions and exercise - where's the connection?

Athletes, for example, are familiar with the connection between emotions and performance. Before an important game, their emotions can be overwhelming, but a trained athlete knows how to manage and use those emotions to better their performance.



Through exercise, you learn to transform anxiety into excitement, and stress into concentration.

The same thing can be applied to your everyday life. Exercise helps you become more emotionally mature, which a healthy diet supports.

Why is it important to understand your emotions?

The better you understand your emotions and their connection to your diet, exercise, and feelings, the better you'll be able to make smart decisions for your mental and physical health. Your emotions are closely connected to your general wellbeing - a healthy diet and an active lifestyle can significantly contribute to your mental health.

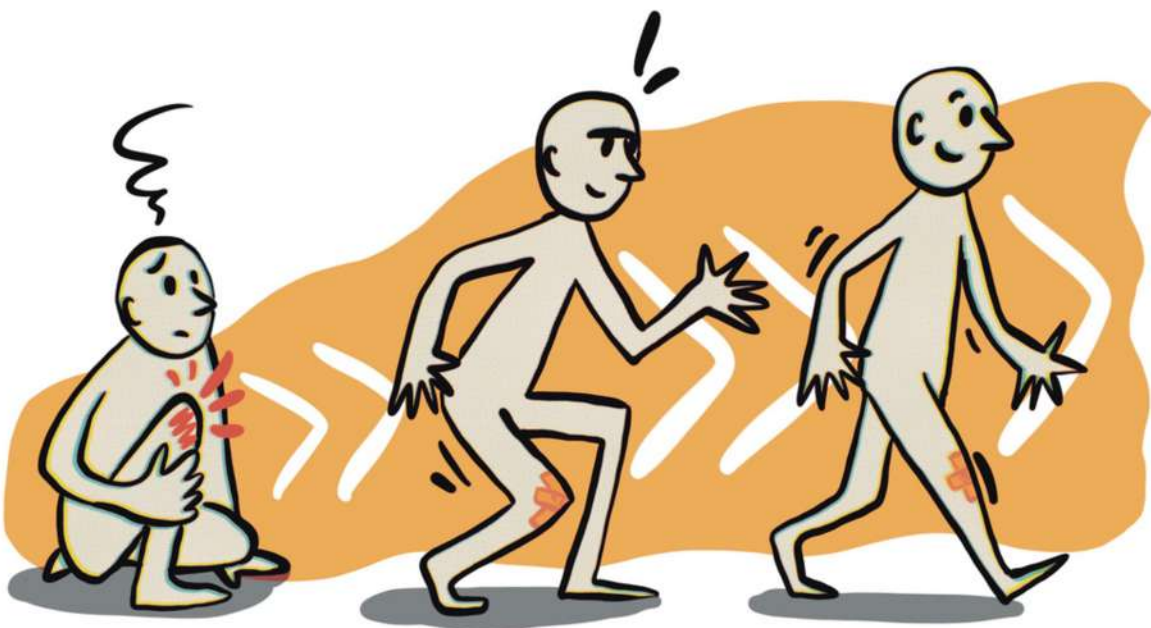
Activity:

Remember one time you felt really happy. What did you eat that day? Did you exercise? Consider how these aspects influenced your emotions and try to integrate healthy habits in your everyday life.

Psychological resilience

Psychological resilience: How it helps you overcome obstacles

In life, we deal with all sorts of situations - some easy, others very difficult. You might've asked yourself how some people seem to have an easier time when life gets hard. This is where the concept of psychological resilience comes into play.



Psychological resilience is your capacity to pick yourself up when you've been knocked down. It's a 'superpower' that helps you recover and continue your life with purpose and self-confidence, even after you've faced complicated situations. It doesn't mean that your problems disappear, just that you manage to resolve them and learn from them. The same way we train our bodies, through exercise and a balanced diet, our brains can also be 'trained' to be stronger and more resilient.

How does resilience work?

Everyone has a certain capacity for resilience. The ways in which we face obstacles depends on our habits and the behaviors we've developed over time. The same way exercise helps you build muscle and nutrition offers you energy, psychological resilience can be learned and developed. It's an ability that can grow as you learn how to adapt to change and difficult situations. For example, exercise releases endorphins - happiness hormones - and reduces stress levels, while healthy foods support a clear mind and stable energy levels, both of these being essential factors in managing your emotions and stress.

Strategies for developing your psychological resilience:

- **Think of your mistakes as learning opportunities** - Instead of seeing your mistakes as the end of the world, try to think of them as problems that can be solved. The same way you recover physically after an intense workout, your mind can also 'recover' from mistakes and difficulties, if you train it with positive, healthy thoughts.
- **Accept change as a part of life** - Consider how you've grown from a child to a teenager. Change is inevitable and is part of your physical and mental development. Your body adapts to new exercise routines or diet changes the same way your brain can learn to adapt to the challenges of life.

- **Focus on your positive traits** - Physical and mental health are connected. Appreciate your physical and mental capabilities. If you like working out or any form of exercise, that can be a source of confidence and resilience. For example, regular exercise improves not only your physical fitness, but also your mental wellbeing, giving you a sense of accomplishment.
- **Look at your problems from a different perspective** - When a situation is overwhelming, ask yourself: “Is this really that bad?” For example, if you missed an important trip, remember that you’ll have more opportunities to experience amazing things. The same way a single workout doesn’t define your journey as an athlete, a temporary problem doesn’t define your future.
- **Be optimistic** - Look for the good in everything, even when things seem difficult. A balanced lifestyle, with exercise and a healthy diet, can energize you and give you the resilience needed to face challenges head-on. Your body and mind work better when they’re supported by healthy foods and physical activity.
- **Take care of your body and mind** - Exercise, hobbies that help you relax or even just time spent alone can help you remain calm and level, even in difficult situations. Exercise helps oxygenate the brain and gives you energy, while a balanced diet keeps your mind clear.
- **Create and sustain solid relationships** - Friends and family are essential to your emotional development. Build relationships based on trust and respect. In addition, team sports can help you develop stronger bonds with those around you, while having a meal with your family can strengthen your connections.

Activity: Think of a recent problem that seems difficult to resolve. Now, take a step back and ask yourself: what resources do you have? Who can help you? What could you do differently next time? Find a solution and try it. Even if you don’t succeed on the first try, you’ll learn from the experience and become stronger.

8. THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS: WHY YOU NEED OTHERS

Nowadays, everything happens so fast that it can seem overwhelming. We're constantly being bombarded with information - from notifications on Tiktok and Instagram, to the TV shows we watch for hours on end, or the news we read online. With this much information, our brains end up overstimulated. Instead of 'feeding' our minds with helpful information, we overload ourselves with random content, which can lead to tiredness and even loneliness, even if we're constantly in touch with people online.

These feelings of alienation and disconnection are very common in teenagers. When your friends or classmates become the most important people in your life, and their opinions matter more than those of the adults' around you, the need for acceptance and understanding becomes essential. However, if you feel like you're not seen or heard by them, you can feel isolated and alone.

The truth is that everyone needs others in their life - even if sometimes, we don't want to admit that. Everyone wants to be understood and to have people on their side to support them, be it friends or family. Relationships help us understand ourselves better, to grow and to develop. As some forms of therapy show us, we're created in relationships, we get hurt in relationships, and it's relationships that help us heal. That's why it's crucial to consider not only interpersonal relationships, but also our relationship with ourselves - how we take care of our mental and physical health and our nutrition. This balance directly influences our wellbeing and our capacity for resilience.

Who am I?

The question “Who am I?” can sound simple, but the response is usually a lot more complex. We can think about our identity from many different perspectives - physical, social, emotional and moral. In addition, we need to consider the way we take care of our body and mind to be able to fully develop as individuals. According to psychologist

Carl Rogers, our identity develops around three dimensions:

- **Self-image** - How do you see yourself? How do you perceive your body and your abilities, including your physical health?
- **Self-esteem** - How highly do you think of yourself? Are you happy with who you are, emotionally and physically?
- **The ideal self** - Who would you want to be like? What’s your ideal version of yourself from mental, physical, and behavioral standpoints?

Our identity is built on a solid base of mental and physical health. For example, not only does exercise affect your body, but it also boosts your self-confidence. A balanced diet positively influences your physical and mental health, helping you be more energetic and focused. Moreover, our online presences become an increasingly important part of our identities, as psychologist Mary Aiken points out (2019).

How much does your online presence affect you?

Most of the time, your online presence doesn’t reflect reality and can become a source of pressure and anxiety. This clash between your real self and what you present online can generate internal conflicts, influencing your self-esteem and your relationship with yourself. The balance you find in your everyday life, between exercise, nutrition and healthy relationships, can help you remain anchored in reality.

How can you explore your identity authentically?

It's worth reflecting on the parts of you that are really important and consider what you value in your relationships with others and yourself. Exercise can help you discover your strengths, nutrition can help sustain your mental and physical health, and introspection helps you understand who you really are.

1. **Knowing yourself through introspection.**

Knowing yourself starts with self-reflection. Spend time thinking about what makes you happy and fulfilled, but also about your fears and wants. Exercise and regular physical activity can offer you moments of reflection and peace, while a balanced diet supports mental clarity.



Method: Keep a journal to write down your thoughts and feelings, alongside your physical and mental progress made through exercise and nutrition. This will help you understand your body and mind better.

2. Establishing goals aligned with your values. To reach your goals can be satisfying, but it's important that these goals reflect who you are. Make sure that they're based on your own values, not others' expectations. For example, if you focus on your physical and mental health through exercise and nutrition, you'll feel much more satisfied.

Method: Break up big goals into smaller steps and keep track of your progress - whether that be mental, physical, or emotional.

3. Accepting imperfections and cultivating compassion. An essential aspect to development is accepting that you will never be perfect. Your body and mind need time to grow and strengthen. Learn to be kind to yourself and accept your mistakes, both in exercise and in daily life.

Method: Write in a journal about the aspects of yourself that need acceptance and practice kindness to yourself. This will strengthen your mental resilience and help you remain motivated, even when you run into difficulties.

The need for connection



You're a social being and you need authentic connections with others. In a world in which you're constantly online, the relationships you have with your friends, your classmates, and your family are essential for your personal and emotional development. They offer support, trust and a feeling of belonging. Even though you can be connected to hundreds or even thousands of people online, this type of connection doesn't replace real-life interactions, where real emotions and authentic support can take place. Close relationships with those around you offer the balance you need to navigate life's challenges.

Social pressure and acceptance

Nowadays, you're often bombarded with the expectations of those around you. Regardless of if it's about the way you dress, how you act or what you post online, everything seems to be part of a test for social acceptance. This pressure can become overwhelming, especially in adolescence, when the opinions of your friends or classmates take priority. Social acceptance is a basic human need, but looking for that acceptance, you sometimes risk losing yourself. Conforming to social norms and expectations can make you emotionally tired or isolated. When you do things just to be liked by others, you can become disconnected from who you really are.

How can you remain authentic?

- **Know yourself** - When you know who you are and what your values are, it becomes easier to resist peer pressure.
- **Say "no" without guilt** - You don't have to follow every trend to fit in. It's okay to say "no" when something doesn't resonate with you.
- **Choose authentic relationships** - Surround yourself with people that accept you the way you are, and don't put pressure on you to change.



At the end of the day,
a balance between
being accepting and

staying authentic is essential to have healthy relationships and a strong identity. You don't have to be liked by everyone to be happy. The important thing is to like yourself and to surround yourself with people who accept you for who you really are.

Worksheet: Acceptance and peer pressure

This worksheet will help you reflect on the influence of social acceptance and pressure in your life and to explore how you can remain authentic in your relationships with others.

Part 1: Knowing yourself and peer pressure

1. Situations in which you feel peer pressure:

Identify 3 recent situations in which you felt like you had to conform to the expectations of other people:

2. How did you act in those situations?

For each situation above, describe how you reacted:

3. How did you feel afterwards?

Reflect on how you felt after giving in to or resisting peer pressure:

4. What would you do differently in the future?

Think about what you could do differently to keep your authenticity in similar situations:

Part 2: Social acceptance and authenticity

1. When do you feel truly accepted and authentic?

Write down 3 moments or situations when you felt fully accepted for who you are:

2. Who are the people who truly accept you?

Identify the people in your life that accept you the way you are and support you:

3. How can you develop more authentic relationships?

Write down a few actions that can help develop relationships based on authenticity and acceptance:

Part 3: Managing social pressure

1. What personal values can guide your decisions?

Identify 3 fundamental values that can help you stay authentic against social pressure:

2. What limits can you set to protect yourself from social pressure?

Think of a few healthy boundaries that you can set in relationships or social situations:

3. How can you say “no” to social pressure without guilt?

How can you say “no” to social pressure without guilt:

Bullying and Cyberbullying

In the digital era, bullying no longer exclusively takes place in the schoolyard or on the street. Nowadays, cyberbullying can appear anywhere and anytime - a mean comment on TikTok, an insulting meme on Instagram or a threatening message on WhatsApp. In contrast to 'traditional' bullying, cyberbullying can follow you 24/7, and its impact is amplified by the fact that it can be visible to a much larger audience.

What is bullying?

It's an intentional, aggressive behavior, with the purpose of humiliating, hurting or intimidating you. When this type of aggressive behavior happens online, it becomes cyberbullying. Negative messages can spread quickly, and online anonymity makes the situation worse.



What can you do if you're the victim?

1. Ignore it and don't reply - Even though it can be tempting to defend yourself, replying can encourage the aggressor. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is to not react

2. **Block and report** - Most social media platforms give you the options to block and report the people bullying you. Use them!

3. **Ask for help** - You don't have to go through this alone. Speak to an adult you trust or a counselor.

4. **Keep the proof** - Save every message or mean comment. This proof can be helpful if you decide to take legal action or report the bullying.

What can you do if you're a witness?

- **Don't encourage it** - Don't like, comment on or share mean or harmful posts.
- **Support the victim** - A message of support can make a big difference.
- **Report the bullying** - If you see cyberbullying, report it or tell an adult.
- **Be empathetic** - Understand that anyone can be vulnerable. Today it's someone else, tomorrow it could be a friend or maybe even you.

Methods to build healthy relationships

As a teenager, relationships are becoming more and more important. Friends, classmates, and even online connections play a major role in your development. However, not all relationships are healthy. It's essential to learn how to build and sustain relationships that will help you grow and develop. In a healthy relationship, you feel respected, understood, and supported. It doesn't have to be perfect, but respect and mutual trust are fundamental, even during arguments. Healthy relationships offer safety and comfort, they help you evolve and discover who you are, without feeling like you have to change to be accepted.



How do you build healthy relationships?

Communicate openly and honestly

In any relationship, communication is key. Be open and talk about what you feel, what makes you happy or what annoys you. Don't expect the other person to read your mind.

Method: Start sentences with "I feel" instead of "You do", to avoid accusations and create a more constructive conversation.

Respect limits

Everyone has their own boundaries- it's important to talk about and respect them, including communicating your own limits.

Example: If you don't like getting texts late at night, say "I like talking to you, but after 10 PM I prefer to rest."

Build trust over time

Trust is earned over time, through small gestures and keeping promises. Be trustworthy and keep your promises.

Be empathetic

Empathy helps you understand the other person. Sometimes, just listening is enough. Instead of saying “it’s not a big deal”, try “I can imagine that it’s hard for you. Do you want to talk about it?”

Resolve conflicts constructively

Conflict is normal, but the way you manage them matters. Instead of getting annoyed or ignoring the problem, try to talk about it calmly and find a solution together.

Consider: An argument isn’t about “who’s right”, rather about finding a solution together.

Encourage personal growth

In a healthy relationship, both partners or friends support each other in personal development. Encourage the other person’s passions, even if you don’t share them.

How can you recognize unhealthy relationships?

Unhealthy relationships can have a negative impact on your emotional and mental health. If you feel controlled, ignored, or manipulated, that’s a red flag. These relationships can make you feel unhappy, stressed, and anxious.

Signs of an unhealthy relationship:

- The other person constantly criticizes you or makes you feel bad.
- You feel like you need to change to be accepted.
- There’s a lack of trust, or frequent lies.

Worksheet: Healthy relationships

1. What does a healthy relationship mean to you?

Write down a few words or sentences describing a healthy relationship:

2. Characteristics of healthy relationships

Complete the following sentences:

In a healthy relationship, it's important to _____.

I respect my own limits and I expect others to _____.

A healthy relationship is based on _____.

When an argument happens, it's important to _____.

3. Self assessment

Evaluate your relationships on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "very weak" and 5 means "excellent":

- *Communication: How often do you communicate openly with the people in your life? Points: ____*
- *Respect: How respected do you feel by your friends? Points: ____*
- *Support: How supported do you feel in your passions and interests? Points: ____*
- *Resolving conflicts: How well do you manage conflicts? Points: ____*
- *Empathy: How well do you understand the feelings of others? Points: ____*

4. Improving relationships

Think about your relationships. Pick one that you want to improve and write a few concrete actions that you can take:

- *The relationship I want to improve: _____*
- *Actions I will take: _____*

9. LIFE IN MOTION

The link between physical activity and mental health

At first glance, physical education class can seem unrelated to other subjects, being an activity that doesn't only take you out of the classroom, but out of your comfort zone, as well. However, this is influenced by how much you include physical activity in your daily habits.

When you read this chapter, you'll strengthen your commitment to keep exercise a constant part of your life, or maybe you'll make it a personal goal. We all have habits that define us, but we also have the power to choose hobbies that support our health. Instead of simply accepting the general saying that "exercise is good for you", you'll discover the clear reasons that support this idea and offer information to make healthy decisions.

A good starting point are examples from your daily life. Maybe you have people around you that think that your limited free time should be dedicated exclusively to studying: math, foreign languages, literature, etc. However, you could be familiar with the Latin maxim "Mens sana in corpore sano," meaning "A healthy mind in a healthy body". Inspired by Juvenal's satires, this expression outlines the importance of a balance between intellectual development, mental health, and physical activity, an idea that's lasted since Ancient Greece. The philosophers of the time promoted it as human basic values: healthy body, healthy mind (*Gustafson, 1927, citat de Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2024*).

Therefore, a clear connection is obvious between exercise and psychological well being. This connection has been recognized throughout human history and continues to evolve under the influence of social and cultural change. Throughout evolution, humans were biologically programmed to move, and our bodies have not adapted to a

sedentary lifestyle, even if technological advancements have eliminated some types of effort. Thus, the positive effects of exercise are not limited to physical development, and they extend to psychological well being. Let's find out why, and more importantly, how this process works.

Conscious physical activity and how to optimize it

But how do these effects translate to everyday life?

Physical activity can:

- improve your disposition;
- give you a feeling of happiness;
- give you motivation;
- increase your self-esteem;
- improve your attention span;
- reduce your stress;
- promote self-awareness;
- regulate appetite and body weight;
- improve sleep;
- support social abilities and the feeling of belonging to a community.

These effects are proven both by day-to-day experience and scientific studies, suggesting that there is a solid interaction between physical activity and mental health. This also proves the importance of routines that include exercise, which can increase your cognitive function, such as memory and learning capacity, it can help regulate your emotions (increasing a state of contentment, reducing stress and anxiety) and strengthens your resilience.

Besides these, exercise can contribute to your social dynamic as well (the ability to work with others, camaraderie and self-confidence). Who knows? Maybe you'll end up loving exercise enough to set your own goals.



Exercise and awareness

Exercising involves not only the body, but also the mind. This balance between physical and psychological helps you enjoy everything your body can do. To profit as much as possible from exercise, you could try to practice awareness, meaning “to be present, aware of where you are and what you’re doing, without overreacting or being overwhelmed by what is happening around you” (*UTHealth East Texas Physicians*).

Awareness includes:

- 1. Focus on the present, without thinking about the past or the future** (*Bishop et al., 2004; Brown și Ryan, 2003, citat de Cox și Ullrich, 2021*),
- 2. Adopting an open and curious attitude about what you observe, no matter the context** (*Cox și Ullrich, 2021*).

A good example could be the way you get ready for an important test at school. Maybe you choose to face it consciously, accepting and recognizing the associated emotions (including anxiety), instead of going through the experience on ‘autopilot’.

Awareness, applied to exercise as well, can have a positive impact on the way you experience physical activity. When your mind and body work together, your workouts can become more efficient and pleasant.

Even though it can seem simple, awareness needs time. In everyday life, full of stimuli and distracting factors, it can be hard to always be present and aware, but physical activity can have a meditative effect, which helps reach a state of awareness (*Robinson, 2024*).

Let's say you don't like the idea of exercise. Still, it's worth dedicating a few minutes to find a type of physical activity that's right for you. You might discover that this practice won't positively influence just your body, but your mental health too.

The start of a healthy habit

At the beginning, you can include a few short stretching sessions and breathing exercises in your daily routine (breathe in for four seconds, hold your breath for seven and breathe out for eight seconds - known as the "four-seven-eight" method). These types of routines can help you get rid of tension, to boost blood flow to your brain, to calm down your nervous system and improve your focus. You can even take a short walk while you think about new ideas. This won't only offer you a new perspective, but it could stimulate your creativity as well.



In addition, try to spend time outdoors, paying attention to the sounds, smells, and sensations around you. Go to a park or help your grandparents garden, if you have the occasion. Activities in nature can become a healthy habit, especially once you start to discover the pleasure of physical activity in the fresh air.

Over time, you could explore more structured options, such as yoga, fitness, team or individual sports, assisted by gadgets or not. As long as you stay active, you can integrate conscious movement in your exercise, keeping in mind Simm's (2022) recommendations:

- recognizing the positive effect of physical activity on the mind, body, and soul,
- focusing on breathing during the exercises to stay present,
- limiting distractions during the workout,
- choosing a type of exercise that makes you happy,
- analyzing your motivation and transforming exercise into a sustainable routine,
- celebrating your progress, no matter how small it might be.

Building a healthy relationship with your body

It's important to develop a healthy relationship with your body, based on health and wellbeing, not aesthetic standards pushed by society. If you decide to view physical activity as a way to improve your health, happiness, and emotions, exercise becomes a form of self-care. Conscious exercise can transform your perception of exercise into a wellness routine. All that's left is to explore, to discover what kind of activity you like best and create a long-term habit.

Exercising outdoors

You probably feel like you already have plenty of things that you have to do daily: going to school, homework, projects, etc. These take up a lot of your time, so that means it's even more important to think about how you spend your free time, which you can control. Usually, you spend time in your classroom, your room at home or scrolling on your phone.

However, you have an option at your disposal that you might be overlooking: nature. Time spent outside, especially in nature, brings important benefits to your physical and mental health. Only two hours per week spent in nature are enough to see positive changes in your mental health (Ward et al., 2019). To be clear, it's not just about the sights of nature, but also the sensations, sounds, and smells of nature, which have a very different effect compared to any indoor space.



The benefits of outdoor activity

The researcher Swaim (2022) brings up a few important benefits of time spent outdoors:

- **Improved breathing:** The air outdoors is cleaner than that of the city and offers a welcome break from pollution. Well-ventilated areas, like fields or forests, give you the opportunity to breathe deeply and oxygenate your brain.
- **Quality sleep:** Exposure to the sun's natural light regulates your circadian rhythm, which helps you fall asleep easier and sleep more soundly. The sun's light is about 200 times more intense than artificial light, so try to spend as much time as you can outside, considering sun protection (Blume et al., 2019).

- **Mental recovery:** Nature offers you a space where you can relax and recharge. You'll see that simply being outdoors helps quiet your mind and makes you more focused. According to the theory of attention restoration, natural spaces activate involuntary attention (natural, effortless observation), permitting focused attention (the kind used for homework, for example) to rest and recover (*Ronna Schneberger, quote by McCoy, 2023*).
- **Boosted immunity:** In nature, your body comes into contact with beneficial microbes which can help your immune system prepare for harder challenges.
- **Positive emotional state:** Nature encourages emotions like happiness, contentment, and optimism, being an ideal space to disconnect from stress factors.

Choose nature for moments of relaxation and connection

Going outside offers you the opportunity to spend time with yourself or your loved ones. Regardless of if you choose to go to a park, a botanical garden or a forest, any form of nature can be a relaxing space. You can even take advantage of your after-school break to recharge. Often, just 15 minutes spent in a natural space can help improve your emotional state and boost your focus for whatever you have to do later on.

You can even transform these outings into group activities with friends or family. It could simply be a walk or a longer hike, adjusted to the right level of difficulty for the group. As you attempt more complex hikes, you'll learn to appreciate nature, and your experiences will be diverse. You can even consider camping for a night - a special way to observe the night sky, far from the city lights.

Ideas for simple outdoor activities

- **Bicycle rides:** An excellent way to spend time outdoors, whether you choose a park, quiet streets, or longer trails.
- **Swimming or relaxing in water:** If you have access to a lake or river, or perhaps the sea, you can take advantage of these places to swim or just relax and float. Swimming isn't only relaxing, it's also a full-body workout.
- **Team games:** Classic games like Capture the Flag can be a great opportunity to have fun and exercise outdoors. Pick varied locations, form teams and adapt the rules to be sure everyone can participate and have fun.

Simple activities in nature are a starting point, but they can slowly evolve into more organized activities, like team sports. As you explore what you like, you'll develop your own routines and preferences for outdoor activities. You can also integrate these outings in your lifestyle, turning them into a hobby that supports you physically and mentally.

Exercise as personal development

It's interesting to find out that, from an etymological perspective, the word "sport" comes from the old French "desport", which meant "free time" (Harper, 2012). Throughout the years, the concept of 'sport' evolved and nowadays is defined as a physical activity or organized, competitive game, which improves your abilities and makes you happy, no matter if you participate or spectate. Sports can be funny and challenging, but it requires motivation, work, and perseverance. It's important to discover the sport (or maybe several sports) that you really enjoy.

If you've been accustomed to sports since childhood, you've probably accepted that physical activity is an essential component of a healthy

lifestyle. But this doesn't mean that you'll always feel motivated to exercise. There might be days where you need a break. These moments let you recover your energy, letting you get back to your routine recharged.

If you're just starting out and you don't enjoy exercising yet, we recommend starting slowly, to discover the sports that are best for you, and know that everything you try helps you get closer to finding what you'll like. Through constant exercise, your body develops 'muscle memory' - an ability that allows you to improve repeated movements (*Colino, 2022*). This ability is formed in the brain, but also in your muscle fibers, strengthening your mind-body connection.

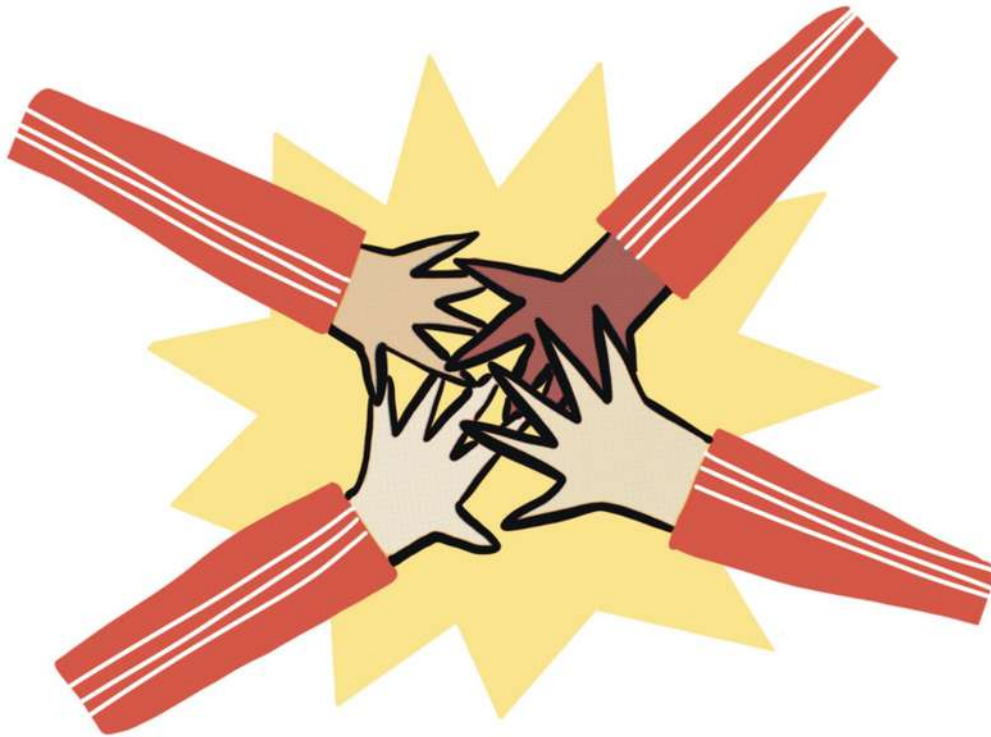
To integrate exercise into your life, you can use mental strategies, like visualizing and stabilizing your goals. Positive thinking and setting clear goals are strategies used by many professional athletes, since it helps improve concentration and self-confidence. The more you improve your cognitive function, like motivation and concentration, you'll see changes in your physical performance and your mental state (*Barhoumi, 2023; Isorna-Folgar et al., 2022; Reyes-Bossio et al., 2022*).

Team spirit - trust and communication

When you think about team sports, remember that the team's success doesn't just depend on the performance of each team member, but also on their collaboration. In a team, it can often be necessary to offer a teammate the opportunity to score if they're in the right position, and this collaboration strengthens the feeling of belonging and helps you feel valued. Team sports help you learn to communicate, to make plans together and lean on your teammates.

Team sports can develop your social skills, helping you communicate more efficiently and make friends. These sports create an atmosphere of community and support, which can contribute to improving your emotional state (*Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2024*).

A few popular examples of team sports are soccer, basketball, volleyball and handball. You might've already seen documentaries about famous athletes or teams, which show how much determination and teamwork is needed to succeed. These stories can inspire you to join a team and experience everything that comes with team sports.



The power of individualism - self-discovery in individual sports

Individual sports, like running, swimming, biking, and tennis, offer you a space where you can concentrate on your development, without relying on others. Choosing an individual sport lets you set your own rhythm and adapt your routine to your own needs, and this process could help you understand what motivates you and what you like.

Even if you practice an individual sport, you don't have to be alone. You can have a support system - trainers, teammates and friends to support you in your journey. Through individual sports, you build up your physical and mental stamina, you develop your psychological resilience, and you have the chance to discover your own interior resources (*Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2024*).

Therefore, try different sports and see what's right for you. You can start with running, swimming, or any other sport that you're drawn to. You can choose more relaxing activities, like yoga or hiking, or you can choose sports that need more energy and adrenaline. The choice is yours, but any type of physical activity will bring you closer to a healthier, stronger version of yourself.

Nutrition for athletes

The importance of macronutrients and micronutrients in nutrition for athletes

Nutrition plays an essential role in your life, regardless of whether you play sports competitively or just for fun. A balanced diet, adapted to your needs, is crucial to assure constant energy during workouts and to support muscle regeneration, preventing accidents and maintaining your body's optimal function.

If you exercise, you have a higher energetic burn rate than those who don't, and foods high in complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, are essential sources of energy for you.

Without enough carbohydrates, your body quickly burns through the reserves of glycogen in your muscles, which can lead to tiredness and a dip in performance.

In addition, healthy fats are necessary for maintaining hormonal balance and sustaining prolonged effort. Unsaturated fats, which you can find in walnuts, avocados, and fatty fish, contribute to cardiovascular health and offer a long-term source of energy, especially for endurance activities.

Protein plays a crucial role in the growth and development of muscle mass. It contains the necessary amino acids to repair and remake muscle fibers deteriorated during a workout.

If you don't get enough protein from sources like lean meat, fish, eggs, or legumes, the process of recovery and growth will be slowed or even stopped. Besides proteins, carbohydrates and healthy fats play an essential role, offering strength and stamina for intense workouts.

Besides macronutrients and water, you can't forget about micronutrients, such as vitamins and minerals. Iron, calcium, magnesium, and vitamins B and D are necessary for optimal functioning of the muscular and nervous systems. Micronutrient deficiencies can compromise your strength, reducing your performance.

Water, hydration, and avoiding processed foods

Another vital aspect for your athletic performance and general health is hydration. Water is essential for regulating your body's temperature, transporting nutrients and eliminating toxins. During intense exercise, the loss of fluids through sweat can greatly affect your performance and lead to dehydration, which can cause muscle cramps, tiredness and even heart problems. Proper hydration ensures energy and supports recovery after intense exercise.

Avoiding processed foods is also essential for a healthy lifestyle and an efficient recovery. Processed foods, high in sugar, trans fat and "empty" calories, don't offer the necessary nutrients to support intense exercise and recovery. For example, consuming too much refined sugar can lead to a glycemic spike, followed by a sudden dip in energy, which leads to tiredness and affects athletic performance.

A diet high in unhealthy fats and ultra-processed foods can contribute to deposits of body fat, undermining your efforts to define muscle or maintain your weight. In addition, these foods can increase the risk of inflammation, affecting the recovery process and increasing the risk of accidents. If you don't give your body the necessary vitamins, minerals and antioxidants for fighting oxidative stress from effort, you'll have a slower recovery and a higher risk of chronic fatigue.

10. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

One fall morning, Andrei, a teenager full of questions, wakes up with a thought that won't leave him alone. For a while now, his life had become a mix of intense emotions and changes that overwhelmed him: "Who am I really? What does it mean to feel good in my own skin? How can I find a balance juggling with all of this?"

For an answer, he calls his grandfather, Ion, who always seemed to have wise advice.

After a few minutes of discussion, the grandfather proposes a challenge with a mysterious smile:

"What if you started a journey of self-discovery? To find out what makes you feel genuinely good, mind and body. You have your whole life ahead of you, but this is the right time to learn about yourself!"

Andrei accepts with an open mind. So, he starts out on a journey of exploring health and wellbeing - an adventure of learning how food, rest, exercise, nature, and understanding emotions can help him find his inner peace.

Discovering nutrition: Food that changes your emotional state

A curious teenager, Andrei starts to explore nutrition. He remembers that his grandfather used to tell him about the power of whole foods and how food can influence not only energy, but also disposition.

The more he learns about carbohydrates, proteins and healthy fats, he discovers that everything has a role: carbohydrates offer energy, proteins support the muscles, and healthy fats feed the brain and its emotions. Slowly, he changes his food choices.

In the morning, he makes himself eggs with fresh vegetables and fruits

high in vitamins. Slowly, he notices a change: on the days when he eats whole, unprocessed foods, he feels calmer, more balanced, and his energy lasts the whole day. He writes the first important lesson in his journal: “The body and mind are connected, and food can have a profound influence on my emotional state.”

The power of rest: Sleep, the mind's peace

After a few days, Andrei starts to understand that food is not enough if it's not joined by rest. He decides to set up a simple nighttime routine, putting his phone aside before bedtime, and learns to value nighttime's silence. His grandfather was right when he would tell him: “Sleep is the mind's fuel.”

After a few nights of restful sleep, Andrei feels more relaxed and ready to take on the day. One morning, after a night of deep sleep, he wakes up feeling capable of taking on anything. “Who would have thought that sleep could completely change my emotional state?”, he says to himself. He realizes how essential sleep is, for recharging his physical energy and managing his emotions.



Movement: Releasing emotional energy

One day, his grandfather invites him for a walk in the park. “Come see what it’s like to calm your mind through movement,” he tells him. Andrei, though he wasn’t the biggest fan of exercise, accepts. On the way, his grandfather explains that movement isn’t vital just for physical health, but it’s also a way to clear his head and calm down. So Andrei starts going on runs and enjoying soccer with his friends. He discovers that when he’s exercising, his troubles seem to disappear, and his emotional state improves. Exercise helps him get rid of accumulated tension, to control his emotions and boost his self-confidence. In his journal, he writes: “Exercise clears my mind and helps me find an inner balance.”

Knowing emotions: Understanding and accepting internal emotions

As he practices his new healthy habits, Andrei realizes that emotions are an essential part of his experience. He remembers his discussions about knowing oneself with his grandfather and understands that emotions shouldn’t be avoided, but listened to. Every time he feels sad or angry, he tries to recognize the emotion and understand where it came from.

Learning to accept even the negative emotions, Andrei discovers how these can show him what’s important to him. “Emotions are my interior guide,” he writes in his journal. This new perspective makes him feel stronger and more empowered to take on life’s challenges.

Going back to nature: Rediscovering contentment and inner balance

One afternoon, his grandfather suggests a trip to the mountains—“Nature has the power to clear our heads,” he says. Backpacks in tow and full of energy, the two go on a hike, leaving the noise of the city behind them and diving into the quiet of the forest.

Andrei notices that, the farther they get into nature, the farther away he feels from his problems. The clean air and calming noises of nature enable a state of calm and help him better connect to his inner self. He understands how much nature can offer: freedom, quiet and a break from the agitation of modern life. He writes: "Sometimes, it's enough to get away from the noise to find inner peace."

Conclusion - Andrei's Journal: Life lessons

At the end of this journey, Andrei feels like he's learned not only about health, but also about balance and knowing himself. Every healthy habit makes him stronger, more aware of his emotions, and readier for life's challenges.

With a smile on his face, Andrei opens his journal and writes down the lessons he's learned:

- **Feed yourself well:** Natural foods give you energy and level your emotions.
- **Rest:** Sleep is more than a break - it gives you clarity and calms you.
- **Move:** Exercise isn't only for muscles, but for peace of mind, too.
- **Connect with nature:** It helps you find yourself and relax.
- **Accept your emotions:** They're your interior guide and help you understand yourself better.

Closing his journal, Andrei feels that he has all the necessary tools to navigate through any obstacle. Adolescence can be tumultuous, but with the right foods, sleep, exercise, connection with nature and a better understanding of emotions, he feels like he's ready to take on anything with optimism and courage.

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