

Sleep, food, exercise, stress: Why working on one of these can improve the others

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Sleeping enough, eating well, exercising and coping with stress are all

components of good health, but focusing on all four at once while managing a hectic schedule may seem impossible. Safia Debar, M.B.B.S., an expert in tailored medical exams at Mayo Clinic Healthcare in London, explains how giving a little extra attention to any one of these areas can improve the others.

"By pulling any of these levers, you can have a big impact on your health," Dr. Debar says.

It all starts in the brain, Dr. Debar says. It can be in a state of "rest, repair and relaxation," in which, assuming general good health, the body is functioning optimally, or the brain can be in a [stress](#) state, in which the body's primary concern becomes handling one or more perceived threats and other physical needs are relegated to [second place](#), she says.

"Our brain does not distinguish. The perception of threat and real threat are the same, so once that button is pressed, the same cascade ensues," Dr. Debar says.

Stress can impact sleeping, eating and exercising. For example, when the brain is in a stress state, it is thinking in the short term and focused on feeling better immediately. That's why it's common to crave sugary and/or fatty foods and not make the effort to exercise when stressed: The brain tells the body it needs immediate energy, Dr. Debar says.

"The [brain](#) wants to feel better right now, so it's not going to think about going to exercise and then feeling better afterward," she says. "It's all intertwined."

Similarly, sleeping, eating and exercising can affect how we handle stress. Key questions to ask yourself include:

- "What is my sleep like?" If it's not good, maybe that's where to

place your attention, by going to bed earlier or changing another aspect of your sleep routine, Dr. Debar says.

- "How is my gut functioning?" If you are having digestive problems, it may help to optimize your nutrition, Dr. Debar says.
- "What is my social support like?" That can affect mood, she says.
- "Do I find certain things are making me feel stressed?" For example, if checking email before bed or immediately upon waking generates stress, think about how to change that part of your routine to maintain calm, Dr. Debar says.
- "What kind of exercise am I getting?" If the answer isn't much, try to find ways to incorporate more movement into your day, she says.

"By helping your gut, that might be enough for you, or helping your sleep, that might be enough for you," Dr. Debar says. "It's those simple foundational elements that can have huge impact. Be intentional about certain things."

Pulling these levers of health ourselves can feel empowering, she says.

"It's not, 'A doctor said I had to lose weight and [sleep](#) and reduce my stress.' When you understand the foundations of [health](#), it then doesn't become about you having low self-control, or procrastinating, or not being disciplined," Dr. Debar says. "Instead, how do we take what you have in your life and embed these practices in it?"

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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