# The Healthy Mind Platter

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More than ever, if we’re to experience the gift of real presence, even as we feel the gnawing uncertainty about what lies ahead, we need to make use of our capacity for mindfulness. Creating mindful moments of presence every day is the key to accepting and coping with the challenges of life during the pandemic. Of course, being accepting doesn’t mean losing hope; it just means seeing things as they are and then being able to take action in a wise, discerning manner.

So how can you find little moments to make sure you’re aligned with your inner self, even if there’s fear or sadness or grief about the world right now? How can you keep your mind from experiencing the kind of collapse that can pull your body and sense of well-being down with it? The research is clear that once we add the three pillars of attention, awareness, and kind intention to whatever we’re doing, we’re going to be happier and healthier.

Studies show that doing formal practices to cultivate these three aspects of our mind lead to important changes in our physiology: reduced stress, enhanced immune function, improved cardiovascular well-being, diminished systemic inflammation, and optimized levels of the important enzyme telomerase, which repairs and maintains the telomere caps of our chromosomes that keep our cells healthy.

In addition, three-pillar practices lead to changes in the functioning and structure of our brain, enhancing the linkage of differentiated areas in what can be called neural integration. This integration is the basis for regulation in our lives, helping us modulate everything from mood and emotions to attention, thoughts, and behavior. In fact, brain integration is one of the best predictors of our overall well-being.

Years ago, my colleague David Rock and I put together a list of seven daily activities that support a healthy mind, which shapes our subjective experience in life, the way we process information, and how we connect in our relationships with people and with nature. Our minds are more than what happens inside our skulls, and even in our bodies. They’re fully embodied, and they’re fully relational.

At the time, the USDA was using an infographic of a plate to help people understand what food groups comprise a healthy diet, so we called this list “the healthy mind platter” to help people understand what our minds need to function optimally. We don’t have to create rigid schedules for each hour of the day, but finding a balance of these seven activities can be especially useful now, when most of us are sheltering in place. Although this ”platter” provides a useful framework for how to organize your day or your child’s day, how much clock time to spend in each of these times is up to you.

**Time In.** This is time you may already spend engaged in a formal mindfulness practice, like yoga or meditation. Inward reflection can include the three pillars of focusing attention, opening awareness, and cultivating kind intention.

**Connecting Time.** This is time you put into intentionally connecting with people, even if you can’t be in their immediate physical presence. This relational time involves communicating not only with other people, but also with nature. Finding time to connect with people and the planet can help with the sense of isolation we may feel these days.

**Focus Time.** This is time spent focusing on something external with discipline, like reading a book. Say to yourself, “For this half hour, I’m not going to be distracted by the news or anything else.” Research suggests that when we focus our attention like this, we release a number of substances, including BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), which enhance brain growth. When we have a singular focus of attention, we learn more, remember more, and enjoy the experience more.

**Play Time.** This doesn’t refer to sports but to doing something that allows you to laugh and be spontaneous—without judgments or feeling that there’s a right or wrong way to do it. The notion here is to engage in an activity, perhaps with others, in which the enjoyment and creative unfolding of the moment is the focus. Too often adults lose this sense of playfulness. To cope with this pandemic, we need to keep our humor and our vitality alive and well!

**Physical Time.** It’s easy to become a couch potato when we’re spending so much time in front of screens, so we need this time when we really focus on moving our body. Therapists can consider doing this in between sessions or even with clients.

**Down Time.** This is space to not do anything specific and just chill out. Our minds need this. As opposed to moments when we find ourselves unintentionally getting distracted, down time involves intentionally letting our minds wander. This might include watching a show or listening to music, drawing on a pad of paper, or simply playing with water in the sink as you do the dishes. (Maybe that’s why it takes me an hour to finish this job in the kitchen each night!)

**Sleep Time.** This is important for lots of reasons, especially because sleep directly affects inflammation in the brain. It’s also critical because when we get seven to nine hours of quality sleep, the toxins secreted by active neurons during our waking hours are cleaned up. Think about it this way: the 16 hours you’re awake is like a big party for your neurons. They’re doing lots of stuff. But during sleep, they rest. The party’s over and the cleanup crew comes in. Without this regenerative clean-up period for the supportive glial cells to eliminate the neural waste products, we’re likely to have increased brain inflammation and decreased ability to focus, remember, stabilize our mood, and even process calories.

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