

Personal health resilience toolbox: prevention of disease by lifestyle choices

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What would your perfect day look like? How would it feel if you could not have that because you were unhealthy? What would you regret about your lifestyle choices if they contributed to your failing health? What helps us to overcome bumps in the road of life, with our relationships, career, finances, and our health? How do some people cope better than others?

Cancer is a big word to process when it's your word. It became my word eighteen months ago. Being told you have cancer holds a mirror up to your life. You must face what you see, ready or not. You review everything in your life. Your values, your dreams, and worse still your questionable lifestyle choices that could have led you to this point. Was I as healthy as I thought I was? Did all the sugar, chocolate, junk food, alcohol and lack of exercise contribute somehow? You can fall into the trap of following endless Dr Google rabbit holes and trying any snake oil supplement available if you are not careful. For me I fell back on my scientific training and the mindfulness practices I had just started to try. The resilience tools I had in place in my life were my greatest asset to overcome this speedbump in the road. A pivotal moment was learning about 'post traumatic growth' from my psychologist, and a growth mindset became my goal. I discovered the emerging field of health coaching, where registered health coaches work alongside doctors and other allied health professionals to use healthy lifestyle tools as a cure for chronic disease. Health coaching uses positive psychology to empower their clients to change and maintain habits and regain control of their health.

The neuroplasticity of our brains allows us to learn and literally change our minds for the better, as we create healthy life habits.

The scientific data of being healthy and resilient

Ninety percent of deaths in New Zealand are from diseases associated with the preventable lifestyle factors of smoking, excess alcohol, unhealthy diet, low physical activity, or environmental harm (AIA Vitality NZ 2021). A 2024 report states the top five non-communicable diseases causing loss of health in New Zealand are cancer, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disease, mental disorders (dementia or Alzheimer's), and neurological disorders, and that New Zealand Government's current approach to reducing loss of health is the 5+5 concept. This focuses on reducing five key risk factors (smoking, alcohol consumption, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and adverse social and economic factors), to prevent the five major diseases (cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, and poor mental health) (Ministry of Health 2024).

Food pyramid changes in line with new nutrition ideas: e.g. Australia updated their pyramid in 2015, the first time it had been updated for 15 years: Key points are the bottom layer is plant based; whole grain foods are recommended over highly processed, refined grains and cereals; more focus on healthy fats such as avocado, olive oil, fish and nut oils; soy milk, quinoa and tofu are now included for the first time; junk food, added salt and sugar are ruled out entirely (Nutrition Australia 2021). These changes bring mainstream advice into alignment with Integrative and Functional Medical physician recommendations, e.g. Dr Weil's Anti-inflammatory food pyramid (Weil 2025), the Mediterranean diet, or Blue Zone diets.

Exercise improves our physical and mental health

One of many studies: Oja *et al.* (2024) studied 2.5 million adults and found reduced risk of all-cause mortality associated with cycling (-21%), running (-23%) and swimming (-24%).

Alcohol increases risk of cancer

Vice President of Research at the American Institute for Cancer Research Nigel Brockton, PhD, said recently “whether it’s red wine, whether it’s liquor, whether it’s beer, they all increase your risk” of cancer. “If you are really concerned about your cancer risk, then you would want to minimise your drinking as much as possible. There is no safe dose.” (Crocker 2025).

Obesity

Overweight or obese people are at greater risk for many diseases, including diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and at least 13 types of cancer, as well as having an elevated risk of death from all causes (National Institute of Cancer 2025).

Micronutrients treat mental illness

Professor Julia Rucklidge, University of Canterbury- research shows micronutrient supplementation improves antenatal depression, birthweight and health of neonates, microbiome health in depression, bipolar disease in children, ADHD, depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress after natural disasters (University of Canterbury 2025).

One-Health

Soil and agriculture systems: Research in regenerative agriculture and other methods such as permaculture and organic farming, may identify methods of increasing soil fertility to improve the micronutrient profile in foods produced.

Microbiome

Eat 30 plus plants per week. Faecal samples from 10,000 'citizen scientists volunteers' showed that participants who ate 30 or more different plants per week had a more diverse microbiome (linked to better health outcomes) and were more likely to have certain 'good' gut bugs than those who ate just 10 plants per week. Samples also contained higher levels of healthy chemicals produced by the bacteria (Jones 2024). Microbiome research is a large area, and consensus is that microbiome diversity leads to less inflammation, cancer, and metabolic syndrome, increased nervous system health and improved immunity.

Metabolic syndrome

The changes that occur in the body due to obesity and persistently high insulin levels. Metabolic syndrome can be reversed with lifestyle changes such as diet, exercise, and stress management.

Healthify.nz (2025) recommendations:

- Waist measurements in men - Less than 94cm but less than 90cm if you are of South Asian, Chinese, or Japanese origin.
- Waist measurements in women - Less than 80cm.
- If you are a man with a waist measurement more than 102cm or a woman with a waist measurement more than 88cm your health risk is greatly increased.
- High blood pressure: A blood pressure reading of 120/75mmHg or lower is ideal for most people.
- High blood pressure is 140/90mmHg or higher.
- High blood glucose: If a fasting blood glucose test shows results of 6.1–6.9mmol/L you may have prediabetes. Higher than this is a sign of diabetes. Ideally HbA1c <40mmol/mol.
- High triglycerides: A triglyceride level higher than 2.0mmol/L increases your risk of heart disease.
- Low HDL cholesterol: Having a reduced level of good cholesterol (HDL) is a risk factor. Less than 1.0mmol/L is considered low.

- Metabolic syndrome is considered the main cause of most chronic human illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, neuromuscular diseases, and is linked to Alzheimer's, dementia and mental health problems and poor immune health.

Resilience and antifragility

Resilience is a personal trait and a process that is learnt and developed. Resilience is the ability to adapt and bounce back to previous levels, and it relies on the individual's strengths, plus the right socioeconomic, community and government environment (Métais *et al.* 2022).

Antifragility is the mindset of not needing to know what the stressor will be but knowing that you will be better because you have experienced it. Antifragility goes beyond resilience, and you bounce back stronger every time. Lucy Hone (Tedx) is a Christchurch based resilience researcher and found resilient people use three key strategies:

- **Acceptance** that tough times come to everyone and that you are not entitled to a picture-perfect life – RAIN meditations (Recognise, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture, (Brach 2025)). Suffer well, so you can suffer less.
- **Ongoing effort to find the positive** and focusing attention on the things you can change – Stoicism, Circles of Control, and Grit. Do not lose your life to what you have lost.
- **Be kind** to yourself (and others). Is what you are doing or thinking helping you? You may have to forgive, let things go, or stop a behaviour. Loving Kindness meditations. THINK (True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary and Kind) acronym when communicating with yourself and others.

Your Health Resilience Toolkit

Optimum health has ten key areas of wellness.

Reflecting regularly on where you are now. Assess all ten areas of wellness: Prevention of disease is possible with lifestyle changes. Food, exercise, sleep, friends, and fun are medicine.

Top down - how we see the world:

1. Mental, emotional and mindset: learning, giving.
2. Spiritual: values, beliefs, religion, ethics.
3. Stress management: mindfulness, meditation, breathwork, cold and hot therapies, rest.

Outside in - how our environment and support network impact us:

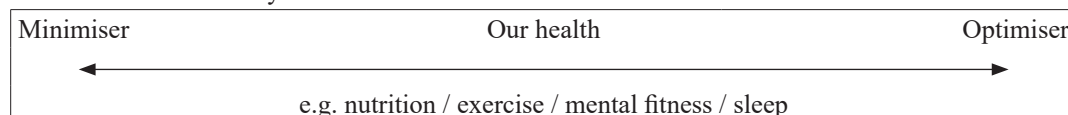
4. Socioeconomic: career, financial, housing, school.
5. Our planet: One Health, blue and green spaces, biorhythms of sunrise and sunset.
6. Social:- significant other, family, friends, social media, volunteering.

Bottom up - how our body feels and how we support it:

7. Sleep and rest.
8. Nutrition.
9. Exercise: mobility, cardiovascular, strength, balance.
10. Harmful substances: alcohol, smoking, drugs, environmental (sun, toxins).

Assess where you want to be in the future

What level of health do you want? Your choice.



Map your happy exercise

- Emotions: What brings you positive emotions?
- Engagement: What activities do you get completely absorbed in?

- Social: What relationships bring you joy and support? What do you do to nurture them?
- Meaning: What larger purpose or cause do you feel drawn and connected to?
- Goals: what would you like to accomplish in the next week, month, year?
- Takeaways: What areas are your strongest? Where could you give more attention to really flourish? What is your biggest takeaway from this exercise?

Values exercise

- What inspires you and makes you feel energised?
- What values must you have in your life?
- Which qualities do you look for in a partner or friend?
- If you had to summarise yourself in five words, what would they be?
- How can your values drive your life choices and create healthy habits?

Know your stress magnifiers

Alcohol, smoking, sugar, junk food, bingeing on food, the internet or TV, avoiding going to bed, procrastination.

Know your stress reducers

Breathing, meditation, exercise, green and blue spaces, socialising, hobbies, reading, good food, a hot bath, time with pets.

Diversify

Your hobbies, in case you are injured and cannot play sport or exercise anymore.

Growth mindset

- Keep learning, job-craft your career, be open to new challenges and experiences.
- Wisdom from Brene Brown: Be vulnerable and brave, stepping into the arena ready or not.
- Guilt vs shame vs regret. Regret gives you a chance to try something new.
- Look up and out and have empathy for others instead of ruminating.

Ask for help

Close the gap between where you are now and where you want to be. Your doctor, councillor or a health coach can give you space to talk, work out your agenda, and offer accountability.

While being resilient, antifragile and having a health toolbox is great, accepting that it is OK to let go of control, to ask for help and to be helped in your times of need is a key mindset to have throughout life.

“Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”

- Nelson Mandela

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