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Optimizing Your Mental Health Playbook

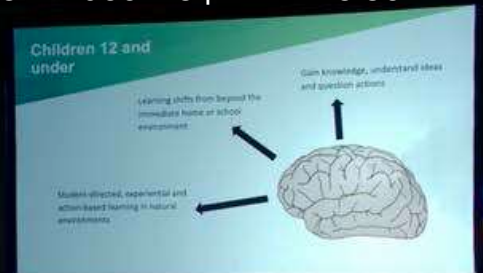
Section 3

Connection With the World:
Connecting to Nature

Fast Facts

Why Nature Matters for Teens

 The importance of connecting Youth with Nature | Nate Wilbourne | TEDxNelson



Opening Video:

"The Importance of Connecting Youth With Nature" by Nate Wilbourne

8 minutes

In this inspiring talk, Nate Wilbourne, a young environmental advocate, shares his passion for nature and emphasizes why it's crucial for today's youth to reconnect with the natural world. He discusses how engaging with nature can enhance mental well-being, foster a sense of responsibility towards the environment, and inspire positive change within communities. Nate's perspective as a young person makes this talk particularly relatable and motivating for high school students.

Fast Facts

Why Nature Matters for Teens

01

Time in Nature Improves Focus and Attention

Teens who spend time outdoors show better concentration and cognitive performance, especially those with attention difficulties like ADHD.

(Vella-Brodrick, D. A., & Gilowska, K. (2022). Effects of nature (greenspace) on cognitive functioning in school children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34, 1217–1254.)

02

Sunlight Boosts Vitamin D, Which Supports Mood and Brain Health

Getting natural sunlight helps your body make vitamin D, essential for regulating mood, immune function, and sleep cycles. Low levels are linked to higher rates of depression in teens.

Spending time in natural sunlight helps your body produce vitamin D, a nutrient that plays a big role in your brain function, mood, and immune system. Low levels of vitamin D are linked to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and fatigue, especially during the winter months or for those who stay indoors a lot.

Why it matters: Just 15–30 minutes of natural sunlight a few times a week can help regulate your emotions and improve your overall mental clarity.

(Al-Sabah, R., Al-Taiar, A., Shaban, L., Albatineh, A. N., Sharaf Aldin, R., & Durgampudi, P. K. (2022). Vitamin D level in relation to depression symptoms during adolescence. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 16(1), 53. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-022-00489-4>)



Why Nature Matters for Teens

01

Nature Encourages Physical Activity

Adolescents who spend more time outside are more likely to engage in physical movement, which boosts endorphins and overall mental health.

Being outdoors—whether you're going for a walk, shooting hoops at the park, or just moving around—naturally increases your physical activity levels. Moving your body releases **endorphins**, which are chemicals in your brain that make you feel happier and more energized.

Why it matters: Teens who are active outdoors report lower levels of stress and anxiety and often sleep better at night. Even 20 minutes outside can help boost your mood.

(Zamora, A. N., Waselewski, M. E., Frank, A. J., Nawrocki, J. R., Hanson, A. R., & Chang, T. (2021). Exploring the beliefs and perceptions of spending time in nature among U.S. youth. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1586. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11622-x>).

02

Time in Nature Helps With Sleep Regulation

Exposure to natural light and outdoor environments helps reset the circadian rhythm, promoting better sleep—a key to mental health for teens.

Spending time outside—especially in the morning—exposes you to natural light, which helps reset your internal body clock, known as your circadian rhythm. This rhythm tells your body when to feel sleepy and when to feel alert.

Why it matters: When your circadian rhythm is balanced, you're more likely to fall asleep faster, stay asleep longer, and wake up feeling refreshed. This can improve your focus, mood, and ability to manage stress.

(Burns, A. C., Saxena, R., Vetter, C., Phillips, A. J. K., Lane, J. M., & Cain, S. W. (2021). Time spent in outdoor light is associated with mood, sleep, and circadian rhythm-related outcomes: A cross-sectional and longitudinal study in over 400,000 UK Biobank participants. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 295, 347–352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.056>.)

WHY DOES CONNECTING WITH NATURE MATTER

In today's fast-paced, screen-filled world, many of us spend more time indoors than ever before. But getting outside—even for a short time—can significantly improve your mental health, emotional balance, and brain power. Here's why:

Mental & Emotional Health Benefits

Reduces stress and anxiety:

Spending time in green spaces (like parks, forests, or even your backyard) reduces **cortisol**—the body's main stress hormone. Nature offers a peaceful, non judgmental space where your mind can rest and reset.

In one study, spending just 20 to 30 minutes in nature led to significant reductions in stress hormone levels, showing how even short outdoor breaks can help calm the body and mind.

Improves mood and decreases depression:

Nature exposure increases serotonin and dopamine—brain chemicals that help you feel happier and more stable emotionally. Even looking at pictures of nature can lift your mood!

(Hunter, M. R., Gillespie, B. W., & Chen, S. Y.-P. (2019). Urban nature experiences reduce stress in the context of daily life based on salivary biomarkers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 722. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00722>)

Physical Health & Sleep Benefits

Supports healthy sleep patterns:

Sunlight is key to keeping your body's internal clock (circadian rhythm) on track. Natural light during the day helps you fall asleep more easily at night, which improves focus and emotional regulation.

Teens who spend more time outdoors during daylight hours tend to sleep better and longer.

WHY DOES CONNECTING WITH NATURE MATTER?

Physical Health & Sleep Benefits (Cont.)

Boosts immune function: Spending time outdoors, especially in natural settings, can enhance immune health by exposing your body to good bacteria, fresh air, and vitamin D from sunlight.

Being in nature helps your body build resilience against illness.

Cognitive & Academic Benefits

Improves focus and memory:

Nature helps clear mental clutter, making it easier to concentrate. This is especially helpful for students dealing with overthinking or school stress.

In studies, students who walked in natural environments performed better on memory and attention tests than those who walked in urban settings.

Enhances creativity and problem-solving: Natural environments encourage creative thinking and allow your mind to wander in productive ways—perfect for when you're stuck on a project or need fresh ideas.

Nature stimulates “soft fascination,” allowing your brain to rest while still staying engaged



WHY DOES CONNECTING WITH NATURE MATTER?

Builds a Bigger Perspective

Increases feelings of connection and purpose:

Being in nature helps you feel part of something larger than yourself. This sense of awe and connection can reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation, which are common in adolescence.

You're reminded that you're part of a much bigger world—and that can be comforting.

(Allen, S. (2018). The science of awe: A white paper prepared for the John Templeton Foundation by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. [White paper]. Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley.
https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Awe_FINAL.pdf)



Deep Dive

Cognitive and Academic Boosts

Natural environments give our **prefrontal cortex** (the part of the brain responsible for decision-making and attention) a break. This allows the brain to reset and improves concentration, working memory, and problem-solving skills.

- **Attention Restoration Theory (ART):** Developed by Kaplan & Kaplan, this theory suggests that natural settings provide "soft fascination"—gentle stimulation that allows the brain to rest and recharge, unlike the intense stimulation of screens and urban life.
- **Evidence:** A study found that a 50-minute walk in nature improved working memory and attention span more than a walk in an urban setting.

(Berman, M. G., Jonides, J., & Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. *Psychological Science*, 19(12), 1207-1212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02225.x>).

Emotional and Spiritual Connection

Nature can evoke a sense of awe, peace, and connectedness to something greater than ourselves. This can be profoundly healing, especially during moments of grief, stress, or disconnection.

- **Biophilia Hypothesis:** Coined by biologist E.O. Wilson, this theory suggests that humans have an innate desire to connect with nature and other life forms. It's part of our evolutionary biology.
- **Nature and Mindfulness:** Time in nature naturally invites stillness and present-moment awareness, making it a form of **mindfulness**—the practice of focusing your attention on the here and now with openness and curiosity—without even trying.

Deep Dive

Social and Community Benefits

- **Shared Nature Experiences Build Bonds:** Group hikes, park visits, or even gardening with others can increase social connection and empathy.
- **Nature Reduces Aggression and Improves Empathy:** A 2020 study in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that time in green spaces is linked with greater prosocial behavior and empathy.

(Putra, I. G. N. E., Astell-Burt, T., Cliff, D. P., Vella, S. A., John, E. E., & Feng, X. (2020). The relationship between green space and prosocial behaviour among children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 859. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00859>).



KEY TIPS

01 | Take a 10-Minute Nature Break Daily

Why It Matters: Even short, consistent exposure to green spaces can lower stress and boost focus.

How to Do It:

- Sit on a bench outside during lunch or after school.
- Take your earbuds out and notice the sounds of birds, rustling leaves, or wind.
- Challenge: Try putting your phone away for extra brain benefits.

02 | Soak Up Some Sunlight in the Morning

Why It Matters: Morning sunlight helps regulate your sleep cycle (circadian rhythm) and boosts your mood.

How to Do It:

- Open your blinds first thing in the morning.
- Eat breakfast outside or near a window when possible.
- Spend a few minutes in sunlight before school—no screen time!

KEY TIPS

03 | Find Your Tribe

Why It Matters: Even indoor exposure to natural elements can improve mood and reduce anxiety.

How to Do It:

- Keep a small plant on your desk or windowsill.
- Use nature-themed backgrounds on your phone or computer.
- Decorate your space with rocks, shells, or leaves you've found.

04 | Walk or Bike Somewhere Instead of Driving

Why It Matters: Moving through outdoor environments increases exposure to nature and releases feel-good brain chemicals.

How to Do It:

- Walk or bike to school, practice, or a friend's house if it's safe.
- Take a walk after school instead of immediately going on your phone.

KEY TIPS

05 | Use Nature to Reset When You're Stressed

Why It Matters: Nature calms the nervous system and helps you refocus.

How to Do It:

- Take a “green break” when overwhelmed—step outside, breathe deeply, and look up at the sky or trees.
- Keep a “nature journal” to sketch or describe outdoor scenes and how they make you feel.



CLASS ACTIVITY

Nature Noticing Walk & Reflection for Students Who Are New to Nature

Objective: Help students slow down, engage their senses, and notice nature around them—even in an urban or school environment.

Steps:

1. Intro (5 mins.):

- Briefly discuss how spending time in nature helps with stress, focus, and mood.

2. Silent Nature Walk (10–15 mins.):

- Take students outside. Ask them to quietly observe using their senses— what they see, hear, feel, or smell. Suggested prompts:
 - Find three natural colors or notice two sounds.
 - Observe one pattern or texture.

3. Reflect (10 mins.):

- Back in class, students can:
 - Write a short reflection.
 - Sketch something they noticed.
 - Create a three-line nature poem or message.

4. Wrap-Up (optional, 5 mins.):

- Invite a few students to share. Discuss how it made them feel.

CLASS ACTIVITY

Nature & Mental Health Poster Campaign for Students Who Are New to Nature

Here are a few alternatives that may be better suited for high schoolers, depending on the group:

Goal: Blend creativity, advocacy, and nature.

Activity: In pairs or groups, students create a campaign poster (physical or digital) that promotes the mental health benefits of being in nature—aimed at their peers.

They research one benefit, include a nature photo or drawing, and add a positive message, like “Sunlight is a natural mood booster—step outside today.”

Why It Might Be Better: It taps into creativity, tech skills, peer voice, and awareness-building.



CLASS ACTIVITY



Adopt-a-Plant

Goal: Build a long-term relationship with something from nature.

Activity: Students choose (or are given) a small plant to care for over a few weeks. They track its growth and how tending to it affects their mood or routine.

Why It Might Be Better: It builds routine, responsibility, and a personal connection over time—great for students who benefit from consistency or nurturing roles.

If you're working with students who are new to nature experiences, the original Noticing Walk is a perfect low-pressure place to start. But if you're looking to increase depth, agency, or social engagement, one of these alternatives may be stronger.

TEACHER SELF-CARE: RITUAL NATURE RESET

Activity: Nature Reset

Purpose: To help teachers intentionally step outside and reconnect with the natural world as a calming, grounding daily or weekly habit.

Time Needed: 10–20 minutes

Frequency: Ideally once a day or a few times a week

How to Do It:

- 1. Pick Your Moment:** Choose a consistent time of day—before school, during lunch, or right after work—to step outside, even briefly.
- 2. Leave the Work Behind:** Go outside without grading, lesson plans, or devices. This is not prep time—it's your time.
- 3. Ground Yourself With the Senses Pause and Notice:**
 - What do you see? (Trees, clouds, movement)
 - What do you hear? (Birds, wind, distant chatter)
 - What do you feel? (Sun on your skin, wind on your face)
 - What do you smell? (Fresh-cut grass, soil, blossoms)



TEACHER SELF-CARE: RITUAL NATURE RESET

4. Try a Nature-Based Micro-Practice

Choose one each time or rotate:

- Take a “5 Senses Walk” for 5 minutes, intentionally noticing at least one thing with each sense.
- Sit with a tree for 10 minutes, doing nothing but being present and breathing deeply.
- Practice barefoot grounding—stand or sit with your feet on grass or soil for 2–5 minutes.
- Take a “sunlight pause” in the morning—let your body soak in 5–10 minutes of natural light to help reset your circadian rhythm.

5. Reflect (Optional)

- Jot a quick note in a journal, planner, or phone:
- “Today, nature reminded me that...”
- “After being outside, I feel...”
- “One thing I noticed that I usually overlook...”

Why It Matters:

- **Nature reduces burnout.** Research shows that spending even 20 minutes outside reduces cortisol levels and mental fatigue.
- **Sunlight boosts mood.** Exposure to natural light increases serotonin production—helping with energy, focus, and emotional balance.
- **Modeling self-care helps students.** When teachers prioritize their well-being, it sets a healthy example for students to do the same.

This simple nature reset can help you show up calmer, clearer, and more present—for yourself and for your students.

KEY ADVICE

01 | **Nature doesn't have to mean hiking boots and forests.**

Spending time outside in your schoolyard, local park, or even your own backyard counts. Nature is everywhere—even a 5-minute sky-gazing session helps your brain reset.

02 | **Short time, big impact.**

Even just 10 minutes outside can lower your stress levels. You don't need hours in the woods—every bit of time outdoors adds up.

03 | **Use nature as a screen break.**

Nature helps your brain recharge from the overload of social media, homework, and constant notifications. Think of it as a “soft reset” for your nervous system.

COMMON MYTHS AND TRUTHS



MYTH: “You have to be outdoorsy to connect with nature.”

TRUTH: You don’t need to go camping or be an “outdoorsy” person. Sitting under a tree, walking your dog, or opening your window to fresh air all count.

MYTH: “Urban areas don’t have nature.”

TRUTH: Even in cities, you can find green spaces, sky, clouds, birds, and sunlight. Nature is accessible—sometimes you just have to look for it.

MYTH: “Nature is only for when you’re stressed.”

TRUTH: Nature supports your well-being all the time, not just in crisis. Regular nature time builds resilience, focus, and better moods long-term.

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Optimizing Your Mental Health Playbook

Section 3

Connection With the World:
Eating Foods That Boost Brain Health

CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD

Boost Brain Health



Opening Video:

[How the Food You Eat Affects Your Brain by Mia Nacamulli](#)

5 Minutes

This engaging animated video explains how different nutrients—such as amino acids, glucose, and micronutrients—affect brain function, mood, and energy levels. It breaks down complex neuroscience into relatable concepts, making it ideal for high school students.

Key Takeaways:

- Foods like whole grains, fruits, veggies, proteins, and healthy fats give your brain energy to stay focused.
- Protein-rich foods (eggs, fish, beans, nuts) help make brain chemicals that boost mood and focus.
- Vitamins and minerals (B12, D, iron, zinc) from leafy greens, dairy, and seeds keep your brain healthy and your mood steady.

CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD

Boost Brain Health

Why It's Suitable for Students:

The animation and clear explanations make complex topics accessible, helping students understand the direct connection between their dietary choices and mental performance.



Fast Facts

01

The Brain Uses 20% of the Body's Energy

- **Fact:** Even though your brain is only about 2% of your body weight, it uses 20% of your daily energy.
- **Why It Matters:** What you eat directly affects your brain's ability to think, concentrate, and regulate emotions.

02

Omega-3s Improve Focus and Mood

- **Fact:** Healthy fats like omega-3s (found in walnuts, flaxseeds, and salmon) help build brain cells and improve communication between them.
- **Why It Matters:** Teens who consume more omega-3s tend to show improved focus and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression.

03

Berries May Boost Memory

- **Fact:** Blueberries and other deeply colored berries contain flavonoids that can improve memory and delay brain aging.
- **Why It Matters:** Regular intake of berries has been linked to better academic performance and cognitive function in teens.

04

Too Much Sugar Can Hinder Learning

Fact: Diets high in refined sugar are linked to impaired memory and reduced brain plasticity.

Why It Matters: Eating lots of sugary snacks and drinks can make it harder to learn, remember things, and regulate mood.

05

Skipping Breakfast Can Hurt Mental Performance

- **Fact:** Blueberries and other deeply colored berries contain flavonoids that can improve memory and delay brain aging.
- **Why It Matters:** Regular intake of berries has been linked to better academic performance and cognitive function in teens.



WHY EATING HEALTHY MATTERS FOR THE BRAIN

Mental Health & Focus

- Your brain needs specific nutrients (like omega-3s, vitamins, and antioxidants) to regulate mood, manage stress, and stay focused.
- Diets rich in processed foods and sugar are linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety in teens.

A well-fed brain can help you think clearer, feel more balanced, and respond better to challenges.

Energy & Academic Performance

- Food is your body's main energy source—and the better the fuel, the better you run.
- A nutritious diet helps improve concentration, memory, and test performance.

Skipping meals or relying on junk food can leave you tired, irritable, and foggy.

Physical & Long-Term Health

- What you eat in your teens sets the foundation for your lifelong health.
- Poor eating habits can lead to issues like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease—even early in life.

Small changes now (like adding fruits, veggies, or healthy fats) make a big difference later.

Deep Dive

Teen Brains Are Still Developing— —and Food Shapes That

- The **prefrontal cortex** (decision-making part of the brain) is still maturing through your teens and early 20s.
- Nutrients directly affect how this part of the brain grows and functions.

Science Insight: Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats can support healthy brain development and emotional regulation during adolescence.

Food Influences Brain Plasticity— How Well You Learn and Adapt

- **Neuroplasticity** is your brain's ability to grow, change, and form new connections—which is super active during adolescence.
- Nutrients like flavonoids (found in berries, dark chocolate, and green tea) have been shown to boost neuroplasticity, making it easier to absorb new information and bounce back from challenges

Cool Insight: Some studies show that people who eat more plant-based, antioxidant-rich foods have greater **hippocampal** volume (the area of the brain responsible for learning and memory).

Deep Dive

Ultra-Processed Foods Can Change the Way Your Brain Reacts

- Diets high in refined sugar, hydrogenated fats, and additives can dull your brain's reward system — making everyday activities feel less enjoyable.
- This can cause you to seek more stimulation (like social media, sugar, or risky behavior) just to feel okay, which can increase impulsivity and low mood.

Science Note: Ultra-processed food consumption is linked to disrupted dopamine signaling, affecting motivation and pleasure.

The Gut-Brain Axis Is Like a Two-Way Street

- There's growing research on how your **gut microbiome** (the bacteria in your digestive system) affects your mood and brain function.
- A diet with more fiber (fruits, veggies, whole grains) feeds good gut bacteria, which can reduce inflammation and improve mental clarity and emotional regulation.

Interesting Fact: Up to 90% of serotonin, a chemical that helps regulate mood, is made in your gut, not your brain. That means what you eat affects how you feel more than you might think.

Deep Dive

Blood Sugar Swings = Brain Swings

- Spikes and crashes in blood sugar (from sugary snacks or skipping meals) can lead to irritability, anxiety, and trouble focusing.
- Stabilizing blood sugar through balanced meals and snacks (protein + fiber + healthy fat) helps keep your mood and energy steady.

What This Means for You: If you find yourself feeling “hangry” or mentally crashing in the afternoon, what you ate earlier might be the reason.

Food Habits Build Mental Health Habits

- Developing a positive relationship with food—like eating regularly, listening to hunger cues, and fueling your body—is a key part of mental health.
- Restrictive diets, skipping meals, or chronic “junk food” eating can all lead to patterns that hurt both physical and emotional health over time.

Takeaway: How you eat matters just as much as what you eat. Making mindful choices, eating when you’re hungry, and choosing brain-nourishing foods builds long-term resilience and self-awareness.

Your brain is your most powerful tool, and what you eat helps determine how sharp, steady, and strong it is. Making small, smart food choices now lays the foundation for mental well-being, academic success, and long-term brain health.

KEY TIPS

01 | Start Your Day with Brain Fuel

Why It Matters: Breakfast jump-starts your brain and helps you stay focused in class.

How to Do It:

- Pick a combo of protein + carbs + fiber, like eggs with whole-grain toast or yogurt with fruit and granola.
- If you're in a rush, even a banana with peanut butter is better than skipping breakfast!

02 | Drink More Water, Less Sugar

Why It Matters: Your brain is about 75% water—even mild dehydration can make you feel tired, foggy, or cranky.

How to Do It:

- Carry a water bottle and sip throughout the day.
- Swap one sugary drink (soda, energy drink) for water, flavored sparkling water, or herbal iced tea.

KEY TIPS

03 | Eat Colorful Foods

Why It Matters: Fruits and veggies are full of antioxidants that protect your brain and help with memory and mood.

How to Do It:

- Challenge yourself to eat three different colors a day, like blueberries, carrots, and spinach.
- Add fruit to cereal or smoothies, or snack on cut-up veggies with dip.

04 | Add Healthy Fats to Your Plate

Why It Matters: Your brain loves healthy fats—they help with memory and focus.

How to Do It:

- Add foods like nuts, seeds, avocado, and olive oil to meals or snacks.
- Try trail mix, nut butter on toast, or adding avocado to a sandwich.

KEY TIPS

05 | Don't Skip Meals—Your Brain Needs Fuel

Why It Matters: Skipping meals can mess with your mood and make it harder to concentrate.

How to Do It:

- Try to eat something every 3–4 hours, even if it's just a small snack.
- Keep snacks like granola bars, fruit, or cheese sticks in your bag or locker.



INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

My Brain Fuel Tracker

Objective: Encourage students to become more aware of how their eating habits impact their brain and mood—and to experiment with small, realistic changes.

Instructions:

Step 1: Daily Brain Check-In (for 3 days)

Students track what they eat during the school day and note how they feel afterwards. Create a quick chart like this (can be done on paper, phone, or Google Doc):

MEAL/SNACK	FOOD/DRINK	HOW I FELT AFTER (FOCUS, MOOD, ENERGY)
Breakfast	Cereal + orange juice	Tired, a little jittery
Snack	Apple + peanut butter	Focused and steady
Lunch	Pizza + soda	Sleepy and sluggish

Step 2: Brain Boost Reflection

After 3 days, students reflect with prompts like:

- When did I feel my best?
- What foods helped my focus or energy?
- What's one small change I could try to fuel my brain better?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

My Brain Fuel Tracker (Cont.)

Step 3: Set a “Brain Boost” Goal

Have them choose one brain-friendly change to try for the next week, such as:

- Swap soda for water.
- Add a fruit to lunch.
- Eat a protein-rich breakfast 2 days a week.

They can write it down or add it as a reminder on their phone.

This activity builds awareness, encourages ownership, and helps teens see that small shifts can make a big difference.



CLASS ACTIVITY

Fuel Your Brain Challenge

Objective: Help students understand the connection between food and brain function, and reflect on how their daily choices impact focus, mood, and energy.

Step 1: Brain Food Match-Up (10 mins.)

Materials: Printed cards (or a slide) with foods on one side and brain benefits on the other.

Instructions:

- Hand out or project a list of 10–12 foods (e.g., eggs, blueberries, leafy greens, water, soda, chips, fish, avocado, etc.)
- Have students match each food to its brain impact: boosts memory, increases focus, causes energy crash, hydrates brain, helps mood, etc.
- Discuss answers as a group—what surprised them?

Step 2: Real Talk Discussion (10–15 mins.)

Use these guiding questions for a short class discussion or partner conversations:

- “How do you feel after eating something healthy vs. junk food?”
- “Have you noticed how your brain works after skipping a meal or eating sugar-heavy snacks?”
- “What’s one thing you could change to help your brain work better during school?”

Encourage honesty and make it a judgment-free zone.

CLASS ACTIVITY

Step 3: Brain Fuel Reflection Card (5 mins.)

Each student fills out a quick “Brain Fuel Plan” card:

- One food I eat often that might not help my brain:
- One swap I could try:
- One food I want to add more of to boost focus/memory/mood:

They can keep it as a personal goal or decorate and post anonymously on a classroom board called “Smart Starts.”

Extension (Optional):

Invite a school nutritionist or health teacher for a Q&A, or do a class smoothie-making demo with brain-boosting ingredients!

Use these guiding questions for a short class discussion or partner conversations:

- “How do you feel after eating something healthy vs. junk food?”
- “Have you noticed how your brain works after skipping a meal or eating sugar-heavy snacks?”
- “What’s one thing you could change to help your brain work better during school?”

Encourage honesty and make it a judgment-free zone.

TEACHER SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

Fuel With Intention

Objective:

Help teachers become more intentional about how they fuel their bodies and brains during the school day—supporting focus, energy, and mood regulation.

Mini Practice: One Nourishing Shift

Step 1: Reflect Briefly

Take 2–3 minutes (maybe during a prep period or after class) to ask yourself:

- What do I usually reach for when I'm stressed, tired, or rushed?
- How do I feel after those foods or drinks—energized? Foggy? Sluggish?
- Is there one small shift I could make that would support my brain and mood?

Step 2: Choose One Simple Shift

Pick one realistic adjustment for the week. Some ideas:

- Keep a small container of nuts or fruit on hand instead of chips or candy.
- Swap one coffee or energy drink for water or green tea.
- Eat breakfast before school (even something small, like yogurt + berries).
- Prep a balanced lunch on Sundays to grab quickly during the week.



TEACHER SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

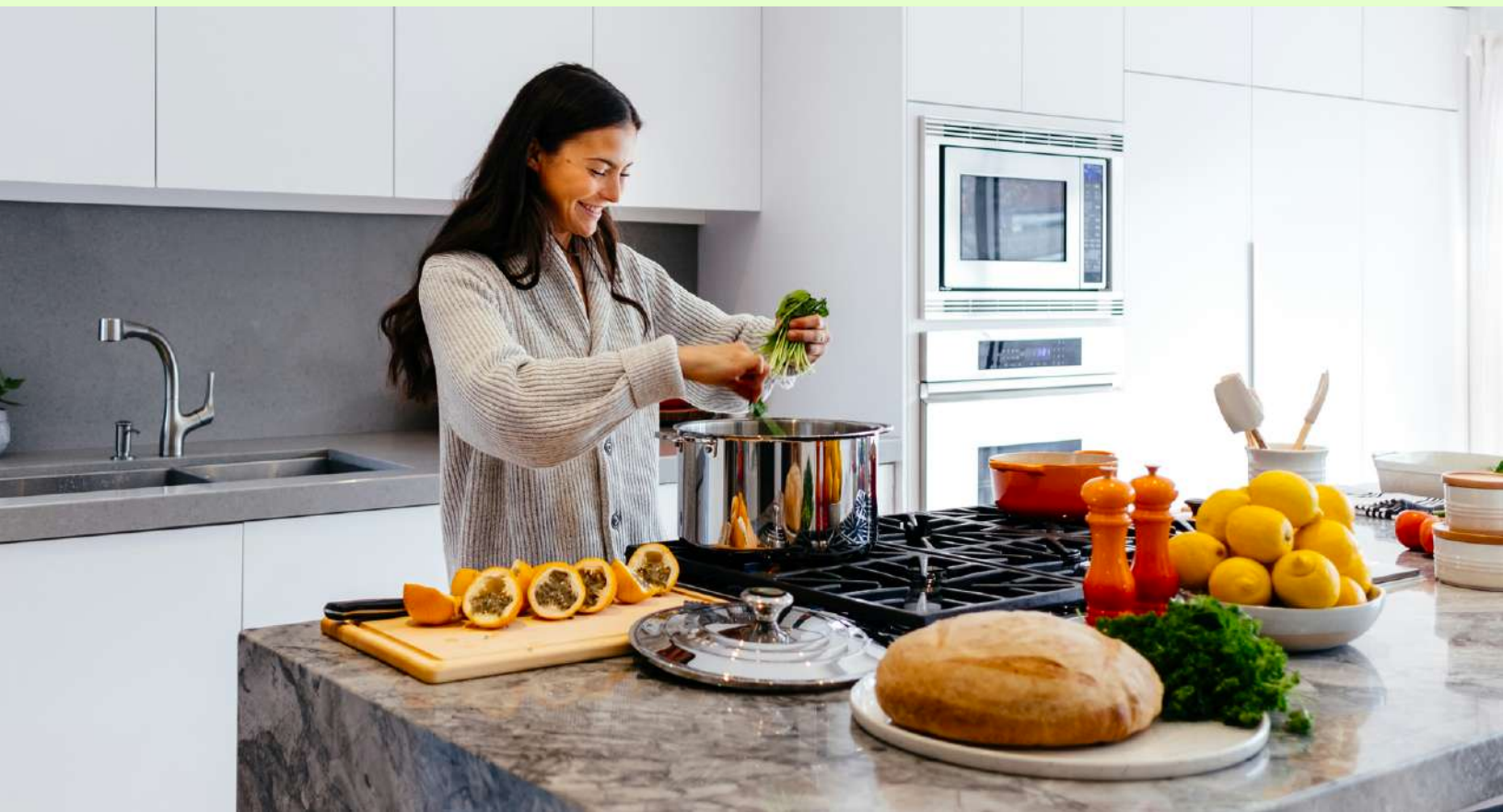
Step 3: Connect the Dots

At the end of the week, take 1–2 minutes to reflect:

- Did this change help me feel more clearheaded or emotionally balanced?
- What felt easy? What was tough?

Optional Add-On: Write the intention on a sticky note (e.g., “Fuel my brain at lunch”) and place it where you’ll see it—desk, planner, or lunch bag.

Why It Matters: Nourishing your brain as a teacher models healthy habits for students and helps you stay focused, present, and emotionally grounded in a demanding environment. Self-care starts with fuel.



COMMON MYTHS & TRUTHS



Myth

“You need caffeine or energy drinks to be productive.”

Truth

While caffeine can give a short-term energy boost, it can actually increase anxiety, disrupt sleep, and cause crashes—especially for teens.

Better Option: Eat balanced meals with complex carbs, healthy fats, and protein to sustain real energy.

Myth

“Fat is bad for your brain.”

Truth

Your brain is actually made up of nearly 60% fat—and healthy fats (like those in avocados, nuts, olive oil, and salmon) are essential for brain health and mood.

Better Option: Don't fear fats—just focus on the healthy ones.

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Optimizing Your Mental Health Playbook

Section 3

Connection with the World:
Being Part of a Bigger Community

CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD

Being Part of a Bigger Community



"Belonging in This Big World." | Ava Prendergast | TEDxYouth@DúnLaoghaire



Opening Video:

"Belonging in this Big World." | Ava Prendergast | TEDxYouth - DúnLaoghaire
4 minutes

In this TED Talk, 18-year-old Ava Prendergast shares her personal journey of finding belonging through community involvement. She emphasizes how connecting with others can empower youth to make meaningful contributions to society.

Fast Facts

The Power of Community

01

Social connection lowers risk of early death by up to 50%

People with strong social relationships are 50% more likely to survive across various health conditions. That's as impactful as quitting smoking.

(Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLOS Medicine*, 7(7), e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>).

02

Loneliness can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day

Chronic loneliness increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and mental illness.

(Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLOS Medicine*, 7(7), e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>).

03

Youth with strong community ties report better mental health

Teens involved in supportive groups (clubs, teams, faith groups) show lower rates of anxiety and depression.

(Knifsend, C. A., & Juvonen, J. (2022). Type and breadth of high school extracurricular activity involvement and postsecondary psychosocial well-being among diverse youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 52(2), 319–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-022-01695-1>).

04

Belonging to a community boosts emotional resilience

When people feel they matter to a group, they're better equipped to cope with stress and bounce back from challenges.

(Flett, G., Khan, A., & Su, C. (2019). Mattering and psychological well-being in college and university students: Review and recommendations for campus-based initiatives. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 17 (3), 667–680. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00073-6>).

05

Community engagement reduces cortisol (stress hormone) levels.

Studies show that volunteering and shared group activities reduce stress, improve mood, and increase life satisfaction.

(Nichol, B., Wilson, R., Rodrigues, A., & Haighton, C. (2023). Exploring the effects of volunteering on the social, mental, and physical health and well-being of volunteers: An umbrella review. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 35, 97–128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00073-6>).

WHY CONNECTING TO A BIGGER COMMUNITY MATTERS



Shared experiences in a community help you build empathy, confidence, and communication skills. You learn how to support others, and how to ask for support when you need it.

Communities teach us how to care—for ourselves and each other.

Humans are wired for connection—and the bigger your circle of care and purpose, the stronger you become. Whether it's volunteering, joining a team, helping a neighbor, or being part of a cultural or faith group, community helps us grow, heal, and thrive.

Deep Dive

Community Fulfills a Core Human Need: Belonging

Psychologist Abraham Maslow placed belonging right in the middle of his hierarchy of needs—just after basic physical and safety needs. Being part of a community gives us that crucial sense of being seen, accepted, and valued.

Research Insight: A study in *Psychological Bulletin* found that social connectedness is a stronger predictor of mental health than income or education.

It's a Buffer Against Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Feeling isolated or like you don't "fit in" can increase your risk for depression and anxiety. Being connected to a group—whether it's a sports team, cultural club, activist group, or faith-based organization—provides emotional support and perspective. It acts as a protective factor when you go through hard times.

Brain Fact: Positive social interactions reduce levels of **cortisol** (a stress hormone) and activate the release of **oxytocin**, the "feel good" hormone that promotes bonding and trust.

It Improves Physical Health—Long-Term

Deep Dive

Social isolation has been linked to chronic illness, sleep disturbances, and even shorter lifespan. In contrast, community participation—especially when active or cooperative—leads to better physical health outcomes through shared activity, accountability, and lower inflammation.

Scientific Insight:

A meta-analysis of over 3.4 million people found that strong social relationships increase survival odds by 50%, making connection as vital to health as quitting smoking or staying active. In contrast, social isolation is linked to inflammation, chronic illness, poor sleep, and shorter lifespan.

It Develops Key Life Skills

Being part of a community helps teens learn empathy, teamwork, communication, leadership, and conflict resolution. These skills are not only essential for healthy relationships—they're also critical for future success in school, work, and life.

Social Emotional Learning Connection:

Engaging in group activities develops the Social Awareness and Relationship Skills competencies in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Social Emotional Learning framework.

Deep Dive

It Promotes Identity and Cultural Pride

Community spaces can also reflect your identity—cultural, racial, LGBTQIA+, religious—offering safe spaces to share experiences, be validated, and feel pride in who you are. This can be deeply protective against discrimination or social stress.

Empowerment Insight:

According to Youth.gov, teens who participate in identity-affirming community programs have stronger self-esteem and lower rates of risky behavior.

When teens are connected to something bigger than themselves, they gain a sense of meaning, feel more capable and supported, and are more likely to grow into healthy, resilient adults. A strong community isn't just nice to have—it's a powerful tool for thriving in life.



KEY TIPS

01 | Start Small: Join One Group That Interests You

Why It Matters: You don't have to do everything—just one step into a club, team, or community group can open the door to new friendships and belonging.

How to Do It:

- Check out your school's club fair or announcements.
- Ask a teacher or counselor about opportunities.
- Try a low-pressure group, like a hobby or interest-based club.

02 | Volunteer for a Cause You Care About

Why It Matters: Giving back not only helps others, but it also boosts your mood and sense of purpose.

How to Do It:

- Look for opportunities at your school, library, or local nonprofits.
- Even one hour a month counts.
- Invite a friend to join you to make it less intimidating.

KEY TIPS

03 | Use Your Skills to Help Others

Why It Matters: Everyone has something to offer—your voice, creativity, or time can strengthen your community.

How to Do It:

- Tutor a younger student.
- Help organize an event.
- Share your talents (music, art, tech, etc.) with a group or cause.

04 | Show Up Consistently

Why It Matters: Trust and connection build over time—being a regular participant helps you become a known and valued part of the group.

How to Do It:

- Attend meetings, practices, or events, even if you're shy at first.
- Say hi to familiar faces—small talk builds bigger bonds.

KEY TIPS

05 | Ask for Help or Guidance

Why It Matters: Community is built on connection—and asking for help is a way to start one.

How to Do It:

- Reach out to a teacher, coach, or community leader.
- Let someone know you want to get involved—most people are glad to help.



INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

One Small Act Challenge: Local to Global

Objective:

Encourage students to take one intentional action that connects them to their local or global community, and reflect on the impact.

Instructions:

1. Choose Your One Small Act:

Pick one simple thing you can do this week that helps you feel part of a bigger community—locally or globally.

Local Examples:

- Write a thank-you note to a school staff member or local worker.
- Pick up trash in your neighborhood or schoolyard.
- Donate a book or clothing item to a local shelter.
- Help a younger student or neighbor.
- Compliment someone who might need a boost.

Global Examples:

- Participate in an online campaign for a cause (e.g., climate action, human rights).
- Write a letter or message of support to a global aid organization.
- Watch and share a video from UNICEF, WHO, or another global organization raising awareness.
- Learn about and support a global initiative, like Earth Hour or International Day of Peace.
- Share a positive message or create a post that raises awareness on social media.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

2. Do the Act

Take action in your chosen way. Whether it's helping a neighbor or advocating online, every step matters.

3. Reflect in Your Journal or Notes App

Answer these prompts:

- What did I do, and why did I choose it?
- How did it make me feel?
- How might this act connect me to something larger than myself?

Why It Matters:

Connecting to a larger community—locally or globally—helps build empathy, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Even small actions make a difference when they're part of a bigger story.



CLASS ACTIVITY

Community Impact Brainstorm + Action Plan

Objective:

Help students explore how they can contribute to their larger community and feel a sense of purpose and belonging.

Step-by-Step Instructions:

1. Warm-Up Discussion (10 mins.)

Start with a few questions:

- What does “community” mean to you?
- Who is part of your bigger community (outside of friends/family)?
- Why do you think people feel better when they’re involved in something bigger than themselves? Encourage students to share thoughts in pairs or small groups.

2. Community Needs Brainstorm (10 mins.)

As a class or in small groups, brainstorm needs or issues in the local or school community.

Examples:

- Loneliness in elderly populations
- School environment improvements
- Food insecurity
- Environmental cleanup
- Supporting new students

Write them on the board or in a shared space.

CLASS ACTIVITY

3. Design an Impact Project (20–30 mins.)

In small groups, students pick one need and answer:

- What could we do about this as teens?
- What skills or tools do we already have that could help?
- Who in the community could support us?
- What's one realistic action we could take?

Have each group create a short action plan or poster to present.

4. Share & Reflect (10 mins)

Each group briefly presents their idea. Then reflect together:

- What surprised you about today's ideas?
- How did it feel to think about helping others?
- What's one small thing you can do this week to be part of your community?

Optional Extension:

Turn one group's idea into a real class project—even something small, like writing gratitude notes to school staff or organizing a mini fundraiser for a local cause.



TEACHER SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

Connect & Reflect: Teacher Edition

Activity: The Weekly Connection Check-In

Objective:

To help educators reconnect with their sense of purpose and community by engaging in a simple act of connection and reflection.

Step 1: Schedule 15 Minutes Just for You (Once a Week)

Choose a quiet time during your week—before school starts, during a prep period, or after students leave—to pause and reflect.

Step 2: Reach Out to One Colleague or Community Member

Choose one person to connect with:

- A fellow teacher
- A school support staff member
- A mentor you admire
- A friend or community member who lifts you up

You can send a short message, share appreciation, check in, or just say hello. This helps build mutual support and reminds you that you're not alone in this work.

Step 3: Reflect with Intention

After your check-in, jot down (on paper or digitally):

- One moment this week when you felt part of something bigger
- One way your work made a difference—big or small
- One thing you're grateful for in your teaching or school community

TEACHER SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

Why It Works:

- Reduces burnout by reinforcing your impact and connection
- Boosts morale through gratitude and social bonding
- Reminds you of the bigger purpose behind your daily work

This simple practice—once a week—is a reminder that your role matters and that you're part of a larger network of care and purpose.



COMMON MYTHS & TRUTHS

Myth

“You have to wait until you're an adult to really connect to a community.”

Truth

Community isn't about being extroverted—it's about showing up in ways that feel authentic to you. Even small acts like volunteering once a month, attending a school event, or joining an online group with shared interests count as meaningful connection.

Advice: Your voice matters in your community. No matter your age, you have the power to speak up, share ideas, and make change. Whether it's through a school club, a social media post, or joining a cause you care about—your input counts.

Myth

“If I'm not leading something big, I'm not really making a difference.”

Truth

You don't need to lead a movement to make an impact. Supporting others, helping out behind the scenes, or just being a consistent, kind presence in your school or neighborhood does contribute to a stronger community.

Advice: Your voice matters in your community. Communities give as much as they receive.

COMMON MYTHS & TRUTHS

Being Part of a Bigger Community

You are never alone in this world—even if it sometimes feels that way. Being part of something bigger than yourself gives life meaning, connection, and direction. Whether you're joining a school club, volunteering locally, or caring about a global cause, each step you take builds stronger ties to others and strengthens your own sense of purpose. Your voice, your presence, and your participation all matter. When we show up for our communities, we not only lift others—we lift ourselves. This is how we rise, together.



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