

WORKING DOCUMENT

Mental Resilience & Vitality

Practical tools for awareness, acceptance,
breathing, recovery and resilience

Revised and redesigned version

In-depth working document | Based on the workshop memo by Huib Zeevenhooven

Haarlem, November 2025 | Expanded version: July 2026

Background

This document is an in-depth and practical elaboration of the workshop “Mental Resilience and Vitality”. The original memo has been refined in content, rewritten in a more professional tone, and expanded with reflection questions, exercises, example situations and a 4-week programme.

The underlying principle remains the same: mental resilience and vitality reinforce each other. A vital body provides greater capacity. Mental resilience helps you keep making healthy choices, even when circumstances are challenging.

This document is intended as a workbook. Do not only read it from beginning to end: select exercises, complete the tables and use the examples to develop your own approach. The content is general and does not replace medical or psychological guidance.

Using this as a workbook

Choose one theme each week. Make the exercise small enough to sustain. Reflect briefly: what do I notice, what works, and what needs adjustment?

Huib Zeevenhooven
Haarlem, November 2025

At a glance

Mental resilience is the ability to remain present, flexible and able to act under pressure. Vitality is the available physical and mental energy to function, recover and grow. Together they form a foundation for sustainable performance and well-being.



Figure 1. The interaction between mental resilience and vitality.

Recognise	Regulate	Choose direction
Learn to recognise early signs of tension, fatigue and resistance.	Use breathing, awareness, movement, recovery and connection to return to balance.	Act from values and realistic thoughts, not only from automatic stress responses.

The core in one sentence

You do not always have to be strong, calm or positive. Above all, you train the ability to recover more quickly, choose more consciously and look more honestly at yourself and the situation.

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1. Introduction

Mental resilience and vitality are not separate themes. They form a system: sleep affects concentration, nutrition affects energy, movement affects mood, breathing affects tension and thoughts influence behaviour. When one element improves, it often creates room for other elements to improve as well.

This system also works in the opposite direction. Prolonged stress can lead to poorer sleep, less movement, faster eating, more rumination and less connection with others. It is therefore useful to look not for the perfect solution, but for the first feasible entry point.

A good entry point has three characteristics: it is concrete, small and repeatable. For example: two minutes of calm breathing every morning, a ten-minute walk each working day, putting your phone away earlier each evening, or planning your recovery moments once a week.

Working definitions

Mental resilience: the ability to deal with tension, change and setbacks without losing yourself.

Vitality: the extent to which you experience physical and mental energy, recovery capacity and motivation.

Why deeper development is needed

Many people know perfectly well what is healthy or helpful, but under pressure they fall back into automatic patterns. Deeper development therefore means understanding what is happening, practising while the signal is still small and building an environment that makes desired behaviour easier.

Layer	What deeper development adds
Knowledge	You know what is good for you, but apply it inconsistently.
Awareness	You recognise earlier what is happening in your body, thoughts and behaviour.
Skill	You have practised concrete techniques, such as breathing, pausing, reflection and communication.
Rhythm	You make healthy choices part of your day, so they require less willpower.

2. Recovery capacity

Recovery capacity is the ability to return to calm, perspective and energy after tension, setbacks or effort. Recovery is not the same as passive waiting. It is an active process of noticing signals, releasing tension, recharging and reorienting.

Everyone has their own recovery profile. One person recovers by talking, another by moving, writing, sleeping, organising or by seeking silence. An effective recovery profile is personal, realistic and repeatable.

Recovery capacity: from setback to deliberate next step

Recovery is not a straight line, but a trainable process of noticing, regulating and adjusting.



Figure 2. Recovery capacity as a trainable process.

2.1 The stress system in plain language

Stress is not necessarily negative. A healthy amount of tension makes you alert, engaged and performance-oriented. The problem arises when tension remains high for too long, escalates too quickly or recovery does not take place.

Under pressure, the body can automatically respond by fighting, fleeing, freezing or pleasing. These reactions are understandable and often protective in intent. Mental resilience begins with recognising that reaction before it takes over completely.

Stress regulation: the work window

Mental resilience grows when you recognise signals earlier and return to your optimal tension zone.

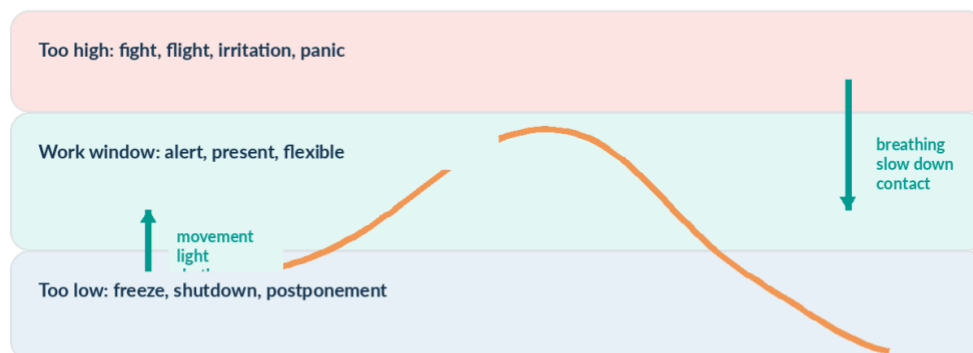


Figure 3. The work window for stress regulation.

Early signals are valuable

The earlier you notice that you are moving outside your work window, the simpler the intervention can be. A glass of water, three calm exhalations or a two-minute walk are most effective when used early enough.

2.2 Signal map: your early warning system

Many people only notice tension once it has already become significant. A signal map helps you recognise subtler cues. Complete the table at a calm moment and use it later as a compass.

Check	Signal	What I notice	My first response
☐	Clenching jaw		
☐	Raised shoulders		
☐	Speaking faster		
☐	Shorter fuse		
☐	Less perspective		
☐	Ruminating		
☐	Procrastinating		
☐	Greater need for sugar/caffeine		
☐	Sleeping worse		
☐	Withdrawing or overworking		

Exercise: your recovery profile

- Think back to a recent stressful period. What were the first signals?
- What did you do automatically? Did that help in the short term, the long term, or both?
- Which three recovery actions almost always help at least a little?
- Which recovery action do you want to use from now on while the signal is still small?

3. The nine practical tools

The original document described seven practical tools. In this expanded version, sleep/recovery rhythm and social support have been added, because in practice they are often decisive for sustainable vitality and mental resilience.

- Awareness, alertness and presence
- Acceptance
- Resistance and minute processing
- Breathing
- Cold exposure
- Nutrition
- Movement
- Sleep and recovery rhythm
- Social support and connection

3.1 Awareness, alertness and presence

Awareness is the ability to be consciously present with what is happening now. It is not about vagueness, but about observing without immediately accelerating towards judgement, solution or distraction.

Awareness often starts physically: feet on the ground, feeling your breath, hearing sounds, noticing temperature, sensing tension in your shoulders. Touch and body signals bring you back to the present moment.

Mini-exercise: notice 3 x 3

Silently name: 3 things you see, 3 things you hear and 3 things you feel in your body. Finish with one calm exhalation.

Step	Meaning
Awareness	I notice what is actually happening now.
Interpretation	I notice the story my mind is adding to it.
Choice	I choose a next step that fits the situation and my values.

3.2 Acceptance

Acceptance does not mean approving of something or giving up. Acceptance means clearly acknowledging what is true at this moment. Only then can you choose what you can influence and what you cannot.

Resisting reality often costs a lot of energy: “this should not be happening”, “this should have gone differently”, “I cannot handle this”. Acceptance removes the struggle from the first moment, freeing up energy for the next step.

Acceptance sentence

“This is what is here now. I do not have to like it. I can still choose my next step.”

Situation	Non-acceptance	Acceptance with action
Traffic jam / delay	“This ruins everything.”	“I will be later. I will inform the other person and use the time to breathe.”
Receiving feedback	“They think I am bad.”	“This is feedback. I will examine what is useful.”
Waking up tired	“This day is a failure.”	“My energy is low. I will simplify my day.”

3.3 Resistance and minute processing

Resistance is a signal that something has been touched: a boundary, need, belief, fear or previous experience. Resistance is not wrong. It calls for investigation.

Minute processing helps when the situation feels too large. You do not have to solve the entire problem. You slow down and keep asking: what is the smallest right next step now?

1. Stop and state factually what is happening.
2. Notice where the resistance is physically present.
3. Exhale longer than you inhale.
4. Ask: which value or boundary is being touched?
5. Choose one small step: ask questions, pause, set a boundary or act.

Inquiry question

What exactly am I resisting: the situation, my feeling, the other person, my expectation or the loss of control?

3.4 Breathing

Breathing is an immediately available anchor. You breathe automatically, but you can also use breathing consciously to regulate tension, gather attention and respond more calmly.

During stress, breathing often becomes faster, higher and shallower. A calm exhalation, nasal breathing and a slower pace can help send the body a signal of safety. The goal is not to breathe as deeply as possible, but to breathe appropriately.

Breathing card: calm regulation

Use breathing as an anchor for awareness, relaxation and clear action.



Safety: Never use intensive breathing techniques in water, while driving or standing. Build up gradually.

Figure 4. Breathing card for calm regulation.

Technique	When to use	Point of attention
Abdominal/diaphragmatic breathing	Daily relaxation, recovery moments	Relax shoulders and jaw; do not force the breath.
4-7-8 or 4-4-6	For calm, sleep or pausing	Use shorter counts if holding the breath creates tension.
Heart coherence	Calm focus, work break, preparation	Aim for an even pace, often 5-6 breaths per minute.
Intensive breathing	Practise only consciously and safely	Never in water, in the shower, while driving or standing.

Safety

In case of panic symptoms, dizziness, cardiovascular problems, epilepsy, pregnancy or severe stress symptoms: consult a doctor or professional before using intensive breathing techniques.

3.5 Cold exposure

Cold exposure can be an exercise in awareness, breathing and acceptance. Start small and do not turn it into a performance. The aim is not suffering, but regulation: can I remain present, exhale calmly and respect my boundaries?

Cold showers or brief exposure to cold are not suitable for everyone. In particular, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, pregnancy, diabetes, poor circulation or neurological symptoms require caution and medical consultation.

1. Start with 10 to 20 seconds of cooler water at the end of a shower.
2. Exhale calmly and relax your shoulders and face.
3. Stop well before you start forcing it.
4. Warm up gradually afterwards with clothing and movement, not by taking an extremely hot shower.
5. Evaluate: did this feel regulating or mainly burdensome?

3.6 Nutrition

Nutrition supports energy, recovery, mood and concentration. A practical foundation consists of sufficient vegetables and fruit, whole-grain products, appropriate proteins, healthy fats and enough fluids. Highly processed foods, sugary drinks and excessive alcohol or snacks can put energy and recovery under pressure.

A good eating pattern does not have to be perfect. Above all, it should fit your body, schedule, culture, preferences and health situation. For some people structure works; for others, prepared meals or fewer choices during busy periods work better.

Aim	Practical translation
Make energy more stable	Combine carbohydrates with protein, fibre and fat; avoid long periods of only coffee and fast sugars.
Make choosing easier	Place healthy options visibly within reach and make less helpful choices less automatic.
Support recovery	Eat enough after exertion and drink enough water, especially in heat or after exercise.
Personalisation	For medical conditions, eating problems or medication: work with a doctor or dietitian.

One nutrition step

Choose one step for seven days: extra vegetables each day, water as the standard drink, a prepared breakfast, fewer sugary drinks or a fixed lunch break.

3.7 Movement

Movement is an accessible entry point to vitality. It does not always have to be sport. Walking, cycling, taking the stairs, stretching, dancing, strength training, yoga or gardening can all contribute to energy, mood and recovery.

A useful guideline for adults is 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity movement per week, supplemented by muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days. See this as a direction, not an all-or-nothing standard. Every extra step counts.

Form	Effect in practice	Starting example
Walking	Releasing tension, organising thoughts, daylight	10 minutes after lunch or work
Strength	Capacity, posture, confidence	2 x per week, 15 minutes of basics
Mobility	Releasing tension, recovery	5 minutes of stretching after getting up
Playful movement	Enjoyment, social energy	Dancing, sports game, gardening

3.8 Sleep and recovery rhythm

Sleep is a foundation for concentration, emotional regulation, recovery and learning capacity. Many adults need at least seven hours of sleep per 24 hours, but quality, regularity and relaxation before bedtime are just as important.

A good recovery rhythm starts during the day: daylight, movement, breaks, caffeine timing, a clear end to work and a calm evening routine. Improving sleep is usually not a trick, but the restoration of rhythm.

Habit	Why it helps
Fixed wake-up time	Get up at the same time as much as possible, even after a poorer night.
Evening landing	Create a transition 30 to 60 minutes before bed: less screen time, less work, softer light.
Worry place	Write down open tasks before bed so your mind does not have to hold everything.
Sleep pressure	Use your bed mainly for sleep; do not stay awake indefinitely ruminating.
Sleep as a skill Do not only ask: "What time did I go to sleep?" Also ask: "How did I arrange my day so that sleep could become logical?"	

3.9 Social support and connection

Mental resilience is not a solo project. Contact with others can help regulate tension, test thoughts, receive support and restore perspective.

A listening ear does not always have to give advice. Sometimes presence is enough: someone who listens, summarises and helps you slow down. Connection is therefore a practical source of recovery.

Need	Helpful question	Example sentence
Listening	Would you listen without giving advice straight away?	"I want to sort this out for a moment; I do not need advice yet."
Thinking along	Would you help me see options?	"Which three choices do you see that I am missing?"
Setting boundaries	Would you help me clarify my boundary?	"What would be a reasonable no?"

4. From knowledge to application

The value of this document lies in its application. Big plans often provide short-term motivation, but small habits create long-term change. The art is to make behaviour so simple that it remains doable even on mediocre days.

Habit formation: small, concrete and repeatable

A habit lasts longer when it is specific, easy and rewarding.



Figure 5. Habit formation: cue, behaviour, reward and reflection.

4.1 Micro-habits

A micro-habit is a small action that is almost too easy to skip. Precisely because of that, repetition becomes possible. You can expand later, but the first gain is that you start.

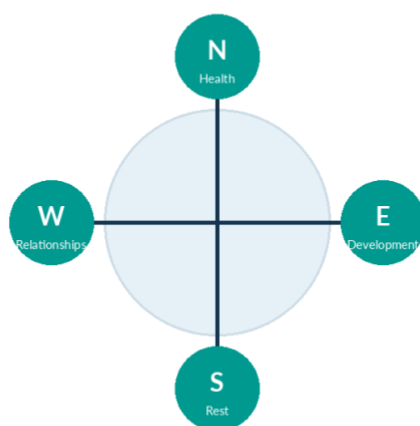
Theme	Too large	Micro-habit
Breathing	Meditating for 30 minutes every day	After coffee: 3 calm exhalations
Movement	Exercising five times a week	After lunch: 10 minutes walking
Nutrition	A completely new diet	At breakfast: one piece of fruit or extra protein
Sleep	Never using screens again	Put phone away 15 minutes earlier
Reflection	Extensive journaling every day	One sentence: what gave me energy?
Formula After [existing habit], I do [small action] for [time]. Then I notice [effect].		

4.2 Boundaries, energy and recovery agreements

Boundaries are not a sign of weakness. They protect energy, quality and relationships. Much stress arises when someone says yes for too long to things that do not actually fit the available time, capacity or values.

Values compass: choose under pressure

Values help you respond not only to stress, but act in the direction that fits you.



Question: Which choice moves me one step closer today to what I find important?

Figure 6. Values compass for choices under pressure.

Concept	Meaning
Energy sources	Activities, people or circumstances after which you feel clearer, calmer or more alive.
Energy leaks	Recurring patterns that cost more than they yield, such as ambiguity, postponement or too many stimuli.
Recovery agreements	Concrete agreements with yourself: a break, a walk, no email after a certain time, a fixed exercise appointment.
Boundary language	Short sentences that are kind and clear, without lengthy justification.
Example of a boundary "I cannot handle this carefully today. I can respond tomorrow at 10:00, or we need to shift priorities together."	

4.3 Application at work

At work, mental resilience becomes visible in the way you deal with pressure, feedback, conflict, priorities and recovery. Not by becoming harder, but by acting more clearly, consciously and effectively.

Situation	Automatic response	Resilient response
Too many tasks	Keep going and hope it works out	Make priorities explicit and ask for help or a decision
Feedback	Defending or shutting down	Summarise, ask follow-up questions and select useful points
Conflict	Attacking, avoiding or pleasing	Slow down, name the interest and seek a concrete agreement
Mistakes	Feel ashamed and hide	Learn, repair and improve the process
Work question Which agreement would reduce my workload by 10% without losing quality?		

5. Mental resilience with REBT

REBT stands for Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. It was developed by Albert Ellis and aligns with broader cognitive behavioural therapy: thoughts, beliefs and interpretations influence emotions and behaviour.

The strength of REBT is that it does not stop at “positive thinking”. It calls for realistic thinking: is this thought accurate, is it helpful, and is there an alternative that is more honest and more effective?

REBT in one image: the ABC model

Not only the event, but especially our interpretation shapes emotion and behaviour.

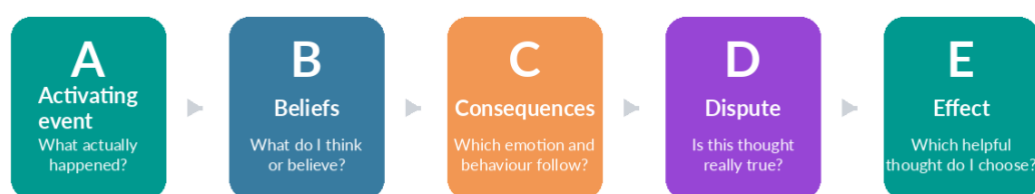


Figure 7. The ABCDE model of REBT.

5.1 The ABCDE model in practice

- A - Activating event: what actually happened, as if a camera recorded it?
- B - Beliefs: which thought, demand, catastrophic thought or interpretation arose?
- C - Consequences: which feeling and behaviour followed?
- D - Dispute: what evidence is there, what is exaggerated, what is unhelpful?
- E - Effect: which realistic, helpful thought do I choose now?

Example

A: A colleague responds curtly.

B: “He does not respect me.”

C: Irritation, distancing or attacking.

D: “Do I know this for sure? Could something else be going on?”

E: “I will calmly check what is going on before drawing a conclusion.”

5.2 Common irrational thoughts

Automatic thoughts are normal. They become problematic mainly when they become rigid, extreme or demanding. Below are patterns with helpful alternatives.

Pattern	Unhelpful thought	Helpful thought
Perfectionism	"I must be perfect and must not make mistakes."	"I may strive for quality and learn from mistakes at the same time."
Low frustration tolerance	"I cannot handle this."	"This is difficult, but I can approach it step by step."
Low self-esteem	"If this fails, I am worthless."	"An outcome says something about this situation, not about my entire worth."
Catastrophising	"If this goes wrong, everything is lost."	"This may be unpleasant, but usually there are options for recovery."
Mind reading	"I am sure they think negatively about me."	"I have an assumption. I can test it or ask questions."
Must-thinking	"They must behave differently."	"I can have wishes and boundaries without having full control over the other person."
Need for approval	"Everyone must like me."	"I want pleasant contact, but I do not need everyone's approval."

5.3 REBT worksheet

Use this worksheet for a concrete situation. Write briefly. The aim is not to convince yourself that everything is fine, but to think more honestly and effectively.

Step	My answer
A - Factual event	
B - My thought / demand / assumption	
C - Feeling and behaviour	
D - Inquiry questions: is it accurate, is it helpful, is it complete?	
E - Realistic helpful thought	
New small action	

6. Four weeks of deepening

This programme helps turn the document into lived experience. It has deliberately been kept simple. It is better to do a little consistently than a lot briefly.

Four weeks of deepening: from insight to habit

Make the document experiential with small, repeatable exercises.



Figure 8. Four weeks of deepening.

Week	Daily exercise	Weekly reflection
1 - Observe	1-minute signal check: body, breath, thought, energy.	Which signals did I notice earlier than usual?
2 - Regulate	3 minutes of breathing or walking as soon as tension is noticeable.	Which intervention brought me back into my work window?
3 - Choose	Consciously include one boundary or value in a choice.	Where did I choose more consciously than usual?
4 - Embed	Keep one habit and adjust one habit.	What stays, what falls away, and what becomes the next step?
Daily score Give yourself a daily score from 1 to 5 for energy, tension and recovery. Not to judge, but to see patterns.		

7. Cases and example situations

The cases below show how the practical tools can be combined. They are intended as examples, not as perfect solutions.

Case 1 - Work pressure

Element	Elaboration
Situation	Your calendar is full, an urgent request comes in and you notice that you are speaking faster and breathing shallowly.
Application	Awareness: recognise the signal. Breathing: three long exhalations. Boundaries: make priorities explicit. REBT: replace "I have to solve everything today" with "I need to choose clearly what comes first."
Reflection Which automatic response do I recognise in myself? Which small intervention would I choose first in this case?	

Case 2 - Feedback

Element	Elaboration
Situation	You receive feedback and immediately feel resistance in your abdomen and jaw.
Application	Acceptance: the feedback is there. Minute processing: listen, summarise, ask one question. REBT: replace "I am failing" with "I can select useful information."
Reflection Which automatic response do I recognise in myself? Which small intervention would I choose first in this case?	

Case 3 - Fatigue

Element	Elaboration
Situation	You sleep less well for several nights and reach for coffee and snacks during the day.
Application	Recovery: simplify the day. Nutrition: plan a stable lunch. Movement: take a short walk in daylight. Sleep: restore the evening landing.
Reflection Which automatic response do I recognise in myself? Which small intervention would I choose first in this case?	

8. Personal action plan

Translate this into your own practice. Complete the table briefly. The aim is not to change everything at once, but to choose a first feasible step and evaluate it weekly.

30-day action plan

Choose one small step and make it as easy and repeatable as possible.

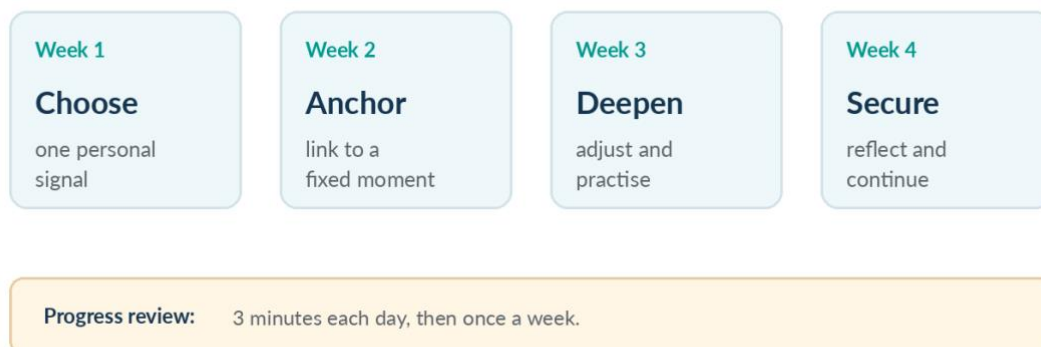


Figure 9. A simple 30-day action plan.

Theme	My signal	My first step	When / where	How will I evaluate?
Awareness				
Breathing				
Recovery				
Nutrition				
Movement				
Sleep				
Boundaries				
REBT				

My 7-day experiment

Question	Answer
I choose	
I do this on	
It takes no more than	
I make it easier by	
I know it works when	
After 7 days I decide	

9. Closing

A workshop on mental resilience and vitality is a starting point. The deeper development comes afterwards: in recognising signals, practising regulation, choosing from values and building a recovery rhythm.

The most important development is not that you never again experience stress, resistance or fatigue. The development is that you recognise these signals earlier, respond less automatically and return more quickly to an appropriate next step.

Closing thought

Resilience is not never falling. Resilience is learning to recognise what is happening, recover what is needed and choose the next step again.

Sources and further reading

This expanded version is based on the original workshop memo and supplemented with general, reliable reading directions. The sources are intended for substantiation and further exploration; personal health remains a matter of individual tailoring.

Theme	Source / reading direction
Original document	Memo "Mental Resilience and Vitality", Huib Zeevenhooven, Haarlem, November 2025.
Awareness and habit formation	Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People; practical literature on behaviour, habits and awareness.
Mindfulness and stress	American Psychological Association and NCCIH: overview information on mindfulness, meditation, stress and mental health.
Breathing and relaxation	Mayo Clinic: relaxation techniques such as calm breathing, meditation and body-based relaxation; James Nestor, Breath as a popular-science reading direction.
REBT and cognitive behavioural therapy	Albert Ellis: Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy; American Psychological Association: cognitive behavioural therapy and the relationship between thoughts, emotions and behaviour.
Movement	World Health Organization (WHO): for adults, 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity movement per week and muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days.
Nutrition	Netherlands Nutrition Centre: Wheel of Five, with attention to vegetables, fruit, whole-grain products, water/tea/coffee without sugar and limiting less nutritious products.
Sleep	CDC and NHS: adults usually need at least seven hours of sleep; sleep rhythm, evening routine and reduced screen stimuli can contribute to sleep quality.
Cold exposure	Cleveland Clinic and recent literature on cold exposure: possible benefits, but caution in cases including cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and pregnancy.
Professional help	In case of severe stress, trauma, panic, depressive symptoms, eating problems or medical conditions: consult a doctor, psychologist, occupational physician or another qualified professional.

Medical and psychological note

The exercises in this document are general and intended for education and self-reflection. They do not replace diagnosis, treatment or guidance. Seek professional help when symptoms are severe, increasing or limiting daily functioning.