

Lifestyle as Medicine_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah [00:00:06] Hello, and welcome back to our BeWell podcasts. I'm Bekah Walker, your host, and I'm delighted to be here with another fabulous panel of guests for today's episode which will focus on lifestyle and how making small changes could change your life. Before we kick off our discussion, can we go around each of you to introduce yourself to our listeners telling us who you are and why you volunteered to be part of today's podcast?

Duncan [00:00:29] Sorry, I'll go first. I'm Duncan Massey. Well, probably like everyone, I've been listening to a lot of podcasts in the last year, especially since the lockdown. I got a lot of interest in it and always wanted to see if I could do something myself. Otherwise, I'm a mature student taking a sabbatical of work in the oil and gas industry to do a master's degree in the Energy Transition, so I just started that.

Josefine [00:01:02] Yes, thank you. So, my name is Josephine Bjorkqvist. I'm a research fellow and PhD candidate at the Institute of Health Sciences here at the university. So, my background is actually in physical activity for health and health behavior change, so I'm really happy to be talking about this topic, which is a passion of mine, for sure.

Olivia [00:01:21] My name is Olivia Théorêt. I'm actually from Canada. I'm here as an international student to do my master's, and I'm doing it in Global Health and Management. So, I think this was just a very interesting topic, and it goes something similar to Duncan. You know, just the podcast space seems like it'd be interesting to participate in and take part in. I'm happy to be here today.

Bekah [00:01:49] Great. Thank you, guys, and thanks so much for joining me. I really appreciate you giving up your time to be part of the discussion today. So, lifestyle is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the way in which a person lives. So, this includes both their personal interests and behaviors, such as what we eat, how active we are, substance use and sleep. Unsurprisingly, these lifestyle factors affect not only our physical health, our overall wellbeing, too. I'm interested to hear from you guys about what influences lifestyle choices you make and lifestyle choices that you make, I should say, and the effect that these choices have on your wellbeing day-to-day.

Duncan [00:02:28] I guess I've got a slightly different perspective to some of you guys, I guess being a little bit older but recently I've worked around the way I live, my lifestyle and my diet and things like that. You know, recently I've lost about two stone in weight. I was a bad way. I'm an ex-rugby player, so, you know, obviously I was winning. It's quite heavy from playing rugby and obviously just getting a little bit older, starting to put a little bit of middle-aged spread. And I used to get a medical every year with work, and all the measurements were going in the wrong direction every year, and over the lockdown, you know, we all had a bit more time on our hands and I just really focused on a few different things with regards to diet and increasing activity. So, I've become quite passionate about that. Some of the things I've looked at is obviously exercise. I've always done a reasonable amount of exercise, but I've been doing a lot more cycling outside and diet wise - again, I've always had a reasonable diet, but now I really focus on a few things, such as trying to minimize sugars and maximize fresher fruit and vegetables and properly prepared meals.

Josefine [00:04:10] It's really great to hear from Duncan that you've made such fantastic changes already. Just to jump in around lifestyle changes – so, from my own perspective, one of the things I really identified was that I was under a lot of stress, sleeping really badly. I think part of that was due to the pandemic, but also there was a lot of work pressure. So, as an early career researcher and also a graduate student, there's a lot of pressure to always be working, always be reading papers, always be writing. So, I did take a step back from that and tried to really focus on my goals and how to really be my best self and to be more productive and to work smarter. And I did manage that or trying to manage that by trying to just get up earlier in the morning, trying to fit some exercise in at the beginning of the day, trying to leave the office or leave my desk by five o'clock every day, which is hard to do. But one of the things that really helps me is actually having colleagues who check in on me and make sure that I am abiding by this as well. So, I think that social support is really great as well, making sure that you're keeping check on yourself, but also helping others to keep to their goals. So that's helped me a lot.

Olivia [00:05:24] I've always had a pretty healthy lifestyle, but I think what's really noticeable for me now is just since I've moved here, like literally two months ago and I've never been here before, and I don't know anyone that definitely, you know, change things around for me a little bit. And, you know, mental health was definitely something that I needed to like, really take a step back and realise I need to make some changes being here in my lifestyle just because, you know, sleep wasn't great and stuff being here. So, I really tried to create myself a routine, I think it's really important for you to be able to put in those things that are healthy for your lifestyle and good for you. Little things that can make you feel, you know, safe like you've got a safe space. But then that you've also, especially for students being online, creating a different space for studying if you can go to the library or go somewhere else so that it's not all crowded and overwhelming you when you're in your home space. And yeah, I just really like, I think at night before you go to sleep, really finding ways for you, even if it's just little self-care ways for you to create a calmer space for you. That's been something that's been really big for me recently for trying to change and help my lifestyle.

Bekah [00:06:49] Yeah, they're so interesting tips. And I think it's definitely something that, I suppose lifestyle as well, can be very personal to each individual person. So, what will be healthy, and obviously everything is like healthy for everyone, but what people get the most benefit out of is very personal and certainly some of my behaviors have an effect on my wellbeing, depending on how much I've exercised. You know, it really enhances my mental health and helps me to be productive in the day if I could get up and exercise in the morning before I go to work. Also, not even just like the mental health, it really helps with your digestion and helps with sleep and stuff as well so that you are tired when you go to bed because it can be really difficult if you're stressed. For example, last night, I also work at the university and I'm also studying at the university so I've got quite a busy lifestyle at the moment, and I was on my computer far too late last night and I couldn't sleep when I went to bed. You know, I done a full day of work and I thought, I've got quite a few things like assignments to do, you know, I want to crack on with them and before I knew it was, I think 10:30pm, which might not seem too late, but then I switched off my computer, went to bed and I was just like lying, looking at the wall, like I just couldn't switch off and go to sleep. So, for me, that's something I really want to focus on, like you said, having that clear switch off time so that I am getting to sleep so I'm feeling more ready to take on the next day and then I'm more likely to make better lifestyle choices. For example, certainly for me if I'm tired, I'll eat a load of rubbish food like, you know, you just crave something really sugary and you feel like it's going to wake you up to get you through the day. But you

know, if I've had my eight hours sleep or whatever, I'd feel more alert and just ready to make those lifestyle choices.

Josefine [00:08:53] It can be really hard to break out of those bad habits. I work late a lot as well, and I feel I'm just buzzing at 10-11 o'clock in the evening. And similarly, if you're watching one of your favourite shows or one of these streaming platforms and then you get really into it and you watch far too many. So, it's these cycles that we get each other into and it's hard to stop. But we can stop, and we know that we can make new habits. So, thinking about what the change is you want to make and then really committing to it, so try sticking to it for a week. And if you can stick to it for a week, then you might be able to stick to it long-term and for sleep, things like leaving your phone and laptop out of the bedroom is a good one. And maybe switching that show for maybe a book, if possible. These things do help a lot, but they are hard changes to make.

Bekah [00:09:44] Yeah, and I think that's like what you said, it's about trying to build that habit and setting yourself that small target of 'I can do this just for a week' and then you will most likely know that it's such a difference. Certainly, I've made a small personal goal the past few weeks to try and maintain a good sleep routine. So, going to bed at the same time every night, whether it's the weekend or not. And again, although it's much more difficult in the dark mornings I tried to get up at the same time every day as well so that throughout the week I'm then sleeping better because on a Monday night or a Sunday night, I'm not getting as much sleep as I need because I've stayed up late at the weekends, then I got up late and it isn't just a knock-on effect for one day. It's like a continuous knock-on effect to the rest of your week, and then that's where you think 'Oh, I want to be making a change there'.

Olivia [00:10:36] Just real quick, I wanted to say it doesn't have to be a huge, massive change like it can even be something as simple as 'you know what, every day I'm going to go for a walk' and at some point in your day, you fit in that you're going to go for a walk. And there's something as simple as that and getting some fresh air and hopefully some sunlight and not in the rain. You know, that can help a little bit.

Duncan [00:10:54] I was just going to say I thought it was a really interesting point everyone made about the sort of difficulties being a student and finding the sort of separation and getting a routine. You know, certainly it's one thing I've noticed, you know, just start coming back to being a student after being in work as probably doing longer hours at work, but it's a bit more routine. It's not nine to five but you do your work, what you've got to do, and you get it done. Whereas being a student, it's kind of endless. You know, as everyone said, you can read, keep reading, there's an endless amount of things to read, and it's difficult to get to know when to stop and to get that balance and structure. So, I think that was a really important point that, you know, nearly everyone touched upon, and it's certainly something I've noticed coming back into studying.

Bekah [00:11:56] Yeah, definitely, and I feel that we've kind of alluded to our lifestyle choices. It not only affects our physical health and our mental wellbeing, but it does also affect our learning experience and our ability to learn. You might find if you have healthier lifestyle choices, such as prioritising going to sleep, that you'll have enhanced concentrations. You're able to better focus on your studies and apply your learning and retain information for your exams really, which obviously the ultimate goal of a student is to graduate. So just making those small changes to your lifestyle really can have only physical benefits to your health, mental wellbeing, as well as helping you excel and get to the top of your own academic ability. I just wondered, like from your guys' experiences in

your academic career, do you feel that the environment in which you're in affects the lifestyle choices you make? And is there anything that you think the university could do better to empower students to make healthy lifestyles throughout their studies? Healthy lifestyle choices, I should say, when they're studying.

Duncan [00:13:06] One reflection for me is, you know, with Covid measures and working a lot more from home make it harder to be healthy because you're typically stuck in one place for a lot longer. You don't have to travel, you don't have to walk, and I think, even the act of getting yourself onto campus is also a useful break, which, you know, quite often you're not even getting that. So, I think little things like that are a big miss, and I think potentially the university could do more to encourage a few more things on campus, even if it's not your actual lectures or for tutorials or whatever. I think just a few more ad hoc social sessions.

Josefine [00:14:00] I think that's a really, really good point, and it goes back to what we were discussing earlier around the importance of having a routine. And I have to say the hardest point for me during the lockdown was when we were just working from home. And, you know, a lot of people are working in their PJs and the novelty of that, those wear off at some point. And actually, there's something great about getting dressed for uni every day, you know, getting up at the same time, sitting down at your desk, going away from your desk to walk about and things like that. So, I think that is really important and you feel more professional if you're looking your best. I think routine is important and part of that is also obviously returning gradually and safely to more face to face sessions because I think students are telling us that that's what they want to see.

Olivia [00:14:49] Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you both kind of touched upon the points that I was going to bring up that I think it would definitely help to have more in-person activities and sessions, even like you said, I could not even have like classes, pitches, activities and social settings in-person. That definitely helps and, you know, just being able to get out and stuff. So, I absolutely agree with both of your points.

Bekah [00:15:15] Yeah, I think the pandemic has really brought to life the importance of socialising and the importance of going out to work or going to university, as much as it can sometimes be a thought sometimes. Like how many times have you heard someone say 'Look, I can't be bothered to do uni or kind of bother to go to work today'? But actually, when that was all taken away from us to start with, it was a little bit of novelty. I guess it's like, 'Oh, I can stay at home and do work' but very, very quickly became stale. And a lot of people that I've certainly spoken to and myself included did notice some deterioration within their mental health because of that and the impact that actually going on to campus and whether you're just engaging with the classmates, not even necessarily like for lectures, maybe just meeting someone for coffee makes such a difference. I certainly know for myself when I first went back to campus after being at home, I had only gone on for a few hours, and it was really, really odd. I came home and I remember saying to my husband, 'Oh, I feel really happy today', and I didn't feel that I was unhappy before, I was just in such, you know, better mood. And the only thing that I had done differently in my day was go on campus and interact and engage with someone face to face. That was the only thing that I had done differently. And that really just spoke volumes to me because it can be so easy to say 'Oh, I'll just stay at home', you know, you don't have to commute at all, you can be more in comfortable clothes. But really, it is healthier for us to be engaging when it's safely. Of course, you know, abiding by the guidance of like wearing our masks and keeping that safe distance. But really just having that physical interaction and

managing to keep eye contact with someone makes such a difference to your overall wellbeing, for sure.

Josefine [00:17:14] Absolutely, and I think something that I've heard from students has been difficult as well is engaging with societies and sports teams and volunteering opportunities because obviously a lot of that was not available for the past year. And that's often, I think, where we make some of our best friendships that last beyond university, you know, like-minded people. We're actually learning a lot of skills and it can be life changing for people, just the skills and the confidence building that comes with being part of a society or a sports club. So certainly, I'll be very happy to see those starting to have more activity on campus as well because they are very important, I think, to the student experience.

Duncan [00:17:58] Yeah, I totally agree with that. You know, there have been probably a handful of people on my master's degree since I've started and, you know, I'm actually in a fortunate position. I'm from the city, you know, I've got my family and support groups here, but I imagine it would be really hard if you just arrived at university, not really knowing anyone and you're spending most of your time in your flat or accommodation, just attending your classes. I think that must be really tough.

Olivia [00:18:30] Um, yeah, absolutely. I mean, that's kind of my experience. So, I really had to like, put myself out there and even just arriving here. You know what I mean? Like, going out was just going out to the grocery store and to the bank because, you know, I had to figure out getting a bank account here. So, I really had to try and make an effort and put myself out there because then classes were, you know, lecturers are recorded, pre-recorded, so they're not in-person. So, I definitely had to create some sort of different challenges but ends up being the same thing of having to find in-person activities that make you feel good. And I've personally been able to do that with some dance classes, I've just been trying different ones around the city and I finally joined the dance society at the university. So again, like even if you're not talking, just being in a room with other people or, you know, you go to your little space and you can take off your mask and that creates a routine and just feeling good and do some exercise. And then you start seeing familiar faces, which I think is also key to feeling more comfortable.

Bekah [00:19:36] Yeah, definitely, that's really good to hear that you've managed to engage with the dance society. It's so good that our sports clubs and societies are opening up again because it's such an important aspect of student life, and to have that social aspect as well, because you're getting the physical exercise as well as the social aspect. So, you know, you're hitting two of the goals there at one point, which is obviously key. And it just helps your overall wellbeing and kind of feeling happy and content and helps with your motivation and for your studies and stuff as well. What I find about the routine as well and, you know, going out to work or going to university, is that I certainly find it easier to make those healthier lifestyle choices when I am out of the house. For example, I suppose I'm thinking about diet. I would make lunch and take lunch with me to work and then I just eat what I've got. But if I'm at home, I've got like my whole house to decide what I want to eat or what I want to snack on, or if I don't want to eat a proper meal. So, in terms of the effect of maybe not eating the best when I'm at home as well, I definitely eat better. And that, you know, it affects so many things. Not only does that affect your skin, like the colour or the clearness of your skin, and generally you just feel better, your brain's able to be more productive. And again, back to the concentration thing like having that balanced diet really does help. Once you're doing one thing healthier, I find it easier to do another as such. So, you think, 'Oh, I've eaten well while today', and then I'll go for a walk and

suddenly you feel like you've made really positive lifestyle choices. But then that day, and I also think it is OK to have some days where you don't, it's like everyone has times where they're really, really tired and they need to rest. And, you know, I always aim to go out of the house every day for a walk. And there's some days certainly here, you know the weather's horrible, the last thing I want to do is to go outside, and I think it's OK to have those down days and those chill days as well. But it's just about knowing your own body and kind of being aware of the signs of to where you're maybe getting stuck into a little bit of a rock, you're maybe hitting another slump, kind of identifying what is one thing that I could change to try and combat that behaviour or get me stuck out of that drive, you know what I mean?

Josefine [00:22:32] Absolutely. And again, about getting out of the house, I think one aspect that being on campus is very beneficial is that it gives you a chance to go there as well, like either walking or cycling and you're building that active travel and that commutes into your daily day. And certainly, that's a good time for me to sort of get prepared for the day mentally or de-stress at the end of the day. So, I love that cycle ride to work in the morning and in the afternoon, even in the cold winter days, it really allows me to just de-stress, which is really nice. I think if I were sitting in a car or in a bus, it's not necessarily as beneficial. So, I love that commute and I definitely saw a difference when I started to commute back to campus again because beforehand, I was, you know, walking around my house and it got boring after a while. So, it's nice to have some variety, and I'm lucky to live close by one of the parks so I can walk past the park on the way. So, it's been really lovely. Definitely enjoying that again.

Olivia [00:23:34] I guess also just to touch upon the back of what you said about packing a lunch - when I go out of the house, if I'm bringing a water bottle with me, I end up drinking more water than if I stayed at home because I keep doing stuff, and you forget you don't fill up your glass. I always end up forgetting to drink water, whereas if I'm going out and I have a full water bottle, I know I'm drinking at least that full water bottle. So, I feel like that's a little thing, but it ends up making a big change. And also, I know not everybody likes cleaning, but I feel like even if you just try, it's easy when you're stuck in an apartment or whatever to just let everything accumulate and your clothes, your laundry, your dishes, like, I had a cold last week, so I just spent the entire week in bed, and the place was just like, I was so happy on the weekend to do my dishes and vacuum. And just that made me feel better. And last week, I ended up joining online just because I didn't want to expose people right to my cold. And then this morning I was like, 'Oh, I'd be so nice to stay in bed and join online', but I'm happy that I ended up actually walking to class. I was able to enjoy the sun this morning and enjoying the fall colours, so now I actually feel better, so I'm glad I did that.

Bekah [00:24:56] Yeah, I think what you said, Olivia, is so, so important and it can be so difficult that I just stay here today. Like it's just less time consuming, it's more comfortable, it's cosier. You never regret going out for a walk, ever, ever. Even if it has been cold, you know, just dress for the weather. I think, like probably everyone in Scotland does have a jacket for every single weather, and you've got to have like millions of layers with you for when the weather changes when you're out. But yeah, I've never, ever had a bad walk and it always makes you feel better. I really enjoy going for a walk with someone, and I probably just ran the whole walk and I'm like, you know, stressed about something. But then I always come back and I feel so much lighter and so much easier, and I've got my exercise in as well. Exercise doesn't always have to be running, running a 5K or going to the gym, really just getting out and getting some the fresh air. It affects our physical health, but again also our mental health. So, it's really trying to build in what works for you. If you

want to go to the gym and work out for an hour, then that's brilliant. That's absolutely fantastic. I mean, I'm a gym-goer myself. But in lockdown, obviously the gyms were shut, so I then took out running and, you know, did some more walking and there was something just about going out for the exercise rather than going to the gym. I just liked being outside in the fresh air, although some days it's obviously not the best for running. So, then I could go to the gym, but I really like having that balance of doing both. And yeah, I guess it is just really what works for you and just try to make those small changes as we kind of been speaking about, even in terms of what you're eating and thinking about, maybe healthy sugar swaps, I think someone mentioned that at the start of the episode. I personally don't believe in going on a diet. I see it more as a lifestyle change because at one point you'll go off the diet and then you'll fall back into your own habits and then you'll have to go back onto the diet. Whereas if you try and just make that conscious effort but again not being too strict like, you know, you have to be versatile. If you're going out for a meal with your friends, go out for a meal with your friends and enjoy it. Don't feel guilty about what you're eating, what you're drinking. If you try to track calories, and not everyone does that and that's totally fine, you probably also shouldn't track calories too religiously, but kind of based on what you've eaten throughout the whole week, not what you intake on that one day. I certainly find that having that flexibility in my own personal life just really helps. It helps to make the lifestyle choices a little bit more manageable and a little bit less overwhelming, like it is OK to not go to the gym. It's OK to not really eat so well today, but tomorrow I can try and do a little bit better. And I guess that's what I would want any of our listeners listening today to take home from this podcast. It's just that you can make those really, really small changes and it doesn't have to be, you know, you don't have to change the world in one day as such. I guess just to round up our discussions a little bit, I wonder if we've got any listeners who are feeling inspired by our conversations, if there's any advice that you guys would really give someone who is looking to make a change in their lifestyle?

Duncan [00:28:40] Yeah, I think it's all the things we've talked about today, it's having the separation from work at home that's important. And whether you can do that by a walk or some sort of exercise. That's great. And then I think that's what you just mentioned there again, Rebecca. I don't want to get into the realms of giving diet advice, but I think it's just sort of enjoying your food. But, you know, trying to eat as healthily as possible if there's a few little things to change. Try and do that as part of your everyday process rather than, you know, a big diet. As I mentioned at the start, for me it was trying to reduce the amount of sugar I was eating and carbs, actually. So, I find that easy, and there was quite an easy way for me to lose a little bit weight by reducing rice, potatoes, pasta and replacing chocolate with some other things. Mainly dark chocolate, rather than full blown Cadbury's or whatever. So, yeah, for me, it's just all those little things that we've mentioned throughout.

Josefine [00:30:00] Absolutely, and I think maybe the first thing to do is to really have a think about what is important to you. So, what is the thing that you really want to focus on and that might be around eating healthier, getting more sleep every night or perhaps doing more exercise, and then looking at how you can actually turn that into a smart goal. So then going from the big picture to being more focused and trying to build habits around that one goal. Then as you said, Rebecca, once you've made one change, it's easier to make the next. And just to reflect on something that helped me quite recently is for a week I kept a mood focused diary. So, I actually wrote down throughout the day when I was in a good mood, when I was feeling stressed, when I was maybe in a bit of a bad mood. And just the kind of things I was doing throughout the day, and I really found out when I was just sitting for long periods of time I was in a really, really bad mood. And then obviously, I wasn't at

my best in my work. But whereas if I was, you know, getting up regularly, drinking water, eating better, you know, leaving the office at 5:00, I was in a much better mood. So, that helped me to focus and to really look at the things that put me in a better place.

Olivia [00:31:16] I agree with everything you said. You summarized it really well. So, it really comes down to little, small changes that you can do because it can definitely be overwhelming if you're trying to make a big change, you know, like we said, try and go to bed at the same time every night or wake up at the same time every morning, drink water, slightly healthier choices, picking the dark chocolate instead. Little things like that. I think it's also important to set boundaries with studying and then also creating yourself a safe environment or a safe space. I know that for me, especially with psychic anxiety, you really want to be able to create that for you to feel better and then you can actually sleep at night and exercise. And having a good support network, I guess like you said Bekah, if you can go out for dinner with friends, it doesn't have to be going out for dinner but if your touch base with the people that are important in your life, that can actually give you that support, which can also help you in the long run with making those good lifestyle choices. Give yourself credit because I feel like we can all be really hard on ourselves when we're trying to make changes. So, give yourself credit for any little thing that you did today, that was an improvement from yesterday. I think that's really good. And of course, reach out, if ever you're needing help with something, of course, there's a lot of resources, even just with the university. So yeah, I guess that would be my piece of advice.

Bekah [00:32:50] Thank you so much. I think that's such a great point to end on there, Olivia. I'm really giving yourself that pat on the back. And, you know, looking forward to the next day, if today didn't quite go so well, what can I do tomorrow to feel a little bit better? I really liked what you said about that mood diary as well. I'm going to try this, I'll certainly try and monitor as well.

Josefine [00:33:23] I did find that I can't have coffee before meetings. It puts me in a really jittery mood. So, I've learnt to limit my coffee intake, which has been a good change.

Bekah [00:33:34] But that is so interesting. And I guess that's how you get to see what is working for you, because for someone else, they might need that coffee before they go to that meeting to help them wake up and be able to focus on that meeting. So yeah, that's super, super interesting and hopefully something that we'll all be able to go away and try see how it makes a difference on our general wellbeing and how we can study better because of that. So, I would just like to thank you guys so much for joining me for the episode today. I've certainly taken some hints and tips from you guys, which I can go and put into practice in my own life, and I'm looking forward to seeing the difference, the positive difference that can have on my lifestyle. So, thank you guys so much for coming, to any of our listeners who's feeling inspired or want to know a little bit more information about any of the themes that we've discussed today, just head to the University of Aberdeen website and search 'BeWell'. Thank you so much, guys, for joining. To our listeners, thank you for tuning in. Take care and I'll see you next time.

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