

# MAINTAINING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Evidence-based sport science and  
medicine guidance for developing athletes



These resources have been compiled by the English Institute of Sport / UK Sport Performance Pathways Team, based on the expertise and experiences of practitioners working with our GB Olympic and Paralympic programmes, together with current literature findings.

The aim is to bring the most appropriate and useful knowledge being applied at the top end of British sports to the athletes, parents and coaches who are currently at an earlier stage of their development journeys.

We are confident that if this guidance is followed from an early age, positive habits will be formed that will actively contribute to an athlete achieving a great deal of success, both in and out of competitive sport.

Editable and presentable versions of these resources are available on a case-by-case basis; if you'd like to request these please email us at [talent.matters@eis2win.co.uk](mailto:talent.matters@eis2win.co.uk).

Dr Ben Holliss, PhD (Senior Performance Pathways Scientist)

# Mental health...everyone has it!

Whilst everyone is different, we all enjoy phases in our lives when we feel energised and fulfilled, and we all experience more challenging times. This resource aims to raise your awareness to various factors associated with maintaining positive mental health, and covers the following areas:



We all need to understand the stress that we can tolerate, and the self-care strategies **that work for us as individuals**



“Mental health” is **a state of wellbeing,** and is different to a “mental health difficulty”



There are some common signs that someone is struggling, and **there are lots of things that we can do** and things that are best to avoid when trying to help (most of all, create time and space for conversations and follow ups)



**Self-care is critical,** and knowing what works and doesn't work for us as individuals is our best way to stay healthy

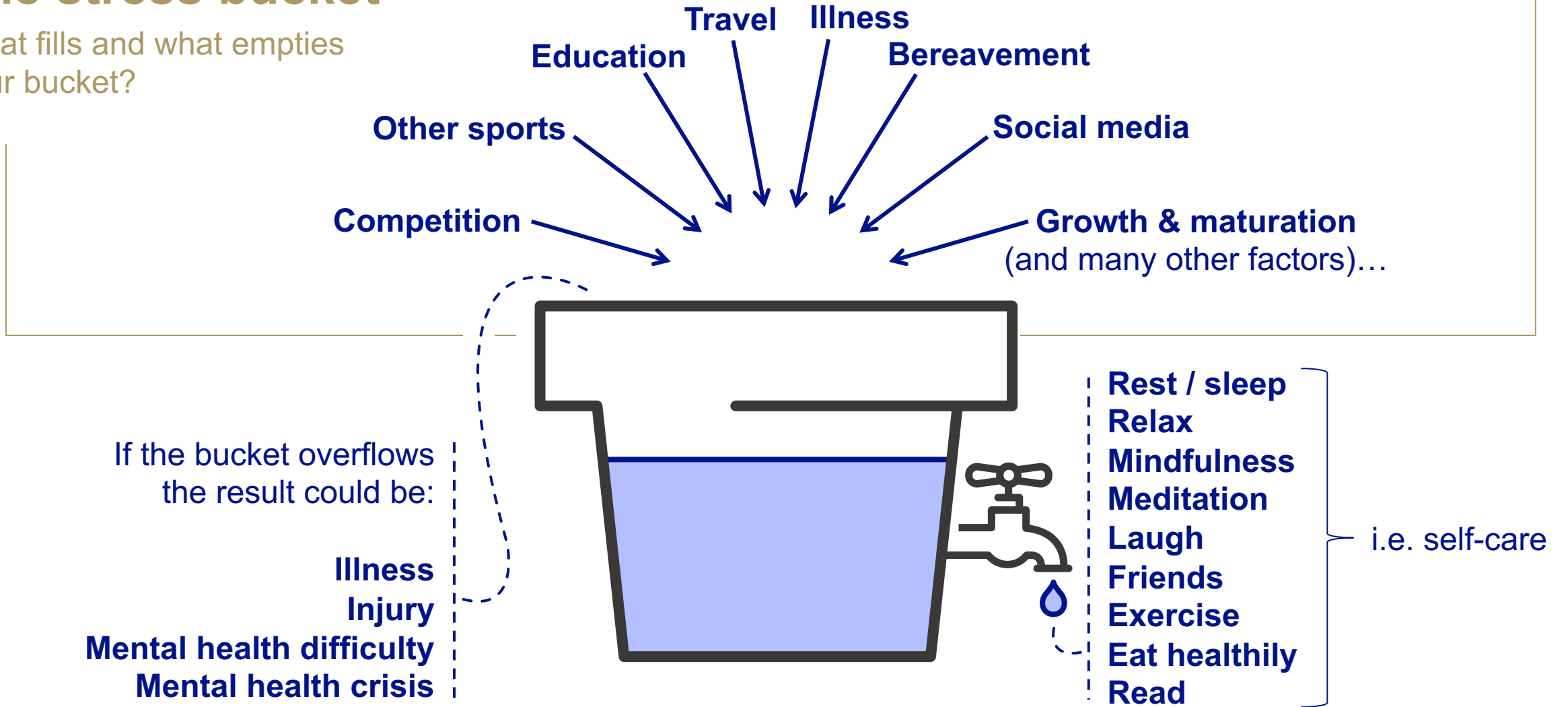


When thinking about self-care, **we suggest focussing on:**

- 1) Assessing what helps you to stay healthy
- 2) Planning your regular self-care routines and activities
- 3) Sharing this self-care plan with those who are closest to you
- 4) Reviewing what is working and what is not on a regular basis

# The stress bucket

What fills and what empties your bucket?



Follow [this link](#) to see a video explaining this stress bucket concept.

## Awareness & definitions

Your mental health is just as important as your physical health.

“ **Mental health is:**

A state of wellbeing in which every individual **realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses** of life, **can perform productively**, and is able to **make a contribution** to her or his community.



“ This is separate from a **mental health difficulty**, which is:

A pattern of behaviour, experiences, thoughts and feelings that causes **significant distress and/or impairment of daily functioning** and/or **difficulties in relationships** with others. Such distress or impairments are most likely to be experienced **over a period of time** and **are not easily reduced by an individual's typical self-care or coping strategies.**



# The mental health continuum

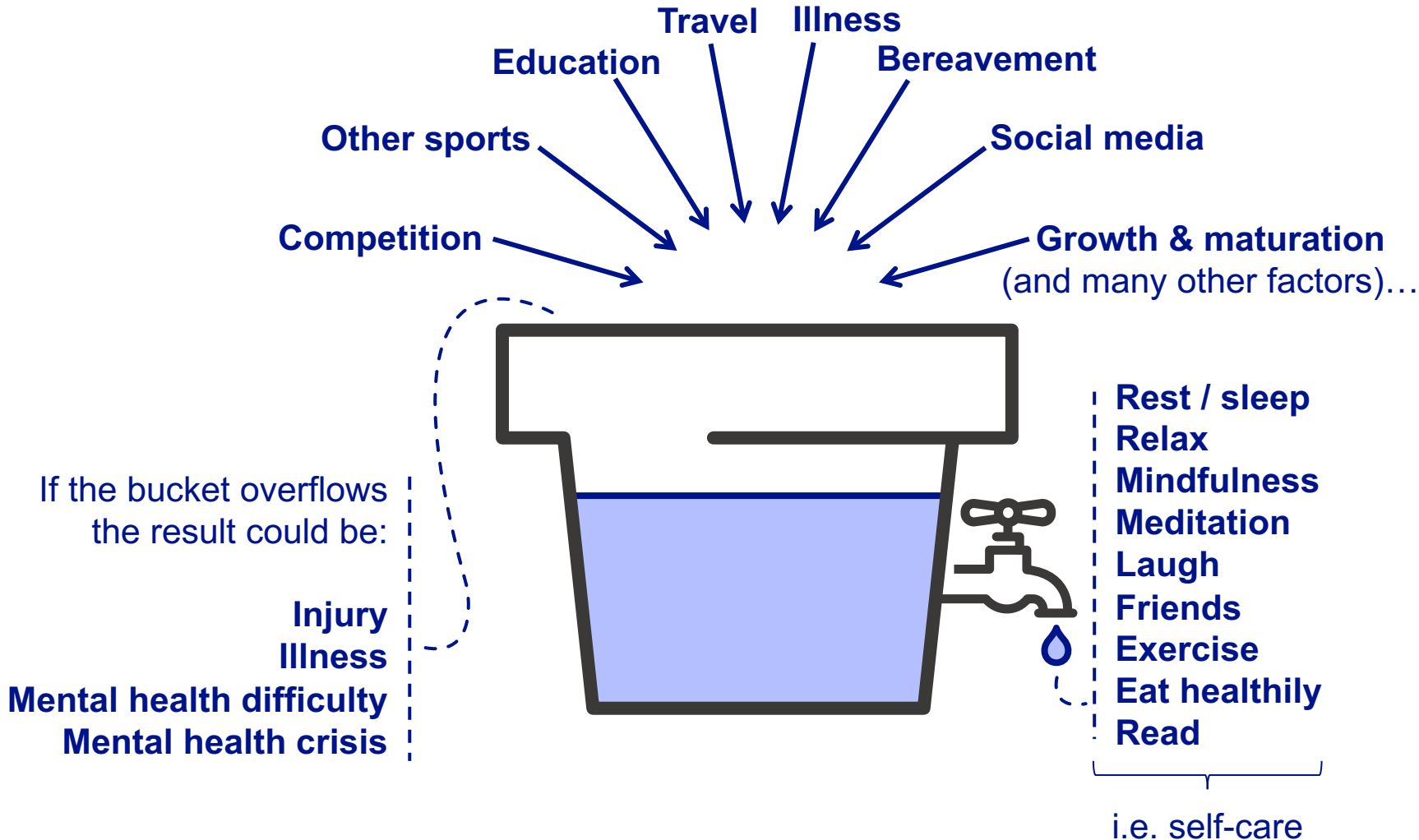
We can see mental health as a continuum with **emotional well-being** at one end and a **mental health crisis** at the other.

We all sit somewhere on this mental health continuum, and **we constantly move up and down in response to our experiences** over a day, week, or year, reacting to the stresses of competitive sport, and life in general, and partly based on our genetic predispositions.

## MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM



# Some dysfunction is to be expected



By its nature, competitive sport can be a **highly challenging** and at times **highly stressful** environment.

At the senior elite end, people are often pushed to **the edge of their coping capacities**.

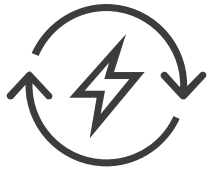
In any such highly challenging environment we would expect people to have **pretty full stress buckets**, so some dysfunction is to be expected.

However, when this continues for extended periods of time, particularly with **insufficient support and self-care**, this can set off **'survival mode'** and the potential for a mental health crisis, with negative well-being and performance implications.

**This should be avoided at all costs.**

## Spotting the signs

Some signs that may indicate that someone is struggling:



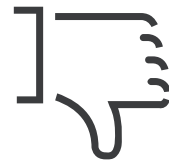
Lacking energy or appearing tired



Appearing more tearful



Not wanting to talk or be with people



Not wanting to do things they usually enjoy



Change of routine e.g. sleeping more



Becoming withdrawn, losing touch with family and friends



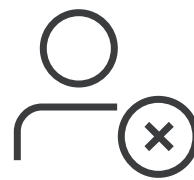
Using alcohol or drugs to cope with feelings



Difficulty coping with everyday things



Appearing restless and agitated



Not liking or caring for themselves, feeling they don't matter

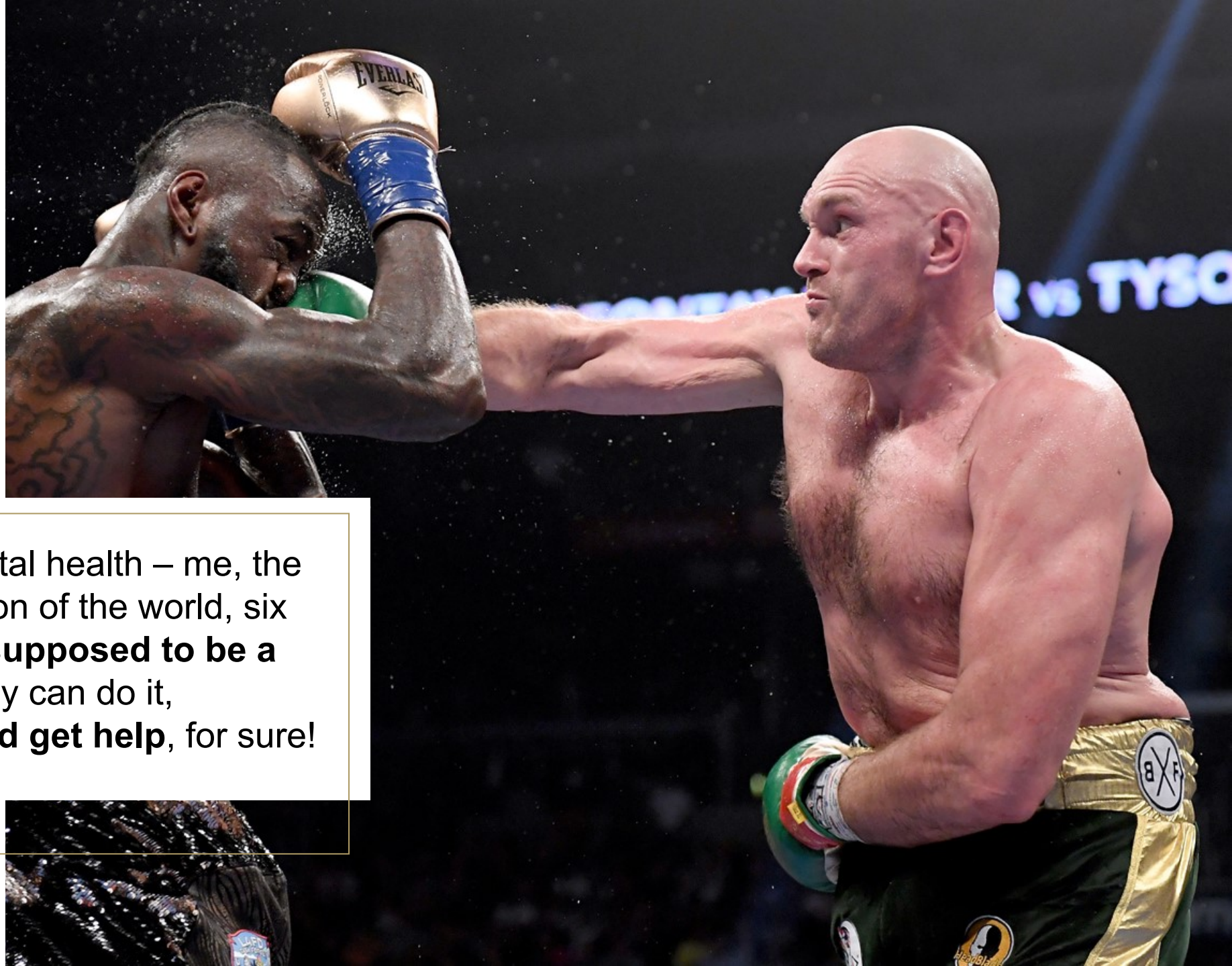


Being untypically clumsy or accident-prone



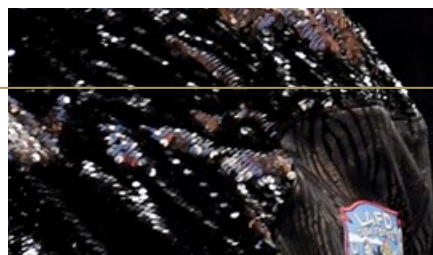
## Everyone should talk

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's mental health, you should talk about it as openly as possible, and seek help.



If I can speak about mental health – me, the big heavyweight champion of the world, six foot nine, 18 stone, **I'm supposed to be a big tough guy** – anybody can do it, **anybody can go out and get help**, for sure!

Tyson Fury



# What can we do to help others

## Do's...



Create **time and space** for conversations, follow up, active check-ins.

Show **concern, empathy, reflect back** and name the emotions that you hear.

**Be curious** about behaviours.

**Listen** and check your understanding.

Model and encourage **greater self-care** (including seeking help yourself).

**Ask if they are worried** about hurting themselves or others.

Ask what **they think will be helpful**.

Be **clear and realistic** about the support you can and cannot offer (e.g. the time, training and experience you have).

**Develop a support plan together** and/or as a team (ask for advice and refer for additional support).

## Don'ts...



**Avoid the topic.**

Tell them to “**snap out of it**”, “**cheer up**” or “**just keep going it will be ok**”.

Tell them to “**keep busy**” or just to throw themselves into things.

Assume the problem **will go away**.

Think you need to **have all the answers**.

**Keep all secrets** – whilst confidentiality is often important, and knowing when to break that confidentiality often comes down to personal judgement, it is 100% clear that if you think there is a risk of harm to self or others you should break confidentiality to seek support for that individual (this may be calling 999, 111 or someone within the individual's referral pathway, e.g. a family member, close friend or doctor).

**'Carry' any disclosure(s) alone** – instead, find ways of getting support yourself, as there are ways of doing so even whilst maintaining confidentiality on key details (e.g. their name and exact details of the situation).



## Self-care

Self-care is any action or behaviour which is under all of our own personal control, is deliberate and self-initiated, and which promotes positive health.

These actions can be different for each person, so the key is being aware of what works for you.



To look after yourself, you really have to know and be honest with yourself... which, as obvious as it sounds, **is not that easy...**

Lutalo Muhammad

Check out [this video](#) of various sports people talking about what self-care means to them



## Self-care

It's important to have a good understanding of how to take care of your health, especially as you approach high pressure periods of time. Having a personalised plan for keeping yourself healthy will have a big impact on your ability to consistently perform.

### 1. Assess

Identify what you currently do to stay healthy and consider which combination of things likely work best for you

### 2. Plan

Identify what you need, what might get in the way, and how you might go about giving yourself the best chance at self-care

### 3. Share

Help those around you to support you in following your Self-Care Action Plan

### 4. Review

Take time to think about what has worked for you recently, and what you could do to improve your self-care



## Self-care assessment

There are numerous self-care assessment tools available; one of which we are recommending as it's been well received by various people in lots of different GB sports, and it has a foundation in evidence-based research.

It covers the broad areas of: physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and professional self-care.

[Click this link to access this self-care assessment tool that was developed by Therapist Aid LLC.](#)

**Other assessment tools are available**, and you are encouraged to try alternatives to this one, especially if you find it doesn't work for you.

The important message is to **find some time to consider what helps you to maintain good health.**



## Self-care action plan

### What helps me to stay healthy?

Use your **reflections from your self-care assessment** to identify the activities / habits you need to stay mentally and physically healthy.

E.g. getting into bed by 10pm to ensure you get 8 h sleep every night.

### What I would like to improve to help me stay healthy?

List any areas that you would particularly **like to improve upon**, for example some new ideas from the self-care assessment.

E.g. prioritising some quality time with friends and family outside of sport.

### What things might get in the way of my self-care routines?

Think about the **specific situations that you are planning for** (daily life, a particularly challenging time coming up, etc), and consider what are the potential obstacles that might reduce your self-care effectiveness.

E.g. combined training and academic requirements meaning lots of late nights and not enough sleep!

### What can I put in place to avoid them getting in the way?

Considering what obstacles might come up, think about **how you could plan to lessen these risks** and therefore still look after your mental and physical health.

E.g. plan exam revision early to avoid a last-minute cram, and speak to your coach to balance training around key academic pinch-points.

# Self-care action plan: ideas

We all have a responsibility to ourselves to find out what helps us to maintain positive mental health, and there are some practical self-care actions that we can all try, for instance:

*[There are more details within each of the above areas at this link \(all of which has been adapted from the Mind.co.uk website\).](#)*

Make some lifestyle changes



Practise being straightforward and assertive



Use relaxation techniques



Develop other interests and hobbies



"Give back" to a community



Make time for your friends



Find balance in your life

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Look after your physical health



Get enough good quality sleep



Be physically active



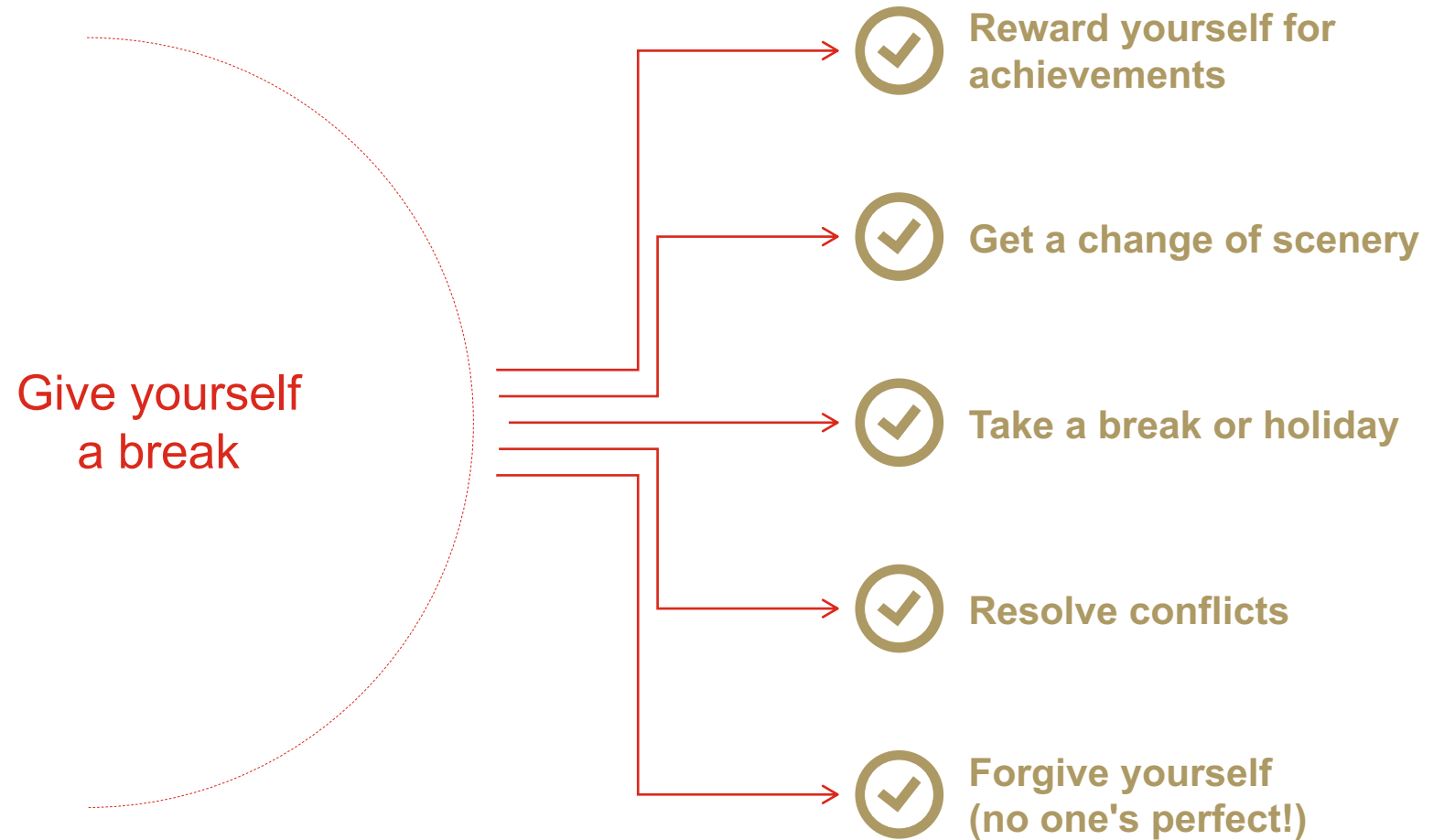
Eat healthily and stay hydrated



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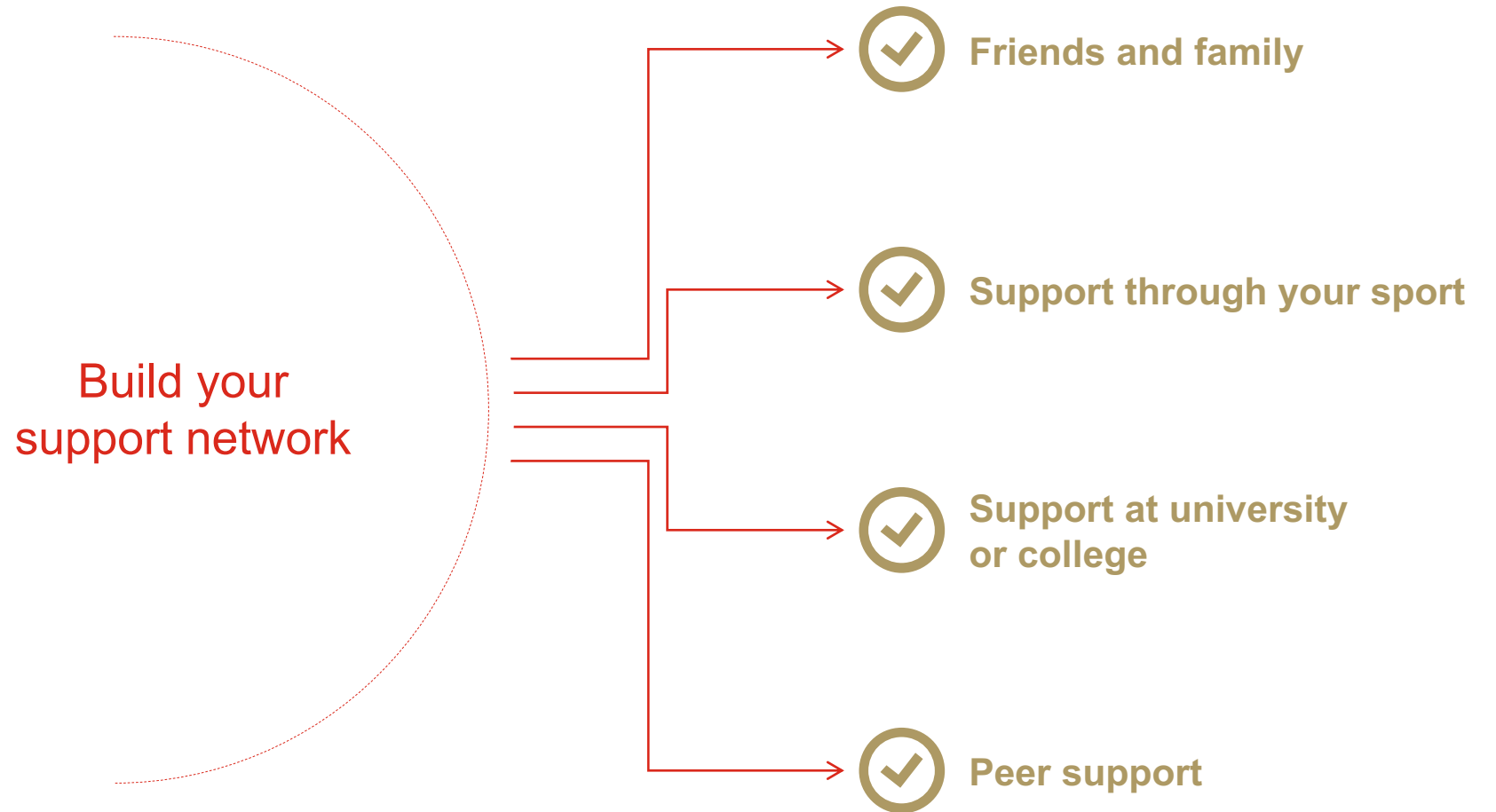
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## Sharing your self-care plan

Help those around you to support you in following your Self-Care Action Plan by sharing it with people who you are close to (e.g. family, friends, team mates, coach).



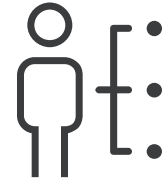
Who can support you?



Who would notice a change in your mental health?



Who gives you energy?



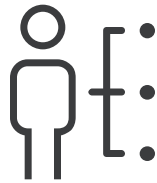
How would you like to be supported?



Who would notice if you were neglecting your self-care?



When would this person be most helpful?



Who is mentioned in your self-care plan?

## Reviewing your self-care plan

Take time to **think about what has worked for you recently**, and what you could do to improve your self-care.

When have you looked after your mental health most effectively, and **what did you do?**

When has your mental health suffered, what are the things that caused it, and **what could you do differently next time you're in a similar situation?**

At this stage it can be useful to **revisit the self-care assessment.**



## FURTHER READING

See the “maintaining perspective and balance” section of our [RECOVERY STRATEGIES](#) resource for some useful suggestions to help maintain positive mental health.

All the related video links here:

1) Stress bucket

<https://vimeo.com/user16923063/review/367231255/cc7becec0e>

2) Hygiene <https://vimeo.com/user16923063/review/367767528/5b49b6f57e>

3) Self-care <https://vimeo.com/user16923063/review/367251922/dd58116f2b>

[MIND Tips for Improving Your Mental Health in Everyday Living](#)

The charity MIND provides lots of expert advice on mental health, and this wide-ranging bank of tips for everyday living offer lots of useful ideas for all of us to consider, regardless of our current state of mental health.

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