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Lifestyle Psychiatry

From Evidence to Everyday Practice

Kavita Kothari, MD, FAPA

Vice-Chair, Department of Psychiatry, Atrium Health Cabarrus AKA Advocate health — Concord, NC

Diplomate, American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology; Lifestyle Medicine

DISCLOSURES

I have no relevant financial relationships to disclose.

All recommendations reflect published evidence and professional guidelines.

THE CLINICAL CASE

Meet Sarah, 38F

“I can't remember the last time I felt rested or hopeful.”

HISTORY

MDD × 8 years, partial response to duloxetine + SGA augmentation. Two prior failed SSRI trials. Past psychotherapy was not helpful. Persistent depressive symptoms.

LIFESTYLE PROFILE

Severe sleep-onset insomnia, ≈25-lb weight gain, low physical activity, chronic stress, limited social connection.

> Beyond augmenting or switching medication — what else can we offer Sarah?

WHY NOW

The Psychiatric-Metabolic Gap

10-25

years of reduced life expectancy in serious mental illness

≈30%

of patients with MDD are non-responsive to medication alone

2-3×

higher cardiometabolic disease prevalence in SMI

APA 2025 Annual Meeting theme: “Lifestyle for Positive Mental and Physical Health”

The field is moving. The evidence is here. The question is whether we integrate it into our practice.

DEFINING THE FIELD

The Practice Gap

WHAT WE KNOW

Evidence for lifestyle interventions across psychiatric disorders is now substantial — systematic reviews, RCTs, and professional guidelines all converge.

WHAT WE DO

Lifestyle is rarely assessed or documented systematically in routine follow-up visits. The evidence-to-practice gap remains wide.

> Lifestyle psychiatry bridges this gap — it is a formulation habit, not a new specialty.

DEFINING THE FIELD

What It Is vs. What It Is Not

LIFESTYLE PSYCHIATRY IS

Evidence-based behavioral intervention targeting brain function, expanding conventional treatment

Adjunctive to pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, and other conventional treatment

Neurobiologically grounded (BDNF, HPA axis, gut-brain axis)

Prescriptive and measurable, like any other intervention

IT IS NOT

“Wellness” advice or vague self-care

A replacement for medication or conventional psychiatric treatment

Optional - it addresses the leading cause of death in our patients

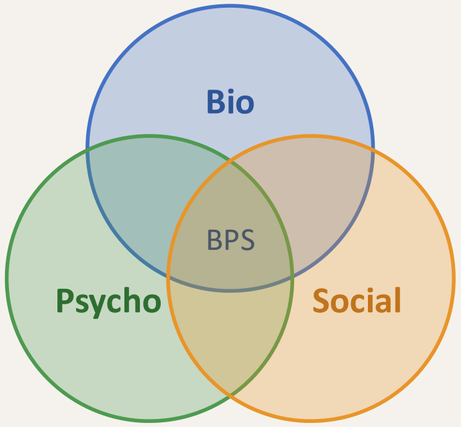
Integrative or functional medicine

Lifestyle + medication + psychotherapy = comprehensive psychiatric care

THE FRAMEWORK

The Biopsychosocial-Lifestyle (BPS-L) Model

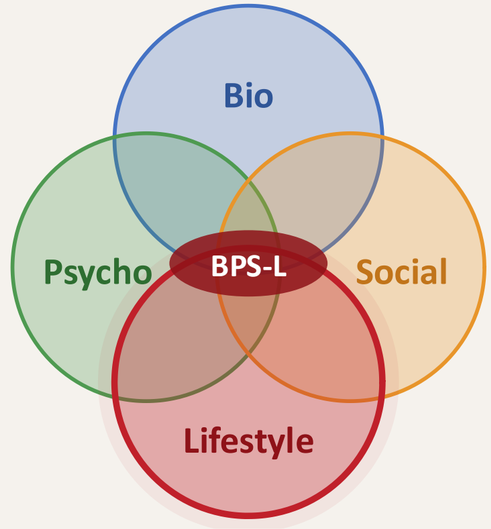
Traditional Model



Something is missing…

+ Lifestyle

BPS-L Model



Biological	Psychological	Social	Lifestyle
Antidepressants, antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, ECT, TMS	CBT, interpersonal therapy, ACT, DBT	Family psychoeducation, support groups, employment, community programs	Exercise Rx, dietary intervention, sleep hygiene, smoking/alcohol cessation, substance use management

Adapted from Malhi et al., 2020

ADJUNCT, NOT SUBSTITUTE

Not Generic Wellness

AVOID

“Eat better, exercise more, think positive.”

INSTEAD

Evidence-graded, individualized, disorder-specific intervention that never replaces indicated treatment.

THE WORKING TEST

Does this change what I do at the next visit?

CLINICAL INTEGRATION

What Belongs in the Psychiatrist's Role

01
Screen

02
Identify

03
Prioritize

04
Intervene briefly

05
Refer / collaborate

06
Follow up

Most of these steps take under two minutes.

THE FRAMEWORK

The Six Pillars

Each pillar targets shared neurobiological pathways: inflammation, neuroplasticity, HPA axis, and the gut-brain axis.

- Nutrition
- Physical Activity
- Sleep
- Stress Management
- Social Connection
- Substance Avoidance

PILLAR 01 — NUTRITION

Landmark Trials in Dietary Intervention

SMILES Trial

Jacka et al., 2017

12-week single-blind RCT (n=67), adults with MDD: Mediterranean-style diet + nutritional counseling vs. social-support control.

Results — MADRS fell ~11 points vs. ~4; between-group difference 7.1 (95% CI 2.3–11.9; p=0.006).

Significance — 32.3% remission vs. 8.0% (NNT ≈ 4).

HELFIMED Trial

Parletta et al., 2019

RCT of 152 adults with depression: Mediterranean diet plus fish oil, food hampers, and cooking workshops vs. social-support control over 3 months.

Results — symptoms improved 45% vs. 26.8% at 3 months (p=0.03).

Take-home — gains held at 6 months; greater adherence, greater symptom reduction.

PILLAR 01 — NUTRITION

Neurobiological Effects of Dietary Patterns

Dietary quality shapes the gut microbiome, altering production of short-chain fatty acids and other metabolites in gut-brain signaling.

These metabolites influence immune, neuroendocrine, and neural pathways, with potential effects on neurotransmission and mood regulation.

Anti-inflammatory patterns may lower systemic inflammation (↓ IL-6, ↓ TNF-α) and support BDNF and neuroplasticity.

CLINICAL ACTION

Ask: “What does a typical day of eating look like?” — then suggest one concrete substitution.

PILLAR 02 — PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Exercise Evidence and Its Limits

Network Meta-Analysis

Noetel et al., 2024

218 RCTs, 14,170 participants with major depression; exercise modalities compared with active controls, psychotherapy, and antidepressants.

Results — walking/jogging (g −0.62), yoga (−0.55), strength training (−0.49) showed the strongest effects; benefit rose with intensity.

Takeaway - exercise belongs alongside psychotherapy and antidepressants as a core option.

Cochrane Review

Cooney et al., 2013

39 trials (n=2,326) of exercise vs. no treatment, psychological therapy, and antidepressants in adults with depression.

Results — moderate effect vs. control (SMD −0.62), falling to −0.18 and non-significant in higher-quality trials only.

Takeaway — blinding is hard; direct comparisons with medication and therapy remain few.

PILLAR 02 — PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Neurobiological Effects of Exercise

Aerobic exercise increases BDNF and supports hippocampal neuroplasticity, including neurogenesis and cognitive function.

Exercise may reduce neuroinflammatory signaling and improve HPA-axis regulation, enhancing stress resilience.

Position it as an evidence-based adjunct to standard treatment, not a replacement for indicated pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy.

CLINICAL ACTION

Prescribe: “Walk 15 minutes after dinner, 4 days a week” — a prescription, not advice.

PILLAR 03 — SLEEP

Circadian Regulation & Prefrontal Function

MECHANISM

Sleep disruption impairs prefrontal-amygdala connectivity and emotional regulation. Sleep regularity stabilizes mood independent of total duration.

LANDMARK STUDY — *HERTENSTEIN ET AL., 2022*

CBT-I shows moderate-to-large effects on comorbid depressive symptoms in patients with insomnia and a mental health disorder — improvement extends beyond the sleep domain.

CLINICAL ACTION

Screen: “Do you feel rested on waking?” — target a fixed wake time before adding medication.

PILLAR 04 — STRESS MANAGEMENT

HPA Axis & Cortisol Regulation

MECHANISM

Chronic stress → HPA-axis dysregulation → sustained cortisol exposure → impaired hippocampal function and reduced neuroplasticity.

Mindfulness-based practices may enhance prefrontal regulatory control, improving modulation of stress responses.

LANDMARK STUDY — *GOYAL ET AL., 2014*

47 trials (n=3,515): mindfulness showed moderate evidence for anxiety (SMD 0.38) and depression (SMD 0.30) — not superior to other active treatments.

CLINICAL ACTION

Teach a 4–6 breath/min technique, or recommend an app such as Calm, Headspace, or Insight Timer.

PILLAR 05 — SOCIAL CONNECTION

Inflammatory Pathways & Oxytocin

MECHANISM

Loneliness → ↑ CRH/HPA activation → ↑ inflammatory signaling (IL-6, CRP). Social engagement stimulates oxytocin and dampens inflammatory tone.

LANDMARK EVIDENCE

Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010 — 148 studies (N=308,849): stronger social relationships associated with a 50% increased likelihood of survival, comparable to smoking cessation.

U.S. Surgeon General Advisory, 2023 — isolation raises risk of depression, anxiety, and premature mortality.

CLINICAL ACTION

Prescribe: “One intentional act of connection per week” — a call, a meal, a walk.

PILLAR 06 — SUBSTANCE AVOIDANCE

Neurochemical Disruption & Inflammation

MECHANISM

Alcohol disrupts GABA-glutamate signaling; nicotine dysregulates dopaminergic reward pathways, influencing mood, stress, and reinforcement. Cessation reduces inflammatory and metabolic risk.

LANDMARK STUDY — *FIRTH ET AL., 2020*

Smoking cessation is associated with reduced depression, anxiety, and stress — not worsened symptoms, as clinicians often assume.

CLINICAL ACTION

Open dialogue: “How has your relationship with alcohol or nicotine been lately?”

CONVERGENT PATHWAYS

Why All Six Pillars Work Through Shared Biology

Inflammation

IL-6, TNF-α, CRP — all six pillars reduce neuroinflammation

Neuroplasticity

BDNF and hippocampal neurogenesis enhanced by exercise, sleep, diet

HPA Axis

Cortisol regulation via stress management, sleep, exercise, connection

Gut-Brain Axis

Microbiome-mediated serotonin synthesis and vagal signaling

Not six separate interventions — six access points to the same neurobiological recovery cascade.

COMMON OBJECTIONS

Myth vs. Fact

× “This is just telling patients to eat better and exercise.”	A prescriptive, dose-dependent, neurobiologically targeted intervention with RCT evidence (NNT ≈ 4 for dietary intervention in MDD).
× “Patients with SMI can't make lifestyle changes.”	Studies show patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder achieve significant improvement with structured lifestyle programs.
× “There isn't enough time in a 20-minute visit.”	Brief counseling under two minutes significantly increases motivation and adherence. One question per visit is sufficient.
× “The evidence isn't strong enough to change practice.”	Effect sizes for exercise in depression exceed most individual antidepressant trials, and the APA has named lifestyle a priority.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

“I Only Have 15–20 Minutes”

You do not assess all six pillars at every visit.

Two minutes buys you the one modifiable target that matters most.

The skill is prioritization, not comprehensiveness.

COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

The 2-Minute Lifestyle Assessment

- “What does a typical day of eating look like?”
- “How many days a week are you physically active?”
- “How many hours, and do you feel rested?”
- “What's your main stressor, and how are you coping?”
- “Who do you talk to regularly?”
- “Alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, caffeine — any changes?”

Goal: identify the one or two highest-yield modifiable targets — not a comprehensive history.

CLINICAL INTEGRATION

Sarah's Highest-Yield Target

BIOLOGICAL

SGA-associated weight gain

Severe sleep-onset insomnia

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Low motivation, fatigue

Ambivalence about change

SOCIAL

Limited support

No reliable person to call

TARGET SELECTED

Sleep-onset insomnia — it plausibly drives fatigue, mood, and appetite

Raise your hand — then let's discuss why this target deserves priority.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Readiness-Matched Intervention

Sarah says: “On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm maybe a 4 on working on my sleep this week.”

A

Explore ambivalence

No prescription yet — ask what's getting in the way.

B

Small experiment

“Fixed wake time this week, and we'll see what happens.”

C

Full prescription

Behavioral Rx plus CBT-I referral and structured follow-up.

Raise your hand — then let's discuss why option B meets Sarah where she is.

MAKE IT REAL

Document and Follow Up

Concise, structured documentation — not a burden.

LIFESTYLE PSYCHIATRY NOTE

Lifestyle: 2-minute screen completed. Target = sleep-onset insomnia.

Plan: Fixed wake time × 2 weeks; patient to track.

Readiness: 4/10.

Follow-up: 4 weeks; refer CBT-I if no improvement.

MAKE IT REAL

Sarah's Lifestyle Prescription

PATIENT: SARAH, 38F — TARGET: SLEEP-ONSET INSOMNIA

Intervention — fixed wake time with a wind-down routine

Dose — out of bed at 6:30 a.m.; screens off 45 minutes before bed

Frequency — 7 days a week, including weekends

Duration — 2-week trial, then extend if tolerated

Monitoring — sleep diary; PHQ-9 at follow-up

Escalation — CBT-I referral if no change at 4 weeks

Readiness 4/10 → start with the smallest change she can actually keep.

SAME RIGOR AS A MED ORDER

Drug name → intervention type

Dosage → dose (time / intensity)

Route → context (bedtime routine)

Frequency → days per week

Duration → titration plan

Labs → monitoring metric

Follow-up → accountability visit

If you wouldn't say “take some sertraline when you feel like it,” don't say “try to sleep better.”

YOUR PROFESSIONAL PATH

Team-Based Care & Referral

Own

Screening and prioritizing

Brief behavioral intervention

Metabolic risk monitoring

Refer

Detailed nutrition counseling

Individualized exercise prescription

CBT-I and sleep-medicine workup

Collaborate

Primary care, nutrition, physical therapy

Case manager and care coordination

Community and peer programs

BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Why Patients Don't Change

“I don't have the energy.”

“I've tried this before.”

“I just want my medication adjusted.”

REFRAME

These are data about barriers and ambivalence — not resistance to be overcome.

COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

Motivational Interviewing & Readiness

PATIENT SAYS	CLINICIAN MIGHT SAY
“I don't have time to cook.”	“What's one meal this week where five extra minutes is realistic?”
“I'm too depressed to change anything.”	“That makes sense. What feels possible, not ideal?”
“I've tried this before.”	“What got in the way last time?”
“I'm not interested.”	“Is there anything else on your mind about your day-to-day?”

MAKE IT REAL

SMART Goals & Implementation Intentions

S

SPECIFIC

Walk after dinner

M

MEASURABLE

15 minutes

A

ACHIEVABLE

3× per week to start

R

RELEVANT

Targets fatigue and mood

T

TIME-BOUND

Reassess in 4 weeks

“If it's after dinner, then I'll put on my shoes and walk to the mailbox and back.”

HEALTH EQUITY

Implementing Lifestyle Psychiatry in Resource-Limited Settings

Nutrition

Mediterranean-style eating on a budget: canned and frozen vegetables, dried legumes, whole grains.

Bulk staples instead of specialty foods and supplements.

Physical Activity

No-cost options: bodyweight exercise, neighborhood walking, stair climbing.

Free digital workout platforms; no gym membership required.

Sleep, Stress & Connection

Low-cost sleep hygiene; free community mindfulness apps.

Public parks and nature exposure; local community and faith groups for social connection.

Lifestyle psychiatry must be accessible at every socioeconomic level, not only to affluent patients.

CASE RESOLUTION

Back to Sarah — 12 Weeks Later

BASELINE

PHQ-9: 16 (moderate-severe)

Sleep: severe onset insomnia

Weight: +25 lb since SGA start

Activity: sedentary

Social: isolated, limited support

12 WEEKS

PHQ-9: 10 (mild-moderate)

Sleep: CBT-I referral completed, some improvement

Weight: stable, not decreased

Activity: walking most days

Social: second target now identified

Same medications. The variable was lifestyle intervention — progress, not perfection.

THE FUTURE IN PRACTICE

AI & Wearables in Lifestyle Psychiatry

WEARABLES — WHAT THEY MEASURE

Continuous sleep architecture: onset latency, duration, fragmentation

Heart rate variability as a marker of autonomic and stress tone

Circadian alignment across the week, including weekend drift

Actigraphy-based physical activity and sedentary time

AI — WHAT IT ADDS

Personalized behavioral nudges timed to the patient's own patterns

Automated SMART goal tracking between visits

Generative psychoeducation at the patient's reading level and language

Early detection of depressive or manic relapse via behavioral digital biomarkers

Privacy, algorithmic bias, and unequal access remain real. AI should augment — not replace — the therapeutic relationship and clinical judgment.

CALL TO ACTION

Your Challenge This Month

1

Ask one lifestyle question in your next three patient visits

2

Write one lifestyle prescription this week — dose, frequency, follow-up

3

Refer when the patient's needs exceed your scope

Small steps — one patient, one visit — can transform outcomes and reinvigorate clinical practice.

APPENDIX

References & Further Reading

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Case material is illustrative and does not represent an identifiable patient.

Thank You

Questions & Discussion

Contact information: *Kavita.kothari@advocatehealth.org*