

The Wellbeing Conversation

With Dylan Alcott, Brad McEwan and special guests

Physical health and movement with Mark Whelan and Meg Downie

Brad McEwan: Welcome. It's great to have you here, Dylan. Great to see you again, Brad.

Dylan Alcott: Good to be here, brother. Ready to get physical, baby. I'm excited. So very much looking forward to today's episode.

Brad McEwan: Yeah, it's going to be a lot of fun. And we've got a lot to talk about as we talk about the importance of getting physical. So joining us today, we have Mark Whelan, ANZ Group Executive Institutional. Mark, great to have you here. Thank you very much.

Mark Whelan: Thank you, Brad. Lovely to be here. And also joining us, we have Meg Downie, Melbourne Demons, AFLW player and ANZ team member. Meg, thank you for joining us.

Meg Downie: Thanks for having me, Brad. Also good to be here.

Brad McEwan: As Dylan touched on, we're about to get physical.

Mark, I think the importance of physical activity has been highlighted in those areas that have been in lockdown for the four reasons that you can leave your home, one of them is to exercise. That really highlights, doesn't it, that we need to look after ourselves physically and by extension mentally?

Mark Whelan: Yeah, absolutely and I mean, I think that what we've found, what I've found personally, what I've found with a lot of my staff that I talk to Brad that, you know, that exercise is just so important to ensuring that you keep your balance in what you're doing in your lifestyle, whether it's with work or whether it's just with your personal life. But it just keeps you some mentally centred. And so I'm trying to keep my routine up on that. But it's just so important.

Brad McEwan: Meg, how have you been being in lockdown and someone who is very physically active?

Meg Downie: I think it's been a bit of a rollercoaster, I think similar to sort of what a lot of people are experiencing right now. But I've sort of just had to roll with the punches and really find some new routines in this new environment. So, yeah, so it's been an adjustment, but I think I've managed to interweave physical exercise and find a good balance between work and football. It has taken a little bit of an adjustment to make that happen.

Brad McEwan: Dylan in one of our previous chapters, you only had a small window where you were able to go out and get on the tennis court and have a hit, which highlights to me that you might not have much time, but it's about prioritising and you need to make the most of that and be physically active.

Dylan Alcott: Yeah, exactly right Brad and you might think because Meg and I are professional athletes right, getting out of bed and going to exercise, is easy at the moment through a pandemic. I can tell you bloody hard for us as well. It's very easy sitting on the couch and, you know, you fall into the trap whereby once your routine is broken, you start sometimes bad habits and things like that. And I you know, I probably sat on the couch more than I ever have because I've been forced to. And the one thing I learn is when I'm not physically active, jeez, it affects my mental wellbeing as well. There is such a correlation between getting out and about and then feeling not only feeling physically healthy, but, you know, feeling mentally centred as Mark said. It's tough. It's tough when you can't get out and doing it. And as you said this, it shows how much we have to prioritise being physically active because of how much it benefits you holistically. And, you know, I've been very lucky that throughout the lockout, in certain areas, I've been able to play tennis. But when I had a six week break where I couldn't have a hit, I missed it so much. Like it made me realise how important it is to me, how important it is to get out and be active, you know, to be fit, to be healthy and get out and do some exercise. And I never really thought about it as much. I just did it because it was a part of my life. But now I realise how much it helps me become the best version of me that I can become.

Brad McEwan: So have we all had to be a little bit creative, especially during lockdown? Mark, we'll start with you if you can't go to the gym. What do you do instead?

Mark Whelan: Yeah, absolutely, Brad. I mean, I'm an early starter normally, and so I get into the office around 6:00 a.m. and I do that because there is gym actually underneath the office. And so I'm able to work out for an hour, then be operational at work by seven o'clock. But obviously, with gyms shut during this, COVID situation, I've had to change that up because what I found was I was still going in at the same time. My body clock is waking up and I'd go into the office, but I wouldn't exercise I'd just start work. And so I found I was getting really pretty flat over that. So what I've done now is I'm exercising at home doing something a bit shorter, not as much and running now and then I head back into the office, so it just works better for me now.

Brad McEwan: Meg and Dyl, we'll start with you, Meg. What have you been doing to be creative? Because, yes, you can't do some things, but you can do other things?

Meg Downie: Yeah, I think so. I guess there's the training element of my I guess my football career that I've had to adjust and make sure I'm fitting in time for that. And I've made a couple of adjustments around my working schedule and ANZ offers me some really great flexibility. So I make the most of that. And I split my Tuesdays and Thursdays in half. So I do half days on those days and get my training in on those days. But yeah, my I mean I'm used to having access to a really sort of well-equipped gym and really sort of great facilities for running and I'm white so all that sort of thing. So I've had to be very creative in terms of how I've used some different pieces of equipment to do my weights. At the moment, I'm actually using we've got a wood fire here so I'm actually using a piece of a piece of wood, to do some squats and some lunges with so yeah, it must look pretty silly, but it does it does the job. But yeah, there's been other things where I've had to sort of make adjustments.

Meg Downie: And, you know, it's not just about my training, as I mentioned, you know, getting into the gardening a little bit more outside and, you know, just to sort of get a little bit more movement in my life now that, you know, everything's sort of contained within the four walls of my house.

Brad McEwan: Yeah. And what about you Dylan?

Dylan Alcott: It's been tough. What I've been missing, apart from having gyms, is not having access to someone help me. It's really hard, obviously, being in a wheelchair, setting up gym equipment and doing all kinds of things. So having a trainer is really important. So eliminating that out of my life has been pretty tough. I've got some dumbbells that I reckon are from the 1970s, so I'm feeling super Arnold Schwarzenegger in his pump days, you know, probably not as big. And I mean, obviously, not having the tennis courts has been really, really tough. So I had to try and find other ways to do conditioning. I tell you what I have been doing, I've been doing track work, so at a running track. Whoever chose to do athletics as a sport, they must have a screw loose. It is so painful. Oh, I'll take the strawberries and cream at Wimbledon any day over doing the athletics stuff. I'm telling you.

But I've actually kind of enjoyed also trying to find other ways to train and so finding ways to adjust and work at home have been so important to me because I did go through a patch where I was probably a bit too lazy and I felt the effects not only physically and mentally as well.

Brad McEwan: So on that new question for all of you, Mark, I'll start with you. Can you describe your behaviour and mindset when you don't get to do physical exercise?

Mark Whelan: Yeah, I mean, there's probably two things that would jump to mind on that for me. One, significantly more or less productive in that, you know, I my mind wanders and I find that tasks that would normally take me a shorter amount of time, I'm sort of going back over a lot. And it makes for a really long day. I just find it just disrupts the whole day. And I exercise mornings. So it's really important to me that I get that done because I do find that I'm significantly more effective. Things get done quickly.

Mark Whelan: Second thing is I just sleep better. The other issue that we're finding a lot of people is this anxiety that's around with this COVID-19 thing means that a lot of people's sleep patterns are already under stress because of anxiety. I find that if I don't exercise then, my sleep patterns completely change and I'm awake early so they're the two things that would jump out at me Brad.

Brad McEwan: Meg, being honest, sharing a little bit of yourself. How are you if you're not doing any physical activity?

Meg Downie: I find that my mind's not as clear so you know when I'm trying to work as in ANZ work. I'm just not quite good at problem solving if I haven't sort of had some time to exercise and clear my mind. I think, yeah, it sort of stops my ability to be as present as well. I find exercise is really it's something that really sort of brings you into the moment. And yeah, just like I said, sort of allows your mind to be cleared. So without that yeah I don't think I'm quite as efficient or able to problem solve quite as well. And it also just lifts my mood generally exercising in the morning is just one of the best ways to start the day.

Brad McEwan: What about Dylan, if the outlet for so many people now is physical activity, but if you're doing it so often because you need that outlet a lot, have you had an experience where you just overdoing it and you causing yourself more harm because you need to pullback?

Dylan Alcott: Yeah, I think I look at my beautiful dog Sauce, I think he looks at me and says, Dad, please don't take me for another walk. Like, I think we're just using it as an outlet to get out and about. I will say Mark and Meg you guys you got said a lot better than I am when I haven't exercised. I'm grumpy, I'm a grumpy dude if I don't get out and about and get some fresh air I've realised. But there is a there is a point, you're right Brad about overdoing it. You've got to look after your body, especially at the moment. I know this happened to my brother. People are running more than they ever have. And I know I'm no expert in running. So I'm not giving running advice because my writing skills aren't great. But they're actually starting a lot of soft tissue injuries because people have gone from nothing to running 10K. There's an incredible app called Strava, which is like Instagram for runners and everyone's on there and they're trying to outdo each other and they're probably doing it a little bit too much.

You've got to get a balance. But there is just something so beautiful and refreshing about getting fresh air, isn't there? I could just immediately makes you feel like a better person.

Brad McEwan: And Mark, you're a very outdoorsy person. You like getting out there amongst nature. And no doubt that's passed on through your family. I mean, it's hard to describe how good it is to get out there getting the sun walk through the trees.

Mark Whelan: Yeah, absolutely. And I would add to what Dylan said, definitely grumpy if there's no doubt if you don't exercise I am very much in that camp Dyl. So very good point. Look, I've always liked outdoor exercise, and I'm only doing more of the gym these days simply because it's more efficient. But ultimately, for me, if you can get out and just, you know, go for long walks, what I've done a number of the Oxfam walks in and, you know, there are 100kms. And the amount of training you need to do to be able to do that is enormous for me. Being out, getting out with other people, if you can, and you're allowed to these days and then, you know, you're not only getting closer to nature, the fresh air is fantastic. You do get invigorated.

Brad McEwan: Meg you had a great start in life in regards to being amongst nature, I think you lived in one of the most serene sounding towns or districts in Australia. Tell everyone where you grew up and what a lovely place that was. And I believe you used to get to school a very interesting way.

Meg Downie: Yes. Yeah. This is a story I do like telling people but no I grew up in a little country town in West Gippsland, called Shady Creek, my farm that I grew up on was a dairy farm and it actually was on the Shady Creek as well. So it's a very small little area. And I went to primary school, there' was about 30 kids in my primary school. About 10 per cent of that population was made up by myself and my three brothers. So very little school. But yeah, we used to my brothers and I, we used to ride our horses to school in the morning. So, yeah, it was a really, I guess, different experience. But yeah, it's something that I do like telling people because it's obviously quite unique.

Farm life for me growing up on a dairy farm was just an awesome experience. And I think it really taught me as a kid how to use the environment as a bit of an adventure and to come up with a different set of creative ways to get it to spend my time, whether that was helping Dad milk the cows or being a kid, you know, building cubby houses or, you know, there was just so many ways in which I entertained myself with my brothers out on the farm. And I think it's I feel I sort of draw on those experiences now during COVID in particular, because you've got to have a degree of creativity with your time and find creative ways to get outside and get fresh air in your lungs and get movement and activity

in your life. So, yes, it was it was a great, I guess, foundation and for my life and something that I you know, I still sort of draw on the skills that I learnt on that farm.

Brad McEwan: Can I just ask we've spoken a lot about physical activity, but the theme here is movement as well. So to all of you, Mark, we'll start with you. What are other ways of moving and exercising that we can engaging, whether it's in the garden or it's doing things around the house where we are being active, but without thinking about it so much?

Mark Whelan: Yeah. That's interesting because I was talking to a customer yesterday and he's a pretty senior guy, the CEO of a company and we were talking about these issues and he said he misses even one little thing, like, you know, between meetings, he runs to meetings in the office all the time. But he's going to, he gets up and is physically moving from going from one meeting to another. And then obviously a lunch break. You can get a coffee, you can have a chat with a colleague in the environment we're in at the moment, you don't have that. A lot of you know, you're basically stationary. Make said you might set your office up some way, say you away. So I've tried to just, you know, incorporate into my day. Now, I will get up and go outside, even if it's just to, you know, check the mail, I will go and walk the dog obviously very quickly. I will get some movement going because it's so easy just to sit and stay still. So I think you've got to just put it front of mind, you've got to be able to think, well, I I've been sitting here for two hours. I need to go do something else. And even if it's making a phone call to a colleague, you know, Dylan's mentioned it with friends and things, you have to do that. If you don't, then you've becoming really stagnant. And I noticed in myself, that's why I've started to try and put this really front of mind for me, little things.

Dylan Alcott: I think the one best bit of advice that I can give is everybody can do exercise or movement in their own way. So there is a stereotypical I'm in lock down. I'm seeing all these people running, I'm going to go for a run, whatever it is, and you've got to stay within your own capabilities or whatever you can do. And you're so, right, I might be gardening, I might be walking the dog and I'll be doing a marathon. It's all relevant to what you physically can do. And you know, somebody like me who has a disability. You know, I just try and figure out ways that I can do whatever I can do. And it's been hard at the moment, and I'll be honest about that. But there are so many different ways you can get out and about and do things. And it's so true. Like if you want to call your best mate rather than sit on the catch and call him, just walk around the block and call. And you might think that that's not actually doing anything. But in terms of your physical well-being, your organs, everything, your mental capacity, your mindfulness, everything will improve if you do that.

I've got to say, though, I have had a crack at gardening and I am crap. I will be sticking that one in the pockets and I'll be trying to get someone on air tasker next time because I'm going to have no garden left.

Brad McEwan: Meg you're lucky you live in an area very close to nature. How do you fill in your day when you have some time that isn't directly physical activity?

Meg Downie: I am really fortunate I'm out in Mt Evelyn at the moment. Which is a beautiful little sort of bushy area just outside of Melbourne, so at the moment my weekends are filled with lots of gardening, lots of digging holes and pulling out plants and pulling out weeds. And my housemate last weekend built a wood shed out the back. So that was a bit of fun, filling that up with firewood as well. We've got a little goat and a sheep out here, so they keep us busy feeding them and tending to them. So, yes, that's been a massive part

of, I guess, my time outside of work and football at the moment. But there's heaps of other little things that I've sort of brought into my life as well. And it's been a bit of a trial, and error sort of finding out what works for me and what I'm what I'm enjoying. And one little sort of hobby that I've picked up, which I think you might find interesting, is these woodcarving. So I bought a little wood carving set a couple months ago when COVID started. And. Yeah, and I just found it a really therapeutic exercise. I've carved one of my little friend's nephew's, a stingray. I've carved out a little a little leaf I've carved my mum a wooden spoon. So, yeah, it's been it's been quite fun. I can't say that I'm very good at it, but it's been enjoyable.

Brad McEwan: Meg you're playing a sport that we all love, but part of it is you suffer injuries. Tell us about the really serious concussion you had and the aftermath of that.

Meg Downie: Yeah, so the 2017 inaugural AFLW year, it was round two and there was obviously a lot of Build-Up to round one and even, you know, the whole competition starting like there was just so much energy and so much excitement. And, you know, we'd really pre-season, we'd really worked so hard as a group and Dylan and I know you'll know this the amount of energy and effort that goes into preparing your body for big competitions is huge. And so you feel like when you get to game day, you know, you feel like you've put a lot of work into it to get to that point. Anyway so it was round two of the very first year of AFLW and I was, we were playing against Collingwood and the environment was quite electric.

We were down and in the game and we sort of fought our way back in the third quarter. And I was on the field and the ball was sort of coming towards me and I jumped and tapped it toward my team-mate and I felt something in my hamstring at the time. And as I landed on my feet, I was struck in the face with an elbow from one of the opposition players. And in that moment, I had ruptured my hamstring and got knocked out, clean, knocked out. So it was a very unfortunate few seconds in my life. But it was also quite, quite a scary experience. And I got put it in a neck brace and stretchered off the ground. So, yes, the recovery process from that took it took a bit of time. And since then, I've been doing, I suffered, quite severe concussion from that incident and got sent off to hospital for testing and things like that. And it took me a couple months to sort of get my cognitive functioning back to where it was. So, yeah, from that experience, I've been since involved with the Queensland Brain Institute and doing a lot of promotional work around making sure players protect their heads properly in football and raising awareness around how to treat people with concussion because those sort of following hours and days post a concussion experience, it's really critical that people are treated in the right manner and that you're doing all the right things just to help your brain recover.

Brad McEwan: Well, we are pleased that you're going okay now, but it would have been definitely scary for sure. Let's share a little bit more of ourselves to all of us. And so people that are watching this feel a little bit normal. What have been our bad habits during COVID, Dylan?

Dylan Alcott: Uber eats! Ub-er eats! Uber eats! It's easy. No, I at the moment I'm doing a diet where I do intermittent fasting where I try and wait through a period of time. I don't eat for 18 hours of the day. And that's easy when you're busy but when you're not busy, jeez it's hard. And I think that goes for all of us. And also, when you're bored, or personally tell me you guys honest. When you're bored, you just it's just straight, isn't it? It's just so easy just to fall into that trap. So it's been you know, don't worry if you are an athlete or a non-athlete it's exactly the same for all of us, I think if you talk to any pro athlete all around the

world at the moment, that's been one of the problems, is definitely the one thing that I fall down on. And I'm getting back on the horse and being a lot fitter at the moment, which I'm happy about.

Brad McEwan: What about you, Mark? What would maybe members of your family say, yeah, well, maybe we need to work on this particular thing?

Mark Whelan: Yeah, I get that. I get lots of advice around this one Brad. Lots, there's no shortage of it. My wife is very good with the food and she's got me trying this thing that Dyl's tried with the, you know, don't not eat for 18 hours I struggle with that. You know, I suppose the problem is I have too many reds at night with too many too much sugar. So I usually have reds and chocolate and sitting still watching a lot of the footy because it's on every day at the moment. So I think they're the three bad things in my space so I'm trying to moderate each of those at the moment.

Brad McEwan: And Meg the fact that we're all talking about this Mark used the word there struggle. We all struggle don't we at times?

Meg Downie: Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, even if someone doesn't sort of show it in like we're all no one's immune to struggle in their life. And I think everyone's definitely felt that over the last couple of months. And one of the things that sort of helped me through that experience is really just opening up and talking to people about it. And it's varied in, I guess, like some of the things that I've done and who have opened up to, it's you know, my line manager at work, she's fantastic. And we'll just sort of talk about it when we catch up, how we're travelling and some of the things that we're doing to get a good routine and balance in our life. And some of the other things that I'm doing is writing in a journal. And that's sort of the way that I've found that I can sort of express myself and get things off my chest. So, yeah, no one's immune to struggle. And I think you know if they say that they haven't struggled at some stage over the last few months, that they'd be pulling your leg. So, yes, I think we can all sort of get a bit of comfort from that as well, knowing that even when you are going through a difficult time, there are other people out there that are feeling it as well. And yeah, it's just about making small little changes on a daily basis to turn that around.

Brad McEwan: And really important too isn't it Dyl to communicate this, to talk to your friends or family and colleagues and say, hey, look, I'm struggling to get motivated. I'm not being physically active like I need to be?

Dylan Alcott: Mate I got a sore neck from nodding then because I couldn't agree more so than what Meg's saying and also how powerful is hearing other people say that it's OK and Meg I'm sure other people that you work with see you and go Meg's so good at her work, she plays AFLW and you know, you even hearing you say that and I am open to say that I've been struggling at times as well, especially at the moment because of how hard this year has been you know, and that's OK. And I think there is so much power in, you know, only being vulnerable, but also talking about it. And it might be a small struggle from 'I'm eating too much chocolate' to a bigger struggle, to 'I'm really struggling through my mental health'. And as you said, from elite sportspeople all the way down to people that work within ANZ or whatever it is, we all go through the same things and it's completely ok to feel that.

Brad McEwan: So a final word then from all of you. And we'll start with Mark. What are some basic tips? Maybe someone is in a rut. They're not motivated. The alarm goes off in

the morning and they're turning it off. How do they turn that around? How do they set the goals that they can hopefully achieve?

Mark Whelan: I think it's the little things. I think you do have to have some degree of routine that within that routine, I think you've got to think about the little things that are really important to you as an individual. They'll be different for elite athletes, to you know, there'll be subtle differences to elite athletes to say business people. I found myself sitting in front of zoom and video meetings, you know, ten hours of a day these days. And so I'm trying to break that up a little bit. And I think people just need to remember what's important is their health as the primary issue and everything else should come after that. And so little things during the day to ensure that you're looking after yourself. Personally, I think is, whatever that might be.

Brad McEwan: What about you Meg?

Meg Downie: I think that's, if I could sort of impart any lessons. And what's helped me over the last few months, it's really being kind of myself that's helped a lot. I think particularly, you know, I hold myself at a very high standard when it comes to my training and things like that. And at times it's just been I've sort of just felt like, you know what, I just don't want to train today. I don't have the motivation for it. And sometimes I think it's okay to feel like that and to accept that, you know what? I'm just having a bad day and that's okay.

So I found yeah, being kind to myself is a massive one. But then also at the beginning of COVID, I sort of found that I was looking at this situation as if it was like a challenging situation to be in. And I felt like I was, you know, a little bit down on myself and I tried to flip my mindset and look at this period of time as more so rather than sort of like wallowing in sadness or anything like that, flipping my mindset and looking at this as a challenge, a challenge in my life. And when I sort of flipped that and started thinking about it in a way that it was a challenge, it made me think, well, how can I, you know, what's the opportunity for growth in this experience? And that sort of helped me think of it more like a competition, you know? And I guess that's how my brain works. But I want to look back on this period of time when it's over, because one day it will end and go. You know what? I was really proud of the way that I stood up and I did these things, I brought these tips or tools or tricks into my life in order to overcome that challenge. And this is how I've grown as an individual. So yes. So that's sort of, I guess, the mindset that I've really tried to switch to it. And, you know, look at it in that lens.

Brad McEwan: We finish with words of wisdom from Dylan.

Dylan Alcott: Oh, look, I couldn't say it any better than that. It's so important to give ourselves a break at the moment because we can get so caught up in all the pressure of what's going on. And Meg, you said it so beautifully. You know, you do have to be kind. And one other thing that I've realised is we are not all alone in this. We are all going through this together. And it's so important to share resources but also connect with each other, because sometimes it can feel at the moment like, oh, everything's getting cancelled in my life. I'm losing this. I've gone down to four days at work and it just it just gets bigger and bigger. You know, as a as a cloud of pressure. And we will get through it. We really will.

Brad McEwan: Well, thank you, everyone. Mark, isn't it wonderful to be able to share ideas?

Mark Whelan: Absolutely. It's the best thing we can do in this environment.

Brad McEwan: And Meg, it's just a reminder that we all have our battles. We have our struggles. But if we can get out and walk, garden, carve wood.

Meg Downie: Yeah, absolutely. I think now's the time to be creative and find ways to get ourselves through this. But it will end one day and. And yeah, I think I guess we will all be better for this experience. So it's going to stick together and get through it.

Brad McEwan: And Dyl, we are sticking together, which is just fabulous, isn't it.

Dylan Alcott: Yeah, you know, that's why I love being able to do these Wellbeing conversations. It not only helps me, I get such a benefit from hearing other people's stories and their little tips and tricks.

Brad McEwan: Thank you very much, Meg. Thank you, Mark. And thank you, Dylan. And thank you for joining us on the wellbeing conversation.

Dylan Alcott: *Hey everyone Dylan Alcott again, now we touched on a few topics around mental health throughout that chat, now if that brought up anything for you make sure you reach out to [BeyondBlue.org.au](https://www.beyondblue.org.au) or their phone number is 1300 22 46 36. You can also hit up Lifeline on 13 11 14 or reach out to the people within your ANZ teams and they'll be able to help.*

And here's a little taste of what's coming up in the next episode of the Wellbeing Conversation.