

ARTICLE

CREATE Grant Report: Promoting students' health through science communication, reflections from a multi-stakeholder health communication initiative

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Abstract

This project emerged from the EHPS CREATE Workshop 2023, which focused on communicating health psychology research to lay audiences. Motivated to make scientific evidence more accessible for university students, we developed a series of Instagram posts translating research into clear and engaging health tips. In collaboration with researchers from Maastricht University's Department of Health Promotion and a communication expert from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, we created seven posts published across multiple university communication channels. Reflections from both researchers and the communication expert highlighted the value of co-creation: while researchers ensured accuracy and evidence-based content, the communication expert optimized clarity, tone, and visual appeal. Challenges included simplifying complex findings without losing nuance and maintaining readability within strict word limits. The positive reception—high engagement, community interest, and requests for reuse—demonstrated the added value of credible, evidence-based health information on social media. This project taught us how science communication does not have to be complicated if you collaborate with the right people.

Key words: Science communication, Social media, Health promotion, Evidence-based tips

Description of the project

This project began at the EHPS CREATE Workshop 2023 “Communicating health psychology research to lay audiences”. We were driven by the idea to create Instagram posts aimed at university students to share health psychological research in an engaging and accessible way. In this paper we describe our lessons learned from the multi-stakeholder initiative that emerged.

Outcome

The project resulted in seven posts; one introductory post and six posts with evidence-based health tips. The communication expert from Maastricht University's Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) published these on the University's website, Instagram (um.fhml), LinkedIn (Maastricht University Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences), and the Maastricht University intranet (UMployee). The content of the posts was provided by researchers (PhD candidates to associate professors) from the Department of Health Promotion at Maastricht University. The communication expert designed a cover image for all posts (Figure 1). This image was followed by an image with three health tips and an image including a short description of the researcher providing the tips. The description accompanying the image started with a teaser, written by the communication specialist, and then included an explanation of the tips, provided by the researcher. The description also included a (link to) the references used for the tips. The posts were developed in accordance with the WCAG guidelines to ensure readability.

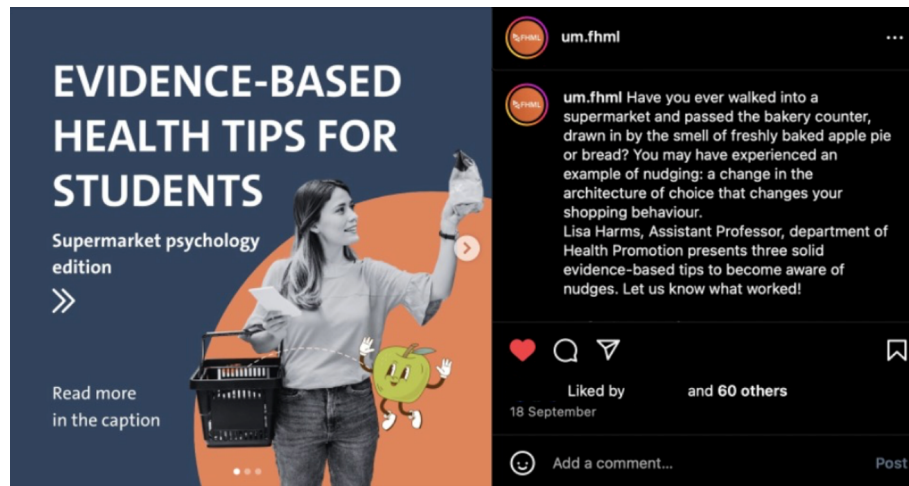


Fig. 1. Example Instagram post (first image and the first part of the description).

Visibility and Impact

The posts were received well, resulting in, for example, over 250 likes on Instagram. The team also received several emails expressing enthusiasm for the project as well as requests from people in other organizations to use the health-tips in their own organizations' communications. This highlighted the added value of the evidence-based health tips gathered through the project.

Researchers' experiences

The researchers who provided the content of the posts were among the most important collaborators to this project. Despite their long list of other tasks and responsibilities, none of them declined our invitation to participate. They indicated that science communication was important to them. The help of the communication expert was most appreciated because it forced them to write with the target audience in mind. For example, the communication expert set a strict word limit. However, this also made the writing process more difficult. Researchers indicated that it was a challenge to create tips that were evidence-based but not too general or boring, and to use appropriate terms and references while maintaining readability (Figure 2). Often the final post took some alterations by the researchers and the communication expert. Researchers tended to pay more attention to accuracy (e.g., maintaining the right order in the text) and possibly confusing details (e.g., an ice-cream cone did not fit with a post about healthy eating), while the communication expert ensured that the text appealed to the intended audience. The final post was always approved by all parties. The collaboration with the communication expert helped develop our and the researchers' science communication skills. Researchers indicated that the posts helped to increase their visibility, and that they could use them for other purposes (e.g., lectures). Although responses from other researchers were limited, they received many positive responses from friends and direct colleagues.

Communication expert experiences

The Marketing & Communications department of the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences focuses on three key areas, namely student recruitment, research communication and internal/external communication. This project has a rare advantage in combining these three domains and was therefore enthusiastically welcomed.

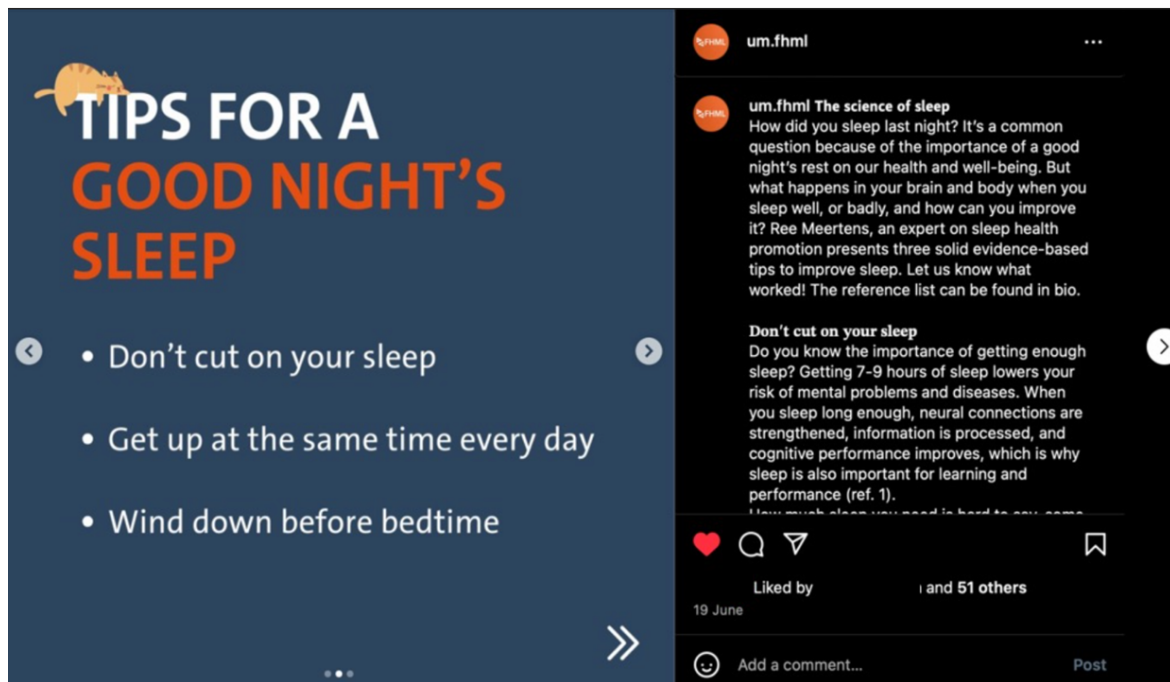


Fig. 2. Example Instagram post (second image and the first part of the description).

The posts positioned our faculty as a health institute that cares about the health of its students. The articles emphasized that there are plenty of health tips to be found online, but that a critical viewpoint is needed to separate the wheat from the chaff. This mindset was incorporated in the title “evidence-based health tips...”. The main point of the posts is that all tips are based on research projects by our academic staff, showcasing their work and the Department of Health Promotion among students, employees and the general audience.

To reach the student population and a broader audience, Instagram and LinkedIn were used as primary channels. The same campaign was used for both channels with an intent to quickly review the tips and navigate to the University’s website where each tip can be found in the format of a news article. Efforts will now be made to further distribute the tips by contacting Maastricht University’s central department of Marketing & Communications, providing them with a comprehensive set and narrative story of all articles to be published in the monthly (email) newsletter for all current students. Observant, the independent university newsmagazine wrote an item and made a podcast about the project.

Personal reflection

When we started this project, we had little experience with science communication. We were worried that no one would want to publish the posts, that the researchers would not be interested in participating, and that no one would be interested in reading the posts. Luckily, we soon found out that all our worries were out of place. Communication expert Ruben Beeckman was immediately interested in joining our project and saw an opportunity to revitalize the faculty’s online science communication practice. The Communications Department communicates research to a general audience, but in this department’s experience, researchers tend to be reluctant to approach them with requests to communicate their research activities and findings. The university, grant suppliers, and the research community in general stimulate science communication, yet they rarely offer you concrete opportunities to communicate about your research, let alone the appropriate assistance needed. The concrete offer from the project team to researchers to have their research highlighted in a post proved to be the motivation most researchers needed. Students and other followers of the FHML accounts were enthusiastic about the posts, seeing them as a rare translation of research evidence into reliable real-world advice, as evidenced by several messages received by the project team. This project took time and effort and does not yield a research grant, a high-impact publication or a permanent contract at the university. Further, breaking down research into three key points, phrased as simple and relatable advice while maintaining a focused and neutral tone, turned out to be more challenging and time-consuming than initially anticipated. However, the positive responses from the people involved made it very well worthwhile.

Recommendations and Outlook

- Collaborate with a communication expert: They know what the audience likes and can think outside of the box.
- Take your time: Simplifying complex research findings into clear and concise messages takes time and effort but is crucial for effective social media communication.

- Keep it simple: Based on König et al. (2025), we recommend keeping posts visually simple and focused, using a neutral tone and avoiding jargon. Keep it at three key messages.
- Draw on theories and frameworks for behavior change: Although our posts were evidence-informed, the development of future social media posts and campaigns could benefit from the use of models and approaches for behavior change (e.g., Intervention Mapping, Bartholomew Eldredge et al., 2016).
- Outlook: We aim to expand the impact of this initiative by translating our science communication posts into German and prospectively other languages. This translation effort will ensure that our valuable health behavior tips are accessible to a broader audience, particularly at the participating institutions (Freie Universität Berlin, University of Wuppertal and University of Lucerne).

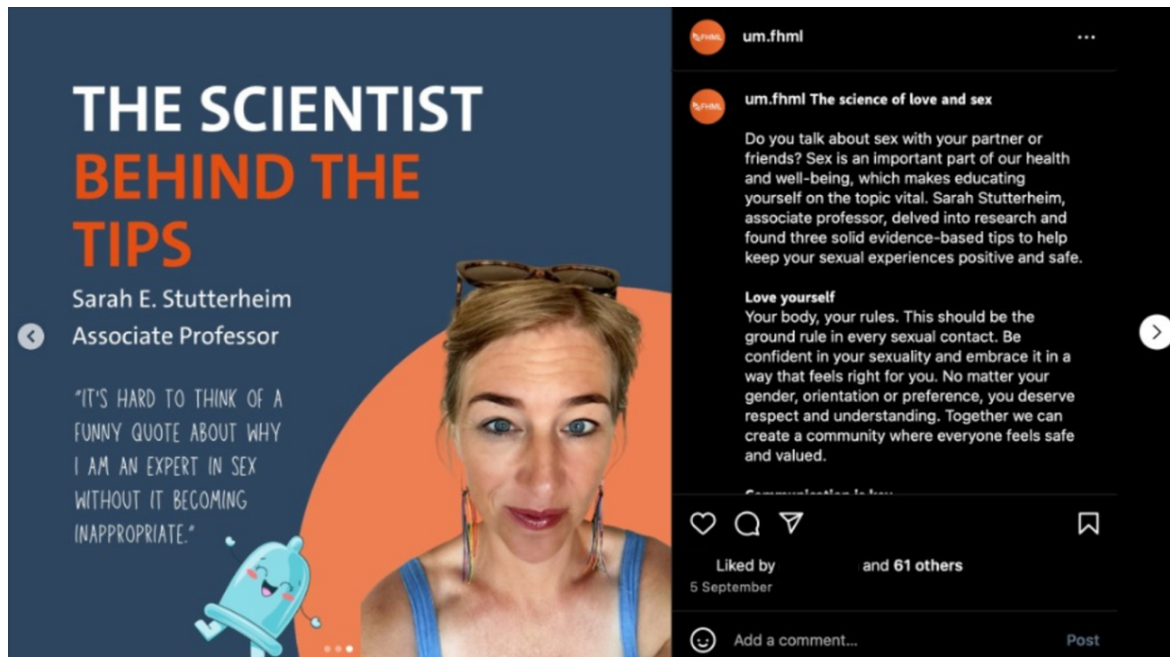


Fig. 3. Example of an Instagram post (last image and the first part of the description).

Acknowledgements

Thank you, EHPS CREATE committee for organizing an inspiring science communication workshop ahead of EHPS 2023 in Bremen. Thank you, prof. dr. Laura König and dr. Heide Busse, for your insightful workshop sessions on science communication and for your advice on this project. Thank you, dr. Ree Meertens, dr. Daniëlle Zijlstra, Christian Preissner, MSc, dr. Sarah Stutterheim, dr. Lisa Harms, and dr. Kathelijne Bessems for contributing to the posts with your evidence-based tips.

Supplementary files

Posts and captions

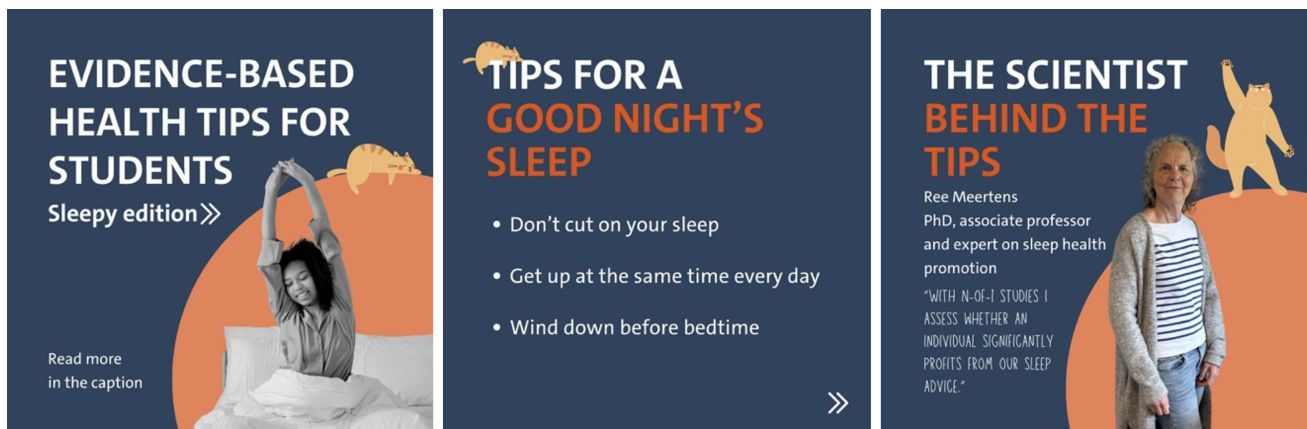


Fig. 4. The Instagram post about healthy sleep.

The science of sleep

How did you sleep last night? It's a common question because of the importance of a good night's rest on our health and well-being. But what happens in your brain and body when you sleep well, or badly, and how can you improve it? Reë Meertens, an expert on sleep health promotion presents three solid evidence-based tips to improve sleep. Let us know what worked! The reference list can be found in bio.

Don't cut on your sleep

Do you know the importance of getting enough sleep? Getting 7-9 hours of sleep lowers your risk of mental problems and diseases. When you sleep long enough, neural connections are strengthened, information is processed, and cognitive performance improves, which is why sleep is also important for learning and performance (ref. 1).

How much sleep you need is hard to say, some need 9 hours, some can do with 6. Don't worry when you cannot sleep well for a few days. You can function on about 4 hours of sleep. Just don't build up a sleep debt in the long run.

Get up at the same time every day

Sleep regularity also improves performance and prevents (mental) health diseases, next to duration (those 7-9 hours). Get up at about the same time daily. Go to bed at about the same time but wait until you are sleepy. When you did build up a sleep debt during exam periods for instance, reducing the sleep debt is more important than staying regular (ref. 2).

Wind down before bedtime

Prepare for a good night's sleep. What works for you to improve your sleep quality (next to the already mentioned sleep regularity) depends (ref. 3, 4, 5). Here below are some tips. Whichever you do, try to do them consistently. Just once is certainly not enough.

- Wind down before bedtime, stop studying, gaming or using social media about half an hour to an hour before bedtime.
- Be physically active outdoors, but not the hours before bedtime.
- Sleep in a cool, dark and quiet environment.
- Don't try to force sleep. You may just accept to not sleep, or get up and do something else until you get sleepy.

For more tips, see reference nr. 5

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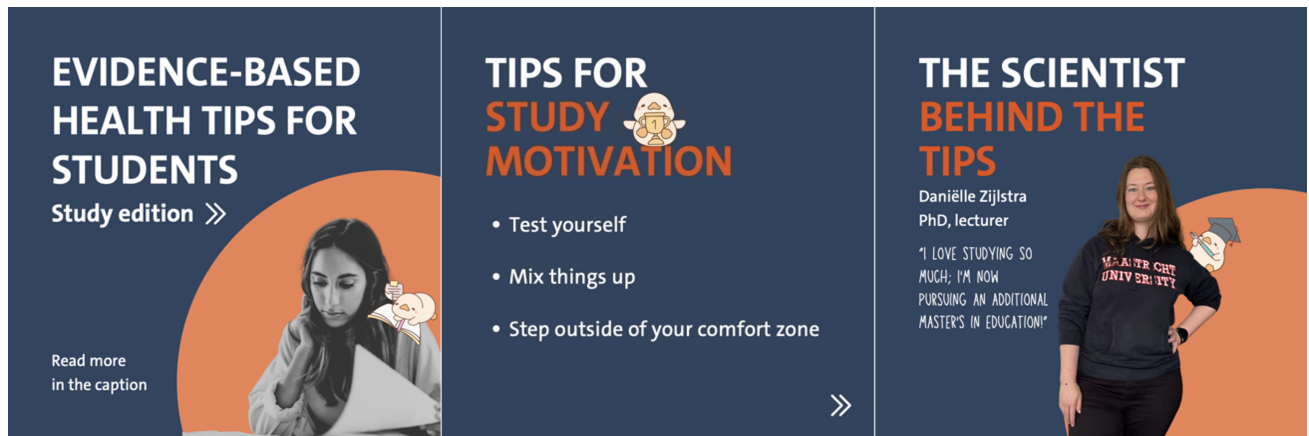


Fig. 5. The Instagram post about studying.

The science of studying

Studying can be fun! If you are sitting at your desk for final exams, don't fall off your chair just yet. Daniëlle Zijlstra (PhD, lecturer) delved into research and found three solid evidence-based tips to make studying easier and a bit more fun. Let us know what worked in the comments and be sure to save the tips for the upcoming exam period or September! All references can be found in bio.

Tip 1: Test yourself

Don't just highlight and summarize text. It is a great start but it works better to create your own self-tests and take them (ref. 1). This active approach not only helps you engage with the material but also shows you what you know and what needs more work. And knowing what you don't know and how to solve that, is crucial (ref. 2).

Tip 2: Spread it out and mix things up

Avoid cramming. Studies (ref. 1) show that spaced repetition is key. Review concepts over several weeks instead of all at once. This method boosts both exam performance and long-term retention. Challenge yourself by mixing different topics. Make connections between concepts and see relationships you didn't notice before. This not only makes studying more interesting but also enhances your critical thinking.

Tip 3: Learning starts outside of your comfort zone

Feeling overwhelmed? Remember, learning (like life) starts outside your comfort zone (ref. 3). Embrace the challenge and make studying an exciting adventure!

Who said studying had to be boring?

#maastrichtuniversity #mylifeatfhml #studytips



Fig. 6. The Instagram post about mindfulness.

The science of mindfulness

Even though students are often occupied with their future, they can benefit from taking a moment to just be in the present. This is often referred to as mindfulness. If you hear the word mindfulness and think it's just about monks meditating, think again. Christian Preissner, PhD Candidate, delved into the mindfulness literature and found solid evidence-based tips on how to tune your thoughts and feelings and dial down your stress response.

Mindfulness is more than medication

There are many different Eastern and Western definitions of mindfulness, how it is measured, and how it is used to promote well-being. While this brings problems for researchers to compare study results, it also brings opportunities and plenty of options for people looking to improve their well-being. Many different clinical and non-clinical mindfulness-based programmes are available that train mindfulness through different methods, not 'just' through meditation - find what works for you! For example, standardized intervention programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), have been shown to be effective in improving anxiety, depression, distress, and quality of life.

Present-moment focus and grounding bring control

One aspect of mindfulness is awareness of how our body and mind are currently feeling. Especially when we feel stressed, distressed, or overwhelmed, it can be helpful to (re-)connect with the 'right now', rather than worrying about future events or dwelling on the past. Grounding oneself in the present moment can help to calm a busy mind, slow down, and adopt a "one thing at a time"-mindset.

Observe emotions and thoughts acceptingly and curiously.

Another key part of mindfulness is accepting what we perceive in the present moment. Acceptance is about creating space for and learning to allow our emotions, thoughts, and feelings to exist instead of suppressing or avoiding them. This can help to avoid wasting too much energy and getting lost in them.

More resources via link in bio!



Fig. 7. The Instagram post about love and sex.

The science of love and sex

Do you talk about sex with your partner or friends? Sex is an important part of our health and well-being, which makes educating yourself on the topic vital. Sarah Stutterheim, associate professor, delved into research and found three solid evidence-based tips to help keep your sexual experiences positive and safe.

Love yourself

Your body, your rules. This should be the ground rule in every sexual contact. Be confident in your sexuality and embrace it in a way that feels right for you. No matter your gender, orientation or preference, you deserve respect and understanding. Together we can create a community where everyone feels safe and valued.

Communication is key

Talking with and listening to your partner about boundaries, desires and safety can be difficult. Especially with new partners. However, consent and mutual understanding contribute to good sex and a healthy, satisfying relationship.

Protection is sexy

Whether you're into condoms, PrEP, or another form of protection, make it a part of your routine. Protection is not just about preventing STIs and pregnancy; it's about taking control of your health. Even if you use protection, make testing a part of your self-care routine. It's quick, easy, and responsible. Know your status and encourage your partners to do the same.

The full reference list can be found through our link in bio.



Fig. 8. The Instagram post about supermarket psychology.

Apple pie anyone?

Have you ever walked into a supermarket and passed the bakery counter, drawn in by the smell of freshly baked apple pie or bread? You may have experienced an example of nudging: a change in the architecture of choice that changes your shopping behaviour. Lisa Harms, Assistant Professor, department of Health Promotion presents three solid evidence-based tips to become aware of nudges. Let us know what worked!

A supermarket can contain many nudges: crisps at eye level, discounted products at the head of the aisle, the use of signage and, of course, chocolate bars at the checkout. Despite good intentions, our self-control is often limited at the end of a busy school or workday, and even more so when we're hungry. Resist the temptation by eating a piece of fruit before you leave or, if your schedule allows, do your shopping in the morning.

Food environment

Our brains are wired to prefer foods high in sugar, fat and salt, which are widely available in our obesogenic food environment. Choosing the healthier alternative therefore requires a rational or conscious decision. However, most of the time what we do is what we do most of the time, as our cognitive capacity and ability to self-control are limited throughout the day. Support your rational food choice by making a shopping list in advance and sticking to it. Making a weekly meal plan and ordering groceries online can also help.

Healthy nudges

Finally, the temptation of nudges can also be used in favour of the healthy food product. Once you are aware of the nudges around you, you may find that some of them can also be considered healthy nudges! Who knows, you might even be able to nudge your flatmate to eat fruits or vegetarian products by making them visible in the kitchen!

Want to learn more? Check the link in our bio!

#healthtips #maastrichtuniversity #mylifeatfhml



Fig. 9. The Instagram post about a healthy diet.

Eating healthy, sustainable and quick can be challenging for students with a tight budget and busy schedule. However, small changes can be enough to make a change and become more aware of what you eat. Kathelijne Bessems, Assistant Professor at the Department of Health Promotion presents three solid evidence-based tips for a healthier diet.

Barriers to overcome

Do you pay attention to your diet but find it difficult to eat healthy? The barriers that students often face are the cost of food, lack of time and sub-optimal cooking skills. In fact, it is well known that nutrient-rich foods tend to be more expensive than nutrient-poor foods. So yes, healthy eating can be challenging. But with a few tips, you can also prepare a tasty, quick and healthy meal at a reasonable cost.

Choose smart: affordable, quick and easy healthy meals

Small portions of food, including vegetables, are relatively more expensive than large portions. So if you are cooking a meal for one person, it will tend to be relatively more expensive. Try preparing a recipe for several days and freezing it in portions. Or buy a larger portion of your vegetables and make a stew on the first day and use it in a soup or salad the next day for a variety of tasty dishes. Buying seasonal vegetables is also relatively cheap. Finally, preparing a healthy meal does not have to be difficult. Have you tried a vegetable omelette with wholemeal bread? Easy to make and quick to serve!

Small steps, sustainable habits

Want to make your food healthier? Take a regular recipe and replace one ingredient with a healthier alternative. Try substituting wholemeal for white rice, pulses for meat or add a tangerine to your morning yoghurt. Don't make drastic changes, but set small goals: small changes are more effective in becoming sustainable habits.

Want to learn more? Check the link in our bio!

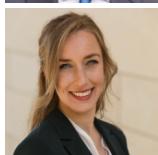
#healthtips #maastrichtuniversity #mylifeatfhml

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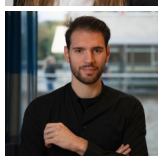
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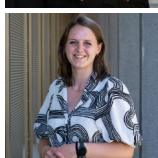
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