



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THE IMPACT OF URBAN LIVING ON MENTAL WELL-BEING

A

Urbanisation has accelerated across the last century, producing an era in which a growing share of humanity experiences life through the lens of *urbanicity*—the distinctive conditions associated with dense settlement, complex infrastructure, and continuous exposure to public activity. For many residents, cities offer measurable advantages: higher concentrations of employment, specialised education, cultural services, and healthcare facilities that are difficult to sustain in dispersed rural regions. Yet the same spatial concentration can also intensify psychosocial stressors, from sensory overload to competitive housing markets, and these pressures can accumulate in ways that are not captured by population density alone. Mental well-being in cities, therefore, is best understood as an urban paradox: opportunity and strain coexist, and the balance between them depends on how environments are designed, how resources are distributed, and how individuals navigate daily cognitive load. In short, the question is not whether city living is inherently harmful, but which features of urban life amplify vulnerability and which can be engineered to support resilience.

B

Among the most consistently studied urban stressors is chronic noise exposure, sometimes described as “acoustic stress.” Traffic flows, construction sites, rail corridors, and crowded public transport create soundscapes that can provoke physiological arousal even when residents report that they have “got used to it.” The body’s stress systems respond to unpredictable or persistent noise with elevated heart rate and hormonal activation, which can disrupt the delicate architecture of sleep—including the depth and continuity of restorative stages. When sleep is fragmented, emotional regulation tends to weaken: irritability increases, attention becomes less stable, and minor setbacks can feel disproportionately threatening. Importantly, average decibel levels alone do not determine mental impact. Two households exposed to similar measured noise may have different outcomes because individual sensitivity varies and because housing quality mediates exposure. Double glazing, insulation, bedroom placement, and the ability to control ventilation can reduce perceived intrusion, whereas thin walls and overcrowded dwellings can intensify it. Thus, the mental-health burden of urban noise reflects a combination of external sound levels and subjective experience shaped by environment and vulnerability.



C

Air pollution represents another pathway through which urban life may influence mental health, although the science is still developing and causal mechanisms remain debated. Fine particulate matter—especially PM2.5—can penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream, and researchers have explored whether such exposure contributes to anxiety and depression through neuro-inflammatory pathways. In this account, chronic inflammation and oxidative stress may affect brain function, potentially altering mood regulation and increasing susceptibility to psychological distress. Even where findings are correlational rather than definitive, the pattern raises a policy concern: pollution hotspots frequently overlap with disadvantaged neighbourhoods located near major roads, industrial zones, or poorly regulated construction corridors. In such settings, environmental exposure becomes socially patterned, creating unequal mental-health risks that mirror broader inequalities in housing, healthcare access, and occupational conditions. The urban mental-health burden is therefore not simply a matter of “city air” in general, but of who lives where within the city and which populations are most exposed to cumulative environmental strain.

D

Cities also reshape social experience in ways that can protect or undermine mental well-being. Dense settlement increases encounters and expands the range of potential social networks, yet many residents report the phenomenon sometimes called “lonely crowds,” where constant proximity coexists with emotional distance. Social fragmentation can emerge when neighbourhoods are characterised by transience, rapid turnover of residents, and weak institutional anchors such as long-standing community organisations. Long commutes and irregular work schedules can further reduce time for relationships, eroding the informal support that buffers stress. Anonymity intensifies this double-edged pattern. For some people, anonymity is liberating: it offers freedom from social surveillance and the chance to reinvent identity without local gossip. However, the same condition can also reduce a sense of belonging, making it harder to form trust-based ties and leaving individuals feeling replaceable within a large system. In this way, urban life can simultaneously widen contact and weaken support, depending on how social connections are built and sustained.

E

The built environment can buffer these pressures or magnify them, and research increasingly emphasises the restorative role of nature within cities. Access to green space—parks, tree-lined streets, community gardens, or even small pocket green areas—has been linked to lower stress markers and improved mood, partly through opportunities for physical activity and partly through the psychological effects described by the



“biophilia” hypothesis: the idea that humans have an innate responsiveness to natural settings. Importantly, large parks are not the only relevant feature. Even small green areas may reduce stress if they are close enough to be used routinely, designed to feel safe, and maintained in ways that invite lingering rather than hurried passage. Walkability and safe public spaces can also foster informal social contact—brief interactions and shared routines that, over time, contribute to social cohesion. Conversely, environments dominated by heavy traffic, poor lighting, and neglected public areas can discourage outdoor time, increasing isolation and reinforcing the sense that the city is a place to endure rather than inhabit.

F

Economic pressure is often a central pathway linking urban living to distress, not because financial problems are unique to cities, but because urban costs can be both high and highly visible. Housing markets in major metropolitan areas frequently expose residents to rent burden, insecure tenancies, and the constant threat of displacement. Such insecurity produces chronic worry, which carries a cognitive burden: attention is repeatedly drawn to budgeting, debt, and future risk, reducing the mental bandwidth available for relationships, health behaviours, and long-term planning. Financial strain also interacts with other stressors. When a household has little flexibility, noise becomes harder to escape because moving is unaffordable, and pollution exposure may be unavoidable because cheaper housing is more likely to be located near major roads. Thus, economic precarity does not merely add one more problem; it amplifies the psychological impact of environmental pressures by reducing coping capacity and increasing the sense of entrapment.

G

Inequality compounds these dynamics by concentrating multiple burdens in the same places. Urban researchers sometimes describe “postcode lotteries” in which safety, service quality, and environmental conditions vary sharply across districts, producing patterned differences in stress and access to support. Disadvantaged communities may face cumulative disadvantage: higher pollution exposure, fewer green amenities, crowded housing, and insecure work, while also having fewer accessible mental-health resources and lower trust in institutions due to past neglect. This clustering matters because stressors interact rather than simply add up. A resident who faces noise, poor air, and financial insecurity simultaneously experiences a heavier overall cognitive load than someone who encounters any single factor in isolation. The distribution of urban well-being is therefore shaped by structural conditions—housing policy, transport planning, and service provision—that determine which neighbourhoods absorb the costs of urban growth and which enjoy its benefits.



H

Because these factors are intertwined, effective responses are typically multi-layered rather than confined to a single intervention. Urban planners can reduce acoustic exposure through traffic calming, zoning that separates housing from major corridors, and building standards that improve insulation. Transport and energy policy can reduce emissions and address the sources of particulate pollution, while land-use regulation can protect and expand green amenities. At the same time, public-health systems can strengthen early intervention, school-based support, and community programmes that reduce isolation and strengthen social infrastructure. The most credible strategies treat mental well-being as an outcome of coordinated action across planning, public health, and economic policy, rather than as a matter of individual resilience alone. In this framing, the city becomes a modifiable system: the same urbanicity that produces risk can be reshaped through governance and design.

I

Overall, the evidence suggests that cities do not inevitably harm mental health. The risks of urban life—acoustic stress, pollution exposure, social fragmentation, and economic pressure—are real, but many are modifiable, and their impacts depend on distribution. When neighbourhoods provide usable green areas, safe mobility, affordable housing pathways, and accessible support services, urban living can sustain and sometimes enhance well-being, particularly through opportunity and social diversity. Conversely, when benefits are concentrated in a few districts while burdens are externalised onto others, mental distress becomes spatially patterned and self-reinforcing. The most defensible conclusion, therefore, is conditional rather than absolute: city life can undermine mental well-being, but it can also support it when environmental stress is reduced and resources are shared fairly across the urban map.

Questions 14–19

Which paragraph contains the following information?

- 14** Conditions under which even small green areas may help lower stress.
- 15** A statement that mental well-being in cities depends on more than population concentration.
- 16** Reasons why urban living can weaken the social support that protects well-being.
- 17** The view that effective solutions usually involve coordinated action across different policy areas.



18 A possible biological mechanism through which fine particulate matter may affect mood.

19 A link between sleep disruption and reduced emotional control.

Questions 20–23

Complete the summary below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

Factors Influencing Urban Mental Health

Urban living presents a mix of stressors and benefits. For instance, chronic exposure to noise can interrupt the delicate architecture of **20**, which in turn weakens emotional regulation. Another risk is air pollution, with fine particulate matter linked in some research to conditions such as anxiety and **21** Conversely, the built environment can offer relief; the **22** hypothesis proposes that humans respond innately to natural settings. However, economic precarity can intensify environmental pressures and increase a sense of **23**

Questions 24–26

Select the correct answer.

24 What does the passage indicate about the effects of noise on city residents?

- A** Its psychological effects are mainly determined by the average decibel level recorded in a city.
- B** Individuals differ in sensitivity, and housing conditions can influence how strongly noise is experienced.
- C** Noise disrupts sleep only when combined with air pollution and overcrowding.
- D** Once residents have lived in a city for several years, noise no longer affects emotional regulation.

25 What is the writer's point about anonymity in urban environments?

- A** Anonymity mainly benefits people with strong community ties, but harms those without them.
- B** Anonymity tends to increase belonging because residents are free to choose their social groups.
- C** Anonymity can be experienced positively by some residents but can also reduce belonging for others.
- D** Anonymity is presented as a more significant cause of distress than economic pressure.



26 Which statement best summarises the writer's overall position on city living and mental health?

A Urban risks exist, but many can be modified through design and policy, particularly if benefits are shared fairly.

B City living generally harms mental health because environmental stressors are unavoidable in dense areas.

C Urban mental well-being is largely unaffected by neighbourhood differences in safety and services.

D The most effective strategy is to reduce urban populations rather than change urban environments.

Answer Key

14. E

15. A

16. D

17. H

18. C

19. B

20. sleep

21. depression

22. biophilia

23. entrapment

24. B

25. C

26. A