An Ounce of Prevention

Improving Emotional Health

Strategies and Tips for Good Mental Health

People who are emotionally healthy are in control of their emotions and their behavior. They are able to handle life's challenges, build strong relationships, and recover from setbacks. But just as it requires effort to build or maintain physical health, so it is with mental and emotional health. Improving your emotional health can be a rewarding experience, benefiting all aspects of your life, including boosting your mood, building resilience, and adding to your overall enjoyment of life.

What is mental health or emotional health?

Mental or emotional health refers to your overall psychological well-being. It includes the way you feel about yourself, the quality of your relationships, and your ability to manage your feelings and deal with difficulties.

Good mental health isn't just the absence of mental health problems. Being mentally or emotionally healthy is much more than being free of depression, anxiety, or other psychological issues. Rather than the absence of mental illness, mental and emotional health refers to the presence of positive characteristics. Similarly, not feeling bad is **not** the same as feeling good. While some people may not have negative feelings, they still need to do things that make them feel positive in order to achieve mental and emotional health.

People who are mentally and emotionally healthy have:

- A sense of contentment.
- A zest for living and the ability to laugh and have fun.
- The ability to deal with stress and bounce back from adversity.
- A sense of meaning and purpose, in both their activities and their relationships.
- The flexibility to learn new things and adapt to change.
- A balance between work and play, rest and activity, etc.
- The ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships.
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem.

These positive characteristics of mental and emotional health allow you to participate in life to the fullest extent possible through productive, meaningful activities and strong relationships. These positive characteristics also help you cope when faced with life's challenges and stresses.

The role of resilience in mental and emotional health

Being emotionally and mentally healthy doesn't mean never going through bad times or experiencing emotional problems. We all go through disappointments, loss, and change. And while these are normal parts of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety, and stress.

The difference is that people with good emotional health have an ability to bounce back from adversity, trauma, and stress. This ability is called *resilience*. People who are emotionally and mentally healthy have the tools for coping with difficult situations and maintaining a positive outlook. They remain focused, flexible, and creative in bad times as well as good.

One of the key factors in resilience is the ability to balance stress and your emotions. The capacity to recognize your emotions and express them appropriately helps you avoid getting stuck in depression, anxiety, or other negative mood states. Another key factor is having a strong support network. Having trusted people you can turn to for encouragement and support will boost your resilience in tough times.

Physical health is connected to mental and emotional health

Taking care of your body is a powerful first step towards mental and emotional health. The mind and the body are linked. When you improve your physical health, you'll automatically experience greater mental and emotional well-being. For example, exercise not only strengthens our heart and lungs, but also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals that energize us and lift our mood.

The activities you engage in and the daily choices you make affect the way you feel physically and emotionally.

- **Get enough rest.** To have good mental and emotional health, it's important to take care of your body. That includes getting enough sleep. Most people need seven to eight hours of sleep each night in order to function optimally.

- **Learn about good nutrition** and practice it. The subject of nutrition is complicated and not always easy to put into practice. But the more you learn about what you eat and how it affects your energy and mood, the better you can feel.

- **Exercise** to relieve stress and lift your mood. Exercise is a powerful antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression. Look for small ways to add activity to your day, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator or going on a short walk. To get the most mental health benefits, aim for 30 minutes or more of exercise per day.

- **Get a dose of sunlight every day.** Sunlight lifts your mood, so try to get at least 10 to 15 minutes of sun per day. This can be done while exercising, gardening, or socializing.

- **Limit alcohol and avoid cigarettes and other drugs.** These are stimulants that may unnaturally make you feel good in the short term, but have long-term negative consequences for mood and emotional health.

Improve mental and emotional health by taking care of yourself

In order to maintain and strengthen your mental and emotional health, it's important to pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Don't let stress and negative emotions build up. Try to maintain a balance between your daily responsibilities and the things you enjoy. If you take care of yourself, you'll be better prepared to deal with challenges if and when they arise.

Taking care of yourself includes pursuing activities that naturally release endorphins and contribute to feeling good. In addition to physical exercise, endorphins are also naturally released when we:

- **Do things that positively impact others.** Being useful to others and being valued for what you do can help build self-esteem.

- **Practice self-discipline.** Self-control naturally leads to a sense of hopefulness and can help you overcome despair, helplessness, and other negative thoughts.

- **Learn or discover new things.** Think of it as "intellectual candy." Try taking an adult education class, join a book club, visit a museum, learn a new language, or simply travel somewhere new.

- **Enjoy the beauty of nature or art.** Studies show that simply walking through a garden can lower blood pressure and reduce stress. The same goes for strolling through a park or an art gallery, hiking, admiring architecture, or sitting on a beach.

- **Manage your stress levels.** Stress takes a heavy toll on mental and emotional health, so it's important to keep it under control. While not all stressors can be avoided, stress management strategies can help you bring things back into balance.

- **Limit unhealthy mental habits like worrying.** Try to avoid becoming absorbed by repetitive mental habits— negative thoughts about yourself and the world that suck up time, drain your energy, and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear, and depression.

More tips and strategies for taking care of yourself:

- **Appeal to your senses.** Stay calm and energized by appealing to the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Listen to music that lifts your mood, place flowers where you will see and smell them, massage your hands and feet, or sip a warm drink.
- **Engage in meaningful, creative work.** Do things that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive, whether or not you get paid for it—things like gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something in your workshop.
- **Get a pet.** Yes, pets are a responsibility, but caring for one makes you feel needed and loved. There is no love quite as unconditional as the love a pet can give. Animals can also get you out of the house for exercise and expose you to new people and places.
- **Make leisure time a priority.** Do things for no other reason than that it feels good to do them. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Doing things just because they are fun is no indulgence. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.
- **Make time for contemplation and appreciation.** Think about the things you're grateful for. Mediate, pray, enjoy the sunset, or simply take a moment to pay attention to what is good, positive, and beautiful as you go about your day.

Everyone is different; not all things will be equally beneficial to all people. Some people feel better relaxing and slowing down while others need more activity and more excitement or stimulation to feel better. The important thing is to find activities that you enjoy and that give you a boost.

Supportive relationships: The foundation of emotional health

No matter how much time you devote to improving your mental and emotional health, you will still need the company of others to feel and be your best. Humans are social creatures with an emotional need for relationships and positive connections to others. We're not meant to survive, let alone thrive, in isolation. Our social brains crave companionship—even when experience has made us shy and distrustful of others.

Social interaction—specifically talking to someone else about your problems—can also help to reduce stress. The key is to find a supportive relationship with someone who is a "good listener"— someone you can talk to regularly, preferably face-to-face, who will listen to you without a pre-existing agenda for how you should think or feel. A good listener will listen to the feelings behind your words, and won't interrupt or judge or criticize you. The best way to find a good listener? Be a good listener yourself. Develop a friendship with someone you can talk to regularly, and then listen and support each other.

Tips and strategies for connecting to others:

- **Get out from behind your TV or computer screen.** Screens have their place but they will never have the same effect as an expression of interest or a reassuring touch. Communication is a largely nonverbal experience that requires you to be in direct contact with other people, so don't neglect your real-world relationships in favor of virtual interaction.
- **Spend time daily, face-to-face, with people you like.** Make spending time with people you enjoy a priority. Choose friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family members who are upbeat, positive, and interested in you. Take time to inquire about people you meet during the day that you like.
- **Volunteer.** Doing something that helps others has a beneficial effect on how you feel about yourself. The meaning and purpose you find in helping others will enrich and expand your life. There is no limit to the individual and group volunteer opportunities you can explore. Schools, churches, nonprofits, and charitable organization of all sorts depend on volunteers for their survival.

- **Be a joiner.** Join networking, social action, conservation, and special interest groups that meet on a regular basis. These groups offer wonderful opportunities for finding people with common interests— people you like being with who are potential friends.

Risk factors for mental and emotional problems

Your mental and emotional health has been and will continue to be shaped by your experiences. Early childhood experiences are especially significant. Genetic and biological factors can also play a role, but these too can be changed by experience.

Risk factors that can compromise mental and emotional health:

- **Poor connection or attachment to your primary caretaker early in life.** Feeling lonely, isolated, unsafe, confused, or abused as an infant or young child.
- **Traumas or serious losses, especially early in life.** Death of a parent or other traumatic experiences such as war or hospitalization.
- **Learned helplessness.** Negative experiences that lead to a belief that you're helpless and that you have little control over the situations in your life.
- **Illness,** especially when it's chronic, disabling, or isolates you from others.
- **Side effects of medications,** especially in older people who may be taking a variety of medications.
- **Substance abuse.** Alcohol and drug abuse can both cause mental health problems and make preexisting mental or emotional problems worse.

Whatever internal or external factors have shaped your mental and emotional health, it's never too late to make changes that will improve your psychological well-being. Risk factors can be counteracted with protective factors, like strong relationships, a healthy lifestyle, and coping strategies for managing stress and negative emotions.

When to seek professional help for emotional problems

If you've made consistent efforts to improve your mental and emotional health and you still don't feel good—then it's time to seek professional help. Because we are so socially attuned, input from a knowledgeable, caring professional can motivate us to do things for ourselves that we were not able to do on our own.

Net News

Diaphragmatic Breathing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7ySGgAFAAo

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=107

Weekly Podcast at the Hammer free guided meditations
Every Thursday at 12:30 PM, MARC holds a free, drop-in, 30-minute guided meditation session at UCLA's Hammer Museum. Follow the link to the podcasts, which you can download or stream.

Each week has a different theme, and usually includes introductory comments, guided meditation, silent practice time, and closing comments. Each session also offers a new daily life practice for the week.

Self-Help Corner:

City of Edmonton Community Resources: 211

Support Network / Distress Line: 780-482-HELP

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-686