

How to Improve Mental Health and Well-Being

Start by making your mental health a priority!

Our mental health is equally important as our physical health. Research has consistently shown the connection between the mind and the body, with one influencing and impacting the other. In other words, taking care of our physical health can support our mental well-being, and taking care of our mental health can enhance our physical health.

Why Your Mental Health and Well-being Matter

Individuals who consciously and actively attend to their mental well-being in addition to physical health are better able to handle stress and life's inevitable challenges. When a person engages in regular self-care strategies, they build their resilience, are better able to adapt to changes, recover from setbacks more readily and are able to build strong, healthy, relationships with others.

Strategies that will improve your mental health

1. Take care of your body and physical health: As stated above, our bodies and minds are connected. When you take care of your body, you are also strengthening your mind. You can do this by making an active effort to do the following:

- **Get quality sleep.** Sleep and rest help the body and brain work more effectively when you are awake. When you are well rested, you have the physical and mental energy to take on the day, put quality effort into your work, relationships, and projects, solve problems more effectively and handle stress better. Most of us can benefit from improving the quality of our sleep. And for many, a small lifestyle or attitude adjustment can significantly help us sleep better. Try making sleep a priority. Go to bed around the same time each night, and limit distractions in bed, such as TVs and cellphones.
- **Eat well.** Research shows the food we eat can impact our mental health. Important nutrients help our bodies and minds work effectively and efficiently, and to that end, help us better cope with stress and daily hassles. Consider what you typically eat and if you are consuming enough healthy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, whole grains etc.
- **Get moving.** Physical activity and exercise not only help our bodies, but it improves our mental well-being as well, especially when part of our regular routine. Many of the "feel-good" hormones in your brain and body are released when you engage in moderate physical activity, including serotonin and endorphins. Further, regular physical activity has been shown to improve sleep, increase energy levels, reduce muscle tension, increase a sense of relaxation and increase resilience to stress. While physical activities can include exercising at the gym or going for a run, they do not need to be rigorous. Consider any activity that gets you moving - walking, yoga, playing a friendly game of basketball with the kids, or dancing around the house to your favorite music.

2. Find moments for rest and relaxation:

Taking time to slow down and relax is a big part of improving our mental health. When we don't find time for self-care and relaxation, stress can pile up and lead to feelings of being overwhelmed or burnt out.

When we slow ourselves down and make opportunities to relax, we often experience clearer thinking and can more easily identify solutions to problems we may be facing. When in a more relaxed state it is also easier to think positively, practice gratitude and manage difficult feelings.

One way to relax is to consciously make time for activities you enjoy. These moments help recharge you. Write down a list of activities you enjoy or find relaxing. If possible, try to implement one of these activities every day, even if it's just for 10-15 minutes. Listen to music, read a chapter in an exciting mystery novel, do a short yoga practice, take a brief walk, make a cup of tea and sit for a few minutes enjoying a moment of calm, connect with a friend through a quick text or email etc. And if possible, consider more in-depth activities you can plan to engage in at least once a week. Coffee with a friend, a lunch date, going to the gym, doing a Zumba class, working on a hobby, attending to a garden etc.

In the end, what is important is not always what you do and how often, but that you are purposefully taking the time to care for yourself. The routine of self-care goes a long way to supporting our mental health and well-being.

3. Tap into your social support:

Social support involves having a network of family and friends that you can spend time with for fun and who you can turn to in times of need. Research has consistently shown that social support impacts our well-being and having a social network improves our mental health. The quantity of the relationships is not as important as the quality. Having individuals you enjoy spending time with and having individuals you can turn to when you need assistance. And social support is a two-way street. When you have opportunities to support others in your social network, that act of kindness will also support your mood and well-being. If you feel your social support network is lacking, consider ways to build it up. Join shared interest groups, volunteer in your community, tap into faith-based groups etc. While in-person is great, online communities can also provide a wonderful support network as well.

4. Practice gratitude:

Gratitude is an awareness of the good things in one's life and being thankful. Every day, both "good" and "bad" things happen – both big and small. Research has shown that individuals who focus on the good things are less likely to experience depression and anxiety than those who tend to focus on the "bad".

Gratitude is a "practice." You can begin it any time and with regular practice, it will change the way you think (build positive thinking habits) and improve your resilience to stress. There are many ways you can practice gratitude from simply taking a moment at the end of each day to reflect on what you are grateful for. Identify three things, big or small - a compliment at work, someone kind enough to hold the door for you, receiving a text from a friend to say hello. You can also create a gratitude journal, taking a moment each day to write down things you are grateful for – your family and friends, your home, your work. You can even practice gratitude by taking a moment to thank others. Send a thank you card. Tell them in person, or even send a text or write an email.

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