



10 ways to help your mental health

We all like to help others. But, when it comes to mental health, what steps can we take to support ourselves? Psychological research has revealed a range of approaches that can help you stay mentally healthy and make the most out of your life.



1 Connect with others

Having deep, meaningful relationships helps mental health. Build a rich social network by flexing your communication skills. Really listen to others and be genuine, sharing your thoughts and feelings.

Your relationships need not be just about sharing difficulties. Celebrate everyday positive experiences with friends. Research shows doing this boosts wellbeing by helping you savour good things and make great feelings last longer.

2 Keep your perspective

Avoiding difficult emotions, keeping feelings to yourself, or stewing over problems reduces wellbeing. Those able to process their emotions well typically experience better mental health.

Emotion processing involves being open to experiences and accepting all your feelings and thoughts, including the difficult ones. It helps to look for constructive solutions, think flexibly and see situations from different perspectives when you are confronted by everyday problems.

You can maintain your perspective by asking yourself: Am I overestimating the likelihood of a negative outcome or am I underestimating my ability to cope?

3 Develop positive habits

Positive psychology has introduced the concept of 'flourishing'. This is when you enjoy positive emotions, healthy relationships, meaning and purpose in life, and a sense of accomplishment.

What can help you flourish? Research suggests acting with kindness, generosity, forgiveness and compassion towards others, cultivating a sense of gratitude and appreciation, savouring things you love, knowing and using personal strengths, being creative and feeling optimistic.

The experience of 'flow' is also good for your mental health. Athletes might call this 'being in the zone'. Flow experiences are ones in which you are absorbed and feel deeply satisfied. Research suggests it not only improves the skills involved in the activity, but this complete immersion lowers stress hormones and releases 'feel good' hormones such as dopamine.

4 Live up to your values

Living a life consistent with your values leads to improved wellbeing. Be aware of your own values – of how you would like to lead your life, behave towards others, and treat yourself. Then find ways to ensure your life is in keeping with those ideals. This is better for your wellbeing than responding to events habitually, without awareness or purpose.

5 Be kind to yourself

Treat yourself with the same kindness, concern and support you'd show a good friend facing struggles. Rather than reproaching yourself, recognise that life is full of mistakes and inadequacies. This is the essence of self-compassion, which fosters resilience in the face of adversity.

Mindfulness, which is the ability to take note of your own experience without being overwhelmed by it, is an essential component of self-compassion. It allows you to maintain perspective without judgement and helps you keep a healthy balance between the things that go right in life and the things that go wrong.

6 Improve your work-life balance

We all have many roles in life. You might be a parent, a partner, an employee, a student, a church member, a teammate, a carer or a volunteer. It is easy to feel pulled between responsibilities and it can be tempting to sacrifice important parts of your life. This can leave you less satisfied and more stressed. Researchers suggest that working towards greater balance fosters wellbeing.

Think about how satisfied you are with the different areas of your life: relationships, work, recreation, health, exercise, self-development, and spiritual life. Are you devoting the amount of attention you would like to each? Making more time for some, and putting boundaries around others, might help create that balance.

Taking time to wind down and enjoy relaxing activities is an important part of a balanced life and helps to reduce stress. Relaxing activities, such as gardening or reading, listening to music, walking or singing, should be an important part of your routine.

7 Laugh loud, laugh often

Laughter really is good medicine. Humour that expresses positive emotion and messages (rather than humour that puts yourself or other people down), is good for your mental health. It has been found to release 'feel good' hormones, increase optimism, improve your mood over time, and improve relationships by increasing connection and intimacy.

8 Look after your body

A good lifestyle supports mental health. Research suggests that a diet rich in fruit and vegetables, and regular moderate exercise, boosts your wellbeing. Making sure some of your exercise occurs in green spaces outside has extra benefits to mental health.

Eat a well-balanced nutritious diet, exercise regularly, get out into nature, and avoid excessive use of alcohol and drugs.

9 Get enough sleep

Getting quality sleep, and enough of it, is essential for physical and mental health. Your idea of a good night's sleep might differ from the next person. Some people need more than eight hours of sleep to feel rested, others less. Your sleep patterns may vary as you age.

Stress, worries, big life events, changes to shift work or daily routines and changes in home life can affect our sleep. Using electronic devices such as tablets, mobile phones or even the TV before bed, can disrupt sleep, as can caffeinated drinks, cigarettes, alcohol, and some medications and drugs. Your bedroom can affect your sleep, as temperature, light and noise can all disrupt sleep.

10 Seek help when needed

There are many effective treatments available for people experiencing mental health difficulties. Psychologists have a range of approaches that can help you with difficulties you may face – and they are backed by evidence.

Remember, delaying treatment or dropping out too early can make recovery slower. What's more, other problems can creep in, such as relationship problems, issues with work, and other stresses. So don't delay. See your GP or look for a psychologist with experience in addressing your issues. You can find one in your area by using the APS Find A Psychologist Service at findapsychologist.org.au.



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