

IMPROVING YOUR MENTAL RESILIENCY & FITNESS

According to Canadian Mental Health Association, mental health is a state of well-being, which includes your emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The state of your mental health can affect how you think, feel, and act, thus also various aspects of your life. There are some common factors found in various mental health literature that indicate good mental health and they include the following:¹

- Have a sense of purpose in one's life
- Able to develop and maintain strong, healthy relationships
- Feel connected to others
- Have a good sense of self, including one's abilities and limitations
- Able to cope with normal stresses of life
- Able to work/function productively and fruitfully
- Able to enjoy life

Having demands and challenges that cause stress in your life is common and it is unlikely that you will eliminate all of these from your life. However, when the demands, challenges, and stress in your life exceed your resources and coping abilities, your mental health can be negatively affected.² As such, it is important to be able to recognize and understand your stress triggers, the state of your mental health as well as the strategies to strengthen your mental resiliency and fitness to deal with the stress in your life.

There is a substantial amount of research and literature which indicate that healthy self-care practices, such as those identified below, can strengthen mental fitness and resiliency to stress. Strong mental fitness and stress resiliency in turn can improve your capacity to manage the demands, challenges, and various other stressors in life that can directly prompt, prolong, and worsen various mental health issues or illnesses such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and many more.

ADEQUATE SLEEP AND REST

A large body of research has shown that sleep deprivation has a significant negative effect on your mood.³ Additionally, not getting enough sleep can even exacerbate disorders such as ADHD. Ari Tuckman, author of *Understand Your Brain, Get More Done: The ADHD Executive Functions Workbook* states that being tired affects your attention span, memory, and complex problem solving.⁴ Similarly, feeling run-down due to lack of sleep can exacerbate symptoms of depression and make it more difficult to be social, get exercise, and manage stress.⁵

PRACTICE THE FOLLOWING HABITS TO GET BETTER SLEEP:



01. **Screen time**

Cut off screen time at least an hour before bed.



02. **Bedtime**

Try to go to bed at a regular time each day.



03. **Bedroom**

Use your bed for sleep or relaxing activities only..



04. **Caffeine**

Restrict caffeinated drinks for the morning.

PROPER NUTRITION

What you eat has a direct impact on the way you feel, thus proper diet and nutrition are very important to your mental wellness. Try to reduce your intake of foods that can adversely affect your brain and mood, such as caffeine, alcohol, and foods with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones (such as certain meats).⁹ For example, if there is a likelihood that you may have anxiety, PTSD, addiction issues and/or sleep issues, avoiding drugs and alcohol as well as eliminating or reducing the consumption of caffeine and other stimulants may help to alleviate your symptoms.

Conversely, higher daily intake of B vitamins (folic acid, B-12, B-complex) and Omega-3 fatty acids (found in fish, nuts, flaxseed, and Omega-3 supplement) have shown to improve mood and cognitive function.¹⁰¹¹ Healthy carbohydrates in moderate amounts can increase serotonin, which has a calming effect on your mood while protein-rich foods can increase norepinephrine, dopamine, and tyrosine, which help keep you alert.¹² Most vegetables and fruits are loaded with nutrients that can also affect mood-regulating brain chemicals.¹³ Ultimately, proper nutrition and a healthy diet can improve both your physical and mental health.



REGULAR PHYSICAL EXERCISE/ACTIVITIES

Physical exercise can relieve anxiety and help our brain to better cope with stress.¹⁴ Research has shown that aside from therapy and proper medication, exercise is also an effective treatment for depression.¹⁵ Our body releases the stress-relieving, feel-good chemicals called endorphins after a rigorous workout, which helps to boost our mood. A low-intensity exercise that is sustain over time can prompt the release of proteins called neurotrophic, which cause nerve cells to grow, make new

connections, and improve brain function which helps you to feel better. ¹⁶ Being able to enjoy the outdoors, get some fresh air as well as more sunlight (vitamin D) to boost your level of serotonin can also help to regulate your mood and emotions.¹⁷ As well, there are indications that continuous and rhythmic exercises which use both your arms and legs such as walking, swimming, or dancing are most helpful for individuals with depression.¹⁸ Of course, exercising and staying physically active have also been shown to bring about various physical health benefits such as lowering blood pressure, improving sleep, and protecting against heart disease and diabetes.¹⁹

CONNECT WITH OTHERS & BUILD A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM

Spending time with people you care about, trust, and can lean on when you need them, can ease your stress and help to elevate your mood. Joining a support group and connecting with others who are going through a similar experience as you can also break down your sense of isolation and help you recognize that you are not alone.²⁰ Expanding your social network by volunteering with others for causes dear



to you can improve your sense of purpose in life while participating with others in an activity of interest to you can enhance your life enjoyment. Many communities have social groups or clubs for hiking, dancing, sports, and more. Collectively, positive connection with others and a strong support system can be your source of strength and encouragement when you are feeling down, taking initiatives to improve your mental health, and going through your

healing journey. When you experience mental health issues such as depression and PTSD, social connections can help you to maintain a healthy perspective²¹ as well as keep you from spiraling downward and from becoming isolated and alone with your thoughts.²²

MEDITATION, DEEP BREATHING & MINDFULNESS

Meditation, deep breathing, and mindfulness exercises have shown to be helpful in managing symptoms and effects of anxiety and depression, cancer, chronic pain, asthma, heart disease and high blood pressure.²³ They have also shown to reduce stress, regulate mood, and boost feelings of joy and well-being.²⁴

Mental Health America provides the following guide for the different types of meditation:²⁵

- **Deep breathing.** Sit or lie down comfortably. Rest your hands on your stomach. Slowly count to four while inhaling through your nose. Feel your stomach rise. Hold your breath for a second. Slowly count to four while you exhale, preferably through pursed lips to control the breath. Your stomach will fall slowly. Repeat a few times.
- **Mindfulness Meditation.** Focus on your breath. Notice anything that passes through your awareness without judgment. If your mind starts to tackle your to-do list, just return to focusing on your breath.
- **Visualization.** Close your eyes, relax and imagine a peaceful place, like a forest. Engage all your senses: Hear the crunching leaves, smell the damp soil, feel the breeze.
- **Repeating a mantra.** Sit quietly and pick any meaningful or soothing word, phrase, or sound. You can repeat the mantra aloud or silently. Experts say the repetition creates a physical relaxation response.
- **Participate in a meditative form of exercise.** Try tai chi or qi gong, which use soothing, flowing motions.

According to Mental Health America, one can start with a few minutes of meditation each day and gradually work up to 10, 20, or 30 minutes. You can build a sense of calmness, focus, and balance and this in turn can alleviate your stress, anxiousness, and/or a feeling of being overwhelmed.²⁶ You can find meditation options online, on CD, or in a class.

JOURNALING

Many therapists may encourage their clients to keep a journal and write down their thoughts, experiences, feelings, concerns, and/or unresolved issues. Being able to express one's pent-up feelings and thoughts without fear or reservation, can help the writer process work through their concerns and unresolved issues, can bring about a sense of liberation and relief, and can ease their stress and emotional burden. Research has shown that journaling can help individuals struggling with PTSD to decrease flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive memories as well as help them to reconnect with people and places that they may otherwise want to avoid.²⁷

CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THINKING

How you think about yourself, and your life can have a direct effect on how you feel as well as on how you may react. For example, if you regularly view yourself and your life as a failure, powerless, and/or hopeless, you have a higher likelihood of feeling scared, worried, anxious, or even angry and ashamed about your life and situation. For some individuals, this in turn may cause them to give up on trying to improve their situation or even cause them to harm themselves. As such, if you find that you often think negatively about yourself and/or our life, it would be important to find and learn ways to do a reality check, deal with any cognitive distortion (irrational, pessimistic, distorted thinking or emotions), and try to see and assess matters through more objective, realistic, and optimistic lens.

- the things that went right. (“I got the last question on the test wrong. I’m an idiot.”)
- Diminishing the positive – Coming up with reasons why positive events don’t count (“She said she had a good time on our date, but I think she was just being nice.”)
- ‘Should’ and ‘should-nots’ – Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn’t do and beating yourself up if you don’t live up to

your rules. (“I should never have interviewed for that job. I’m an idiot for thinking I could get it.”)

- Labeling – Classifying yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings (“I’m a failure; an idiot; a loser.”)

Depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges can magnify negative thinking, and negative thinking can also aggravate symptoms of depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges. This inter-play can in turn create a destructive, spiraling cycle.

Our thinking pattern is often developed over time and can be strongly entrenched. As such, simply telling yourself to “think positively” may not work very well. Instead, when negative thoughts about yourself and your life arise, you can challenge these thoughts by: 1) questioning whether there is clear evidence to not only verify the reality of the negative thoughts but also to counter the negative thoughts, 2) doing a reality check with your therapist or some honest and trusted friends, and asking them how they or majority of people would think of the situation, and 3) asking yourself what you would tell a friend who had these thoughts.¹ From there, you can make the effort to reframe thinking through the use of evidence and feedback that you have gathered. Doing this repeatedly can help you to develop skills and understanding needed to adjust your thinking patterns and frame your thoughts in a more objective and positive manner. This in turn can make you feel better and more optimistically about yourself and your life.

START TODAY

Improving your mental resiliency and fitness can directly strengthen your capacity to deal with life difficulties and challenges that may increase your level of stress as well as trigger or exacerbate any potential mental health issues. As such, if there are some self-care practices on the above list that resonate with you and you have not had a chance to try them, right now would be a good time to do so, regardless of whether you are currently experiencing any mental health issues (if you are currently receiving counselling/therapy or other interventions, consult with your care provider on these practices). Your mental health affects almost every aspect of your life so do NOT wait until you experience significant problems or crisis to take good care of it. Make caring for your mental health a priority starting today, if you have not already done so.

