

## **Maintaining Good Mental Health.**

Just as certain daily habits have been shown to keep people fit and physically healthy, there are also good mental health habits that contribute to mental health. Recently the American Psychological Association published a list of these habits which research has shown to be effective in maintaining good mental health and lowering stress in your daily life. The following list is modified from the APA publication. Note that many of these are the same habits that keep us physically healthy.

- 1. Engage in exercise and physical activity.** Believe it or not, getting up and moving your body is one of the simplest but effective strategies for lifting mood.
- 2. Practice good sleep hygiene.** Disrupted sleep is common in all forms of mental illness. Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning. Avoid activities which keep you awake at night, such as vigorous exercise right before bed, videogames, eating, watching exciting or disturbing programs on TV, and consuming caffeine. Practice activities which calm you down before bed. Reserve your bed for sleeping. Expose yourself to bright light (preferably sunshine) when you first wake up in the morning.
- 3. Do something you enjoy every day.** Stress causes us to focus on the negative, what we are doing wrong, or what we “should” do. No matter how many “have to’s” in your daily schedule, find time for something fun, silly, or totally useless. Do it even if you aren’t in the mood. Vary these activities so you do something different every day.
- 4. Do at least one thing with purpose every day.** No matter how stressed or depressed you feel, even one action done purposefully tends to lift mood and works against feelings of worthlessness.
- 5. Keep a list of activities which have helped you get through stressful days in the past.** Just making the list itself is a way to fight hopelessness. Keep it handy, add to it as you think of some new ideas.
- 6. Engage in an activity that gives you a feeling of achievement.** Even if it isn’t fun, and even if you don’t finish the entire project, every step completed is an accomplishment.
- 7. Enlist a trusted friend or family member to help you get out and do something active.** Some days it may be too much for you to motivate yourself, but a nudge from another person may be enough to jump start your engine.
- 8. Get out of the house every day, even if for just a short time.** Staying in the same surroundings when depressed or stressed out actually contributes to the depression and leads to a vicious cycle of not getting out and not feeling well enough to get out.

**9. Reward yourself for reaching a goal, no matter how small.** OK, so you only got out of bed today. It's the first step to coming back to life, so give yourself a pat on the back.

**10. Learn relaxation methods.** Stress can build during the day without your awareness. A quick but effective relaxation method is a slow breath in and out, letting go of muscle tension as you exhale. Other relaxation approaches include meditation, yoga, muscle tense-and- release exercises, and prayer.

**11. Talk over problems and negative feelings with someone who is caring and supportive.** It doesn't have to be a therapist, just a person you trust who will listen. Surprisingly, just talking (or writing) about problems lifts mood even if the problems are seemingly insurmountable.

**12. Let family and friends know how you are feeling.** Keeping problems to yourself keeps you depressed and stressed out by isolating you from the support of others.

**13. Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** Depression and stress often disrupt normal eating patterns. Eat something at the same time each day. Try to eat the same amount of food – not too much or too little. Balance what you eat – keep the fats and sugars to a minimum.

### References

Jorm, A.F. (2012). Mental health literacy: Empowering the community to take action for better mental health. *American Psychologist*, 67, 231 – 243.

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