

# Fostering a Mental Wellness Identity

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Recognize mental illness may be part of your identity, but it is not who you are

Who are you? What are the labels you use to describe your identity and who you are to others? Student, artist, athlete, partner, musician, movie buff? Many also include descriptions of health concerns they or family members may struggle with, such as "person with ADHD" or "someone who struggles with depression," or "cancer survivor." Since these things are all part of our experiences, they can become part of how we see ourselves and describe ourselves to others. Acknowledgment of mental illness and mental health struggles as part of your life experiences allows for integration of them into your identity. However, mental health struggles do not have to define who you are as whole. Your feelings, experiences, and habits can be both related and unrelated to mental health/illness, so finding the balance between embracing them while not over-identifying with them can be a tricky task. Over-identifying with mental illness or taking on a "mental illness identity" without efforts towards wellness can actually result in worsening of symptoms and greater suffering. Describing yourself as being your feelings ("I'm just hopeless.") or your diagnosis can be problematic if it leads to the perception that emotional states, psychological symptoms, and life difficulties are inflexible, permanent, and unchangeable. While certain mental health conditions may mean that certain feelings and states are more common, it does not mean that there isn't room to manage them, alleviate some of the pain/intensity, and have some control over how we react to them. Leaning into the parts of your identity that can contribute to your wellness, can be helpful for fostering an identity that focuses on building mental health and contributes to confidence and success in managing it. Below are some tips that can be helpful for taking a wellness path!



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## Instead of...

- Seeing emotional states as permanent and inflexible.
- Describing yourself as being your feelings or your diagnosis..
- "I'm bipolar"; "I always feel depressed."



## Try..

- Using observational, non-judgmental, objective, time sensitive language to describe your feelings.
- "I am feeling highly agitated today."; "I have been feeling quite hopeless over the last couple of weeks."

## Instead of...

- Basing social and support relationships primarily on mental illness; getting hooked into competition or comparison of symptoms in a way that does not reduce pain.
- Engaging in social relationships where caretaking becomes the main focus and/or you feel responsible for the other person's well-being ("If I don't answer my friend right away, they might hurt themselves.")



## Try..

- Building relationships around multiple parts of your identity.
- Engage in social activities that foster your interests, strengths, and confidence. Look for opportunities to enhance wellness by using your social network as a gateway to doing things that bring you joy and a sense of positive community.

## Instead of...

- Using all-or-nothing, hopeless language in response to symptoms and emotional pain.
- "I never \_\_\_\_."
- "I always fell \_\_\_\_."
- "I am depressed; there's just no hope.."
- "I have ADHD, so I can't pay attention."



## Try..

- Identifying what you are capable of doing, even the smallest step, and try to formulate an "I can" statement.
- "I am feeling depressed, but I CAN sit up in bed."; "I have ADHD, so it's more difficult for me to pay attention. I CAN take notes to help."; " I CAN listen to music for a bit to calm my nerves."
- Thinking of the skills and strengths you are secure in and how those might help.

## Instead of...

- Engaging in self-diagnosis and/or feeling like you have to figure it all out on your own.
- Denying emotional pain.
- Trying to force it to go away all on your own.



## Try..

- Seeking out help and clarification from a mental health professional. This can help with developing a treatment plan that fits your personal needs.
- Acknowledging and accepting negative emotions as part of your experience, and working on identifying behaviors and thoughts that help reduce their intensity, duration and disruptions to life.