A Workout for Your Mental Health

Keep stress under control by sticking with these daily practices

ILLUSTRATION: SONIA PULID

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Stressed out? Grumpy? Tired all the time?

You need a mental-fitness regimen.

For months, therapists have reported a significant increase in clients who are anxious, worried or depressed over current events—the Covid-19 pandemic, economic woes, civil unrest. And while they can teach coping skills, such as emotion regulation, to help deal with the stress, they say it's also important for people to proactively take steps to be mentally healthy, just as they would if they wanted to be physically fit. "If you wait until a major stressor hits to try and bolster your mental health, it's like trying to inflate your life raft while you are already drowning at sea," says Wendy Troxel, a clinical psychologist and senior behavioral and social scientist at Rand Corp.

Many people turn to talk therapy, exercise, meditation and a healthy diet to do this. Shirlee Hoffman, a 75-year-old retired marketing consultant in Chicago, limits her news consumption to about five minutes a day. Erin Wiley, 50, a licensed psychotherapist in Toledo, Ohio, uses an app to track the things for which she is grateful. Rhonda Steele, 62, a special-education teacher in Sellersburg, Ind., prays and reads devotions. Dwight Oxley, 84, a retired physician in Wichita, Kan., reads and plays the piano. Rachel Glyn, 66, a retired aesthetician in Philadelphia, tries to do as many things as possible for others. Michael Schauch, 40, an investment portfolio manager in Squamish, British Columbia, rock climbs—he says the view gives him perspective. Stedman Stevens, 62, the CEO of an aviation technology company in Wilmington, N.C., takes 15 minutes each afternoon to sit alone without distractions. "I listen to what my mind shows me," he says. "This restores my mental strength." What steps should you include in your mental-fitness regimen**? Here is advice from the experts.**

Make sleep nonnegotiable. Most adults need 7-8 hours of quality sleep. "Following a consistent sleep-wake schedule sends a powerful signal to the brain that the world is safe and secure, which can help reduce anxiety and foster resilience," says Rand's Dr. Troxel, author of "Sharing the Covers: Every

Couple's Guide to Better Sleep." She suggests setting a consistent wake-up time, counting backward to determine when to go to bed, and creating a relaxing wind-down routine, starting an hour before bedtime. Take a bath, read a book, turn down the lights and the thermostat. (65-68 degrees is ideal.) Disconnect from technology to minimize your exposure to distressing news and light.

Set a routine.Get up at the same time each day. Get dressed! Create a morning ritual—many people write in a journal or set an intention for the day, although just drinking coffee in the same chair works. (I drink a large glass of water first thing, then a cup of coffee, and play with my dog.) Eat meals and exercise at set times. This helps create a sense of predictability in a world that feels out of control.

Calm your mind. You can't cope with stress well if your brain is on high alert at all times, says Carolyn Daitch, a psychologist in Farmington Hills, Mich., and co-author of "The Road to Calm Workbook." She recommends beginning the day with 15-20 minutes of yoga, meditation or [prayer](), then scheduling four "mini interventions" during the day—a two-minute breathing exercise or other quick tension-releasing technique. (One of her favorites: Make a tight fist with one hand, imagine it holding all the tension in your body for 10 seconds, release it.) She says to think of these practices as a "stress inoculation."

Watch your language. The words we use to talk to ourselves color our outlook. So try to replace "hot" language with "cooler" language, suggests Patricia Deldin, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. ("This is a challenge but I can handle it," not "I'm overwhelmed.") And stop "shoulding" yourself. ("I would like to…" not "I should.") "A simple language change can influence our feelings and, subsequently, our actions," says Dr. Deldin, who is CEO of Mood Lifters, a mental-wellness program.

Practice compassion. Research shows self-compassionate people are happier, more optimistic, more motivated and more resilient. Yet, too often, we are mean to ourselves. Treat yourself with kindness and understanding. Start by acknowledging when something is painful. (Dr. Daitch recommends putting your hand on your heart and saying: "This isn't easy.") Then talk to yourself as you would to your best friend. And remind yourself that everyone goes through difficult times. This diminishes your stress reaction and connects you to other people.

Move your body. Research shows that aerobic exercise reduces fatigue and tension, and improves alertness, concentration, sleep, mood, and self-esteem, according to Dr. Deldin. And studies show that exercise in nature has even more benefits: It reduces the body's stress response, lowers cortisol

levels and blood pressure, and it gives you a sense of awe, which boosts mood. Dr. Deldin recommends 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day, which can be broken up into small periods. (Even five minutes of exercise begins to decrease anxiety, she says.)

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Create a media diet. There's too much negative news these days. Decide how much you will consume—think of this as a "news calorie count"—and stick with it. Set aside blocks of time to turn off your phone. Purge negative people from your social media feed. Look for positive streams to follow or articles to read. (My feeds are largely about sailing, scuba diving gardening or baking.) Choose extracurricular activities wisely. Research shows that pleasant activities, ones that give you a sense of purpose (such as volunteering), and ones that make you feel accomplished or masterful (such as learning a language) improve mental health. So pick up a new hobby, practice an instrument, work on improving at a sport. "The ability to exert control over something provides [a sense of self-satisfaction and contentment](#)," says Brad Stulberg, an executive coach in Asheville, N.C., and author of "Peak Performance." "And progress nourishes the soul."

Cultivate supportive relationships. People with strong relationships are emotionally healthier. So make a commitment to connect regularly with friends and family. Set a goal to reach out to one person a day. Ask about the other person and discuss something other than the day's awful news. And be open about how you are, because vulnerability can be bonding.

[Be grateful](#). Especially for your loved ones. And let them know. Everyone is feeling challenged right now. When I'm annoyed with someone in my life, I think of at least five things I love about the person. Often, I'm surprised that my list goes on and on. I'm smiling before I'm done counting.

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