

# Building Better Mental Health

Looking to boost your mood, handle your emotions better, or build resilience? These six life-changing strategies for improving mental health and well-being can show you how.



## Understanding good mental health

Your mental health influences how you think, feel, and behave in daily life. It also affects your ability to cope with stress, overcome challenges, build relationships, and recover from life's setbacks and hardships.

Strong mental health isn't just the absence of mental health problems. Being mentally or emotionally healthy is much more than being free of depression, anxiety, or other psychological issues. Rather than the absence of mental illness, mental health refers to the presence of positive characteristics.

People who are mentally healthy have:

- A sense of contentment.
- A zest for living and the ability to laugh and have fun.
- The ability to deal with stress and bounce back from adversity.
- A sense of meaning and purpose, in both their activities and their relationships.
- The flexibility to learn new skills and adapt to change.
- A balance between work and play, rest and activity, etc.
- The ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships.
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem.

Whether you're looking to cope with a specific mental health problem, handle your emotions better, or simply to feel more positive and energetic, there are plenty of ways to take control of your mental health—starting today.

The relationship between resilience and mental health

Having solid mental health doesn't mean that you never go through bad times or experience emotional problems. We all go through disappointments, loss, and change. And while these are normal parts of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety, and stress. But just as physically healthy people are better able to bounce back from illness or injury, people with strong mental health are better able to bounce back from adversity, trauma, and stress. This ability is called resilience.

People who are emotionally and mentally resilient have the tools for coping with difficult situations and maintaining a positive outlook. They remain focused, flexible, and productive, in bad times as well as good.

Their resilience also makes them less afraid of new experiences or an uncertain future. Even when they don't immediately know how a problem will get resolved, they are hopeful that a solution will eventually be found.

## Helpguide's 6 Keys to Mental Health



Anyone can suffer from mental or emotional health problems—and over a lifetime most of us will. This year alone, about one in five of us will suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. Yet, despite how common mental health problems are, many of us make no effort to improve our situation.

We ignore the emotional messages that tell us something is wrong and try toughing it out by distracting ourselves or self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, or self-destructive behaviors. We bottle up our problems in the hope that others won't notice. We hope that our situation will eventually improve on its own. Or we simply give up—telling ourselves this is “just the way we are.”

The good news is: you don't have to feel bad. There are practices you can adopt to elevate your mood, become more resilient, and enjoy life more. But just as it requires effort to build and maintain physical health, so it is with mental health. We have to work harder these days to ensure strong mental health, simply because there are so many ways that life takes a toll on our emotional well-being.

Why we often neglect our mental health needs

Even in today's advanced world, many of us are often reluctant—or unable—to address our mental health needs. This can stem from a variety of reasons, including:

In some societies, mental and emotional issues are seen as less legitimate than physical issues. They're seen as a sign of weakness or somehow as being our own fault.

Some people mistakenly see mental health problems as something we should know how to “snap out of.” Men, especially, would often rather bottle up their feelings than seek help.

In our fast-paced world, we're obsessed with seeking quick, simple answers to complex problems. We look for connection with others by [compulsively checking social media](#) instead of reaching out to people in the real world, for example. Or to boost our mood and ease depression, we'd rather pop a pill rather tackle the underlying issues.

Many people think that if they do seek help for mental and emotional problems, the only treatment options available are medication (which comes with unwanted side effects) or therapy (which can be lengthy and expensive). The truth is that, whatever your issues, there are steps you can take to improve the way you feel and experience greater mental and emotional well-being. And you can start today!

[Make social connection a priority—especially face-to-face](#)

No matter how much time you devote to improving your mental and emotional health, you will still need the company of others to feel and

function at your best. Humans are social creatures with emotional needs for relationships and positive connections to others. We're not meant to survive, let alone thrive, in isolation. Our social brains crave companionship—even when experience has made us shy and distrustful of others.

Why is face-to-face connection so important?

Phone calls and social networks have their place, but nothing can beat the stress-busting, mood-boosting power of quality face-to-face time with other people.

The key is to interact with someone who is a “good listener”—someone you can regularly talk to in person, who will listen to you without their own conceptions of how you should think or feel. A good listener will listen to the feelings behind your words, and won't interrupt, judge, or criticize you.

Reaching out is not a sign of weakness and it won't make you a burden to others. Most people are flattered if you trust them enough to confide in them. If you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, there are good ways to [build new friendships](#) and improve your support network. In the meantime, there is still a great benefit to interacting face-to-face with acquaintances or people you encounter during the day, such as neighbors, people in the checkout line or on the bus, or the person serving you your morning coffee. Make eye contact and exchange a smile, a friendly greeting, or small talk.

Tips for connecting to others

**Call a friend or loved one now and arrange to meet up.** If you both lead busy lives, offer to run errands or exercise together. Try to make it a regular get-together.

**If you don't feel that you have anyone to call, reach out to acquaintances.** Lots of other people feel just as uncomfortable about making new friends as you do—so be the one to break the ice.

Reconnect with an old friend, invite a coworker out for lunch, or ask a neighbor to join you for coffee.

**Get out from behind your TV or computer screen.** Communication is a largely nonverbal experience that requires you to have direct contact with other people, so don't neglect your real-world relationships in favor of virtual interaction.

**Be a joiner.** Join networking, social, or special interest groups that meet on a regular basis. These groups offer wonderful opportunities for meeting people with common interests.

**Don't be afraid to smile and say hello to strangers you cross paths with.** Making a connection is beneficial to both of you—and you never know where it may lead!

[Staying active is as good for the brain as it is for the body](#)

The mind and the body are intrinsically linked. When you improve your physical health, you'll automatically experience greater mental and emotional well-being. Physical activity also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals that lift your mood and provide added energy. Regular exercise or activity can have a [major impact on mental and emotional health problems](#), relieve stress, improve memory, and help you to sleep better.

But what if I hate to exercise?

Well, you're not alone. Pounding weights in a gym or jogging on a treadmill isn't everyone's idea of a great time. But you [don't have to be a fitness fanatic](#) to reap the benefits of being more active. Take a walk at lunchtime through a park, walk laps in an air-conditioned mall while window shopping, throw a Frisbee with a dog, dance to your favorite music, play activity-based video games with your kids, cycle or walk to an appointment rather than drive.

You don't have to exercise until you're soaked in sweat or every muscle aches. Even modest amounts of physical activity can make a

big difference to your mental and emotional health—and it's something you can engage in **right now** to boost your energy and outlook and help you regain a sense of control.

#### Tips for starting an exercise routine

- Aim for 30 minutes of activity on most days. If it's easier, three 10-minute sessions can be just as effective. **Start now** by taking a walk or dancing to a favorite song.
- Try rhythmic exercise that engages both your arms and legs, such as walking, running, swimming, weight training, martial arts, or dancing.
- Add a mindfulness element to your workouts. Instead of focusing on your thoughts, focus on how your body feels as you move—how your feet hit the ground, for example, the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of wind on your skin.

#### [Learn how to keep your stress levels in check](#)

Stress takes a heavy toll on mental and emotional health, so it's important to keep it under control. While not all stressors can be avoided, stress management strategies can help you bring things back into balance.

**Talk to a friendly face.** Face-to-face social interaction with someone who cares about you is the most effective way to calm your nervous system and relieve stress. Interacting with another person can quickly put the brakes on damaging stress responses like “fight-or-flight.” It also releases stress-busting hormones, so you'll feel better even if you're unable to alter the stressful situation itself.

**Appeal to your senses.** Does listening to an uplifting song make you feel calm? Or smelling ground coffee or a favorite scent? Or maybe squeezing a stress ball works quickly to make you feel centered? Everyone responds to [sensory input a little differently](#), so start experimenting now to find what works best for you. Once you discover



how your nervous system responds to sensory input, you'll be able to quickly calm yourself no matter where or when stress hits.

**Make leisure time a priority.** Partake in your favorite activities for no reason other than that they make you feel good. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Doing things just because they are fun is no indulgence. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.

**Make time for contemplation and appreciation.** Think about the things you're grateful for. Meditate, pray, enjoy the sunset, or simply take a moment to pay attention to what is good, positive, and beautiful as you go about your day.

**Take up a relaxation practice.** While sensory input can relieve stress in the moment, [relaxation techniques](#) can help reduce your overall levels of stress—although they're likely to take more time to learn effectively. Yoga, mindfulness meditation, deep breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation can put the brakes on stress and bring your mind and body back into a state of balance.

Manage your emotions to relieve stress

Understanding and accepting your emotions—especially those unpleasant ones many of us try to ignore—can make a huge difference in your ability to manage stress and balance your moods.

[Eat a brain-healthy diet to support strong mental health](#)

Unless you've tried to change your diet in the past, you may not be aware how much of what you eat—and don't eat—affects the way you think and feel. An unhealthy diet can take a toll on your brain and mood, disrupt your sleep, sap your energy, and weaken your immune system. Conversely, switching to a [wholesome diet](#), low in sugar and rich in healthy fats, can give you more energy, improve your sleep and mood, and help you to look and feel your best.



People respond slightly differently to certain foods, depending on genetics and other health factors, so experiment with how the food you include in—or cut from—your diet changes the way you feel. The best place to start is by cutting out the “bad fats” that can damage your mood and outlook, and replace them with “good fats” that support brain-health.

#### Foods that adversely affect mood

- Caffeine.
- Alcohol.
- Trans fats or anything with “partially hydrogenated” oil.
- Foods with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones.
- Sugary snacks.
- Refined carbs (such as white rice or white flour).
- Fried food.

#### Foods that boost mood

- Fatty fish rich in Omega-3s such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, tuna.
- Nuts such as walnuts, almonds, cashews, peanuts.
- Avocados.
- Flaxseed.
- Beans.
- Leafy greens such as spinach, kale, Brussel's sprouts.
- Fresh fruit such as blueberries.

## Don't skimp on sleep—it matters more than you think

If you lead a busy life, cutting back on sleep may seem like a smart move. But when it comes to your mental health, getting enough sleep is a necessity, not a luxury. Skipping even a few hours here and there can take a toll on your mood, energy, mental sharpness, and ability to handle stress. And over the long-term, chronic sleep loss can wreak havoc on your health and outlook.

While adults should aim for seven to nine hours of [quality sleep](#) each night, it's often unrealistic to expect sleep to come the moment you lay down and close your eyes. Your brain needs time to unwind at the end of the day. That means taking a break from the stimulation of screens—TV, phone, tablet, computer—in the two hours before bedtime, putting aside work, and postponing arguments, worrying, or brainstorming until the next day.

### Tips for getting better sleep

- If anxiety or chronic worrying dominates your thoughts at night, there are steps you can take to learn [how to stop worrying](#).
- To wind down, calm the mind, and prepare for sleep, try taking a warm bath, reading by a soft light, listening to soothing music, or [practicing a relaxation technique](#) before bed.
- To help set your body's internal clock and optimize the quality of your sleep, stick to a regular sleep-wake schedule, even on weekends.
- Make sure your bedroom is dark, cool, and quiet. Curtains, white noise machines, and fans can help.

## Find purpose and meaning in life

Everyone derives meaning and purpose in different ways that involve benefitting others, as well as yourself. You may think of it as a way to feel needed, feel good about yourself, a purpose that drives you on, or simply a reason to get out of bed in the morning. In biological terms, finding meaning and purpose is essential to brain health as it can help generate new cells and create new neural pathways in the brain. It can also strengthen your immune system, alleviate pain, relieve stress, and keep you motivated to pursue the other steps to improve mental and emotional health. However you derive meaning and purpose in life, it's important to do it every day.

What gives you meaning and purpose?

**Engaging work that provides meaning to yourself and others.** Partake in activities that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive, whether or not you get paid for them. Some ideas are gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something in your workshop.

**Relationships.** Spending quality time where you give of yourself to people who matter to you, whether they're friends, grandkids, or elderly relatives, can support both your health and theirs, while also providing a sense of purpose.

**Caring for a pet.** Yes, pets are a responsibility, but caring for one makes you feel needed and loved. There's no love quite as unconditional as the love a pet can give. Animals can also get you out of the house for exercise and expose you to new people and places.

**Volunteering.** Just as we're hard-wired to be social, we're also hard-wired to give to others. The meaning and purpose derived from helping others or the community can enrich and expand your life—and make you happier. There's no limit to the individual and group [volunteer](#) opportunities you can explore. Schools, churches, nonprofits, and charitable organizations of all sorts depend on volunteers for their survival.

**Caregiving.** Taking care of an aging parent, a handicapped spouse, or a child with a physical or mental illness is an act of kindness, love, and loyalty—and can be as rewarding and meaningful as it is challenging.

### [When to seek professional help](#)

If you've made consistent efforts to improve your mental and emotional health and still aren't functioning optimally at home, work, or in your relationships, it may be time to seek professional help. Following these self-help steps will still benefit you, though. In fact, input from a caring professional can often help motivate us to take better care of ourselves.

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