



▶▶▶▶ **Our minds need**
looking after too!

Promoting Good Mental Health
Fact sheet for community and health workers



What is Mental Health?

Everyday life can be stressful in many different ways. Problems in relationships, pressures at home or at work, worries about money or about our own or a loved one's physical health can cause stress and anxiety. During the time of major life events such as bereavement, divorce or the loss of a job the effects on our mental state can be devastating. Added to this is the rapid changing pace of our known world. Work patterns, values, the way we live all are being challenged, and this results in the need for our ability to cope with all these changes

As unique individuals, we all have different ways of coping. Some of us are able to deal with our stress and anxiety and cope with major life events comparatively easily. Others find these things more of a challenge.

Putting it simply, having good mental health means having the emotional and psychological strength and well-being to deal with the pressure, stress and anxiety of daily life. It is 'a positive sense of well-being and underlying belief in our own and others' dignity and worth.' (Health Education Authority, 1997)

Why do we need to look after our mental health?

To protect our physical health

There is a close link between physical health and mental well-being. Long-term mental distress, such as stress or depression often leads to physical health problems such as aches and pains, sleeplessness, dizziness, lethargy etc. Research shows that stress suppresses the body's immune system, reduces resistance to diseases like viral infections and increases the risk of high blood pressure, ulcer, heart

To prevent or reduce the risk of serious mental health problems

Common mental health problems include depression, anxiety, fears and phobias, eating disorders, self-harming behaviour. These problems can take some time to develop. Being aware of and looking after one's own mental wellbeing may help prevent more serious mental health problems from developing.

Our attitude to Mental Health

When we find ourselves feeling very low or stressed and anxious, many of us assume these feelings are simply part of life, and tend to ignore them. But when these feelings last too long and happen often, we might end up neglecting our mental health needs.. The main reason for this is our lack of awareness about how we can improve the way we feel. In addition, there is widespread ignorance about the term mental health itself:

- In every day language, the word 'mental' is often used to mean 'mad', for instance in 'mental case', 'mental patient' 'he's mental', etc.
- Many people are not at all clear about what the term 'mental health' means. It is frequently misunderstood as being about mental illness rather than mental health.
- Mental illness still, for many people, carries a serious social stigma and this can prevent us from taking a positive approach to our own mental health.

To improve our ability to cope with mental distress

When we look after our mental well-being, we can be in better position to cope with stresses of daily life. Particularly when facing a crisis such as divorce, bereavement or redundancy, it is even more important to be physically and mentally ready to deal with uncertainty and disruption. Developing better coping skills also means reducing our risk of resorting to health-damaging habits like eating too much or too little, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse etc.

To make us aware of indications of mental stress in those close to us

If we are aware of the way in which mental stress can affect people's behaviour, then we are more likely to be able to help them before it gets too serious. Symptoms such as sleeplessness or sleeping too much, reluctance to do anything, lethargy, problems with eating and self-harming behaviour are often indications of underlying mental health problems and need to be taken seriously.



What are the things that may help us feel better?

It is important to understand the ways in which stress and anxiety affect our physical and mental health. The more aware we are of the kinds of situations or aspects of our lives that lead us to feel down, low or depressed, the easier it is to identify what actions we need to take.

There are, however, many things that affect our mental health over which we do not have direct or immediate control, such as genetic factors (conditions that we inherit from our parents), our past experiences and our living conditions (including level of income, housing conditions, racism etc). However, it is also true that good mental health isn't something we have, but something we do.

There are many positive steps we can take that will help us strengthen our coping skills and help us improve our mental well-being.

Ten important self-help steps

1. Accepting and valuing ourselves

This means being aware of our strengths and our weaknesses and accepting ourselves for who we are. We can also learn to value ourselves and understand that every single person is of equal importance and deserves respect. This is important for our mental health it helps us find the confidence to face challenges in our lives.

2. Exercising and eating well

Both our bodies and our minds benefit from good diet and exercise. Eating a balanced diet can help protect against feelings of anxiety and depression. Physical activity, whether it is a workout in the gym or a simple walk, can do a great deal to help relieve tension because it releases the body's natural anti-depressants (known as endorphins).

3. Sleeping

Getting both regular and enough sleep has both physical and mental benefits. During sleep, the body renews its energy store. Sleep also helps us rebuild our mental energy.

4. Sharing the load

When we feel a heavy emotional load, talking to someone else about our feelings can help us enormously. If we simply bottle things up and don't talk about how we feel, problems can get out of proportion and seem much worse than they actually are.

5. Putting problems into perspective

The way we think about and interpret things and manage different aspects of our lives has a significant influence on our state of mind. Often, we blow problems up out of all proportion and allow our worries to take on huge

significance. Try asking yourself whether the thing you are worrying about will really matter in five years' time.

6. Nurturing relationships

If there are problems in our close relationships, this almost inevitably affects the way we feel. It is important to try to resolve the problems. The better our personal relationships are, the better we are able to deal life's problems.

7. Expressing feelings

Having a good laugh does wonders for us. Crying can also be very beneficial. Even though it may feel terrible at the time, having a good cry can help us to recover from a hurtful experience.

8. Learning to relax

Relaxation enable us to move away from the pressure and pace of daily life. Some people relax when listening to music, while others find relaxation in their hobbies or other interests. Some people find just lying or sitting down for twenty minutes and taking deep breaths helps them relax.

9. Balancing work and leisure

Remember, work isn't everything. If, like many people, you find work is regularly eating into your leisure time, recognise that this is a problem. Find ways to reduce your workload or to become more efficient and always make time for the things you enjoy.

10. Asking for help when we need it

The longer we leave a problem, the worse it will get. When you find it hard to help yourself, don't be scared to ask for help from a family member, a friend or a professional.



When to ask for help

We all experience sadness, anxiety or depression from time to time. This can make us feel low and, sometimes, out of control. For most of us, these feelings pass quickly without much of any external help, but sometimes, even with our efforts to help ourselves, they become persistent and start to interfere with our daily lives.

For example, feeling anxious is a part of being human. But some anxiety goes beyond normal worry when, for example, it involves constant unrealistic fears about safety, or persistent worries about the future or about things before they happen. Worries of this kind often result in people finding it hard to sleep properly or having nightmares. If this persists, it is important that we look for help.

We may need to seek professional help, for example, when:

- We feel that things have got out of control
- Our anxieties take over our lives and/or prevent us from doing the things we used to do
- We find life really difficult to manage on our own, or even with the support of friends and family
- Or there are serious problems in an important relationship that we cannot resolve

Professional help

For most of us, the starting point is a visit to the GP. He or she may offer some kind of medicine (such as anti-depressants or tranquillisers) or suggest a referral to a trained professional, such as a counsellor or therapist. Counsellors offer time and space to listen to you and help you develop different ways of approaching your particular situation. Some counsellors deal with particular subjects. For instance, marriage guidance counsellors will specifically deal with serious problems in a marriage or long-term relationship.

Therapists often take a longer term view, and can help you identify some of the underlying factors that might have led you to feel and react to situations in the ways you do. Therapists also encourage you to work out your own solutions. Both therapists and counsellors will also work with whole families if necessary, for instance when family relationships have broken down.

Many people are frightened to seek help. But our mental health is just as important as our physical health. And society's attitudes are changing, as more people come to understand that there is no shame attached to mental health problems. It is worth remembering that mental health problems are very widespread. The Mental Health Foundation says that, on average, one person in every four will have some sort of mental health problem in the course of one year. Nearly all of us have family members or friends who have had some kind of mental health problem.

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