

Five tips to improve your mental health

1. Take care of your body—eat, sleep, exercise

What you eat can greatly affect your mental health. Research shows a correlation between diets high in refined sugars impairs thinking and causes mood-related symptoms.

Tip: If you know you have a busy week ahead, meal prep on Sunday to ensure you have healthy meals and snacks during the week. Avoid snacks high in sugar—keep it simple with protein, vegetables, fruits and good fats like those found in nuts.

Without proper sleep, you're more likely to feel stressed throughout the day. Young adults and adults should be getting 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night in order to function properly and perform at peak productivity.

Tip: If you have trouble getting to sleep at night, establish a bedtime ritual—go to bed at the same time every night, try meditation, reading, or journaling. Television screens, computer screens and vigorous exercise all cause difficulties in falling asleep.

Exercise has been shown to improve mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative mood and by improving self-esteem and cognitive function. Spending as little as 20 minutes a day on exercise can actually increase your overall productivity, and decrease energy wasted from mental stress.

Tip: Schedule your workout at the time of day when your energy is highest. That may be first thing in the morning before work or school, or at lunchtime before the mid-afternoon lull hits, or in longer sessions at the weekend. Even a short walk can help clear your mind, improve your mood, and boost your energy level. Get up and move while you are working—take a walk around the office, or stretch by your desk.

2. Establish a support circle

A good group of friends is important for emotional health. Loneliness is a key risk factor for poor overall health. Friends can make a stressful situation much less taxing by providing outside perspectives and insights you may not have thought about. Find time to share and to listen. Take time to laugh, or even cry with friends—social connections can make all the difference in how you embrace the world.

Tip: A mental health problem doesn't mean that you're never able to support or laugh with someone else. In fact, laughter strengthens your immune system, boosts mood, diminishes pain, and protects you from the damaging effects of stress.

3. Find balance

Strive for balance between work and play, activity and rest, alone time and social time. Too much of any one thing, especially for sustained periods, can elevate stress and lead to emotional strain. It's easy to let the demands of work and family make it feel like relaxing isn't an option. But, you have to make sure you're getting a healthy balance in order to flourish psychologically.

Tip: Try taking up meditation or yoga to reduce stress and help relax your mind. Whether it's 20 minute self-meditation or an hour long yoga class, these activities incorporate techniques that encourage deep breathing, muscle relaxation and tranquility throughout your entire mind and body.

4. Take up a hobby

Whether it's cooking, volunteering, playing sports, exercising, playing an instrument, DIY projects, owning a pet, or gardening, finding a hobby you love helps you become more in-tune with yourself and lead a happier, healthier lifestyle. A hobby provides great emotional release and can help you cope with stressful situations. Hobbies encourage you to take a break and to focus away from work. Hobbies also offer a positive challenge and urge you to continue to learn new things, while also reminding you to stay present and connect you with others who have the same interest.

Tip: Choose hobbies that stop stress and compliment your current lifestyle. This will give you the opportunity to focus on something else while exercising your brain in new ways and teaching you new skills.

5. Love who you are

Loving yourself isn't always easy, and often, we can beat ourselves up and punish ourselves, thinking that will lead to change. Real change comes from loving who you are and embracing your gifts and talents. It is not selfish to care about yourself. Compassion for yourself means showing concern for your own feelings as well as for others. The emotions we feel about ourselves carry real chemicals with them. Shame and embarrassment raise cortisol levels and inflammation in the body. Being comfortable in your own skin and being proud of who you are is a great step in a healthy mind.

Tip: Say something positive about yourself every single day. Write it down and carry it around with you, or put it on your bathroom mirror so you see it as soon as you wake up in the morning. Be with people who support and love you the way you are.

Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)