



heretohelp

Mental health and substance use information you can trust



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE
BC DIVISION

tips for

improving mental health

primer fact sheets 2009 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



When it comes to our physical health, we all know what things to do to stay healthy. We might take the stairs instead of the elevator, or make sure we eat our veggies, or wear sunscreen to protect our skin. Safeguarding our mental health is just as important. Unfortunately many of us don't consciously make an effort to stay mentally healthy. Part of the reason for this might be that many people see mental health as only meaning not having symptoms of mental illness. In reality it is much, much more than that. Mental health means feeling good about who you are, having balance in your life and in your thinking, and being able to respond constructively to life's highs and lows. Everyone should practice good mental health; not only can it help protect you from mental illness, it can help you get the most of out of life.

Mental health means feeling good about who you are, having balance in your life and in your thinking, and being able to respond constructively to life's highs and lows.

So what does it take to be mentally healthier? Here are some tips and advice on protecting and improving your mental health:

Healthy bodies = Healthy minds

Exercise

We know how good it is for our bodies; but exercise is also good for our mental

health. Research confirms that exercise is a great stress reliever. It reduces muscle tension, improves blood flow and floods your body with feel-good chemicals. People who exercise often report having less anxiety. Exercise has also been shown to reduce symptoms of mild depression.

- *Tip:* The best way to increase your activity levels and see the mental

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mental health meter

Read the 5 statements below. For each statement decide if you agree or disagree with it.

- I'm able to enjoy the present instead of regretting the past and worrying about the future.
- When I'm faced with a difficult situation I focus on what I can learn from it.
- I make time for the things I love to do like hobbies, vacations or spending time with friends and family.
- I recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses and work on making both better.
- I cope well with change.

If you disagreed with any of these statements, or would like to take our full online mental health quiz* to find out about five features of mental well-being, please visit www.cmha.bc.ca and click on Mental Health Meter on the left side of the page.

**available in English only*

health benefits is to make small changes. Take a brisk walk on your lunch break. Play outside with the kids. Find ways to be active that fit into your schedule.

Eat well

OK, so you've heard it all before, eating right is good for your physical health. But evidence suggests that healthy eating can actually help boost your mental health too. Choosing the right foods more often and having a healthy breakfast and regular meals can give you slow burning energy. This can keep your mood and energy levels steady and keep irritability away. Certain kinds of nuts, fish, fruits and vegetables also contain ingredients that are good for both mind and body.

- *Tip:* For more information on making the right food choices, visit www.dialadietitian.org or call 811 on your phone to talk to a dietician for free.

Drink sensibly

Watch what you drink. Alcohol and caffeinated drinks like coffee, black tea, and cola can all affect your mental health. Alcohol is a depressant which means it slows down your brain activity. Because it's a depressant, if you're already feeling down about something when you drink, the problem can seem worse when you sober up. Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it temporarily gives you more energy. But caffeine can make you feel nervous, irritable or restless.

- *Tip:* Avoid certain drinks at bedtime. Don't drink caffeine or alcohol at least two hours before you go to bed. This can help reduce the effects these substances have on your sleep patterns.
- *Tip:* Get your H₂O. Drinking lots of water is important because it replenishes brain cells and helps fight fatigue.

you can have a diagnosed mental illness and still have mental health

A person can have a mental illness and still have positive mental health. Because mental illness can happen in cycles, most people have times when they are well. And during those times, people being treated for a mental disorder often have great mental health. This is because through the process of treatment and recovery, they have learned that taking care of their mental health can help prevent relapses in their mental illness, and help them stay well longer.



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Get enough sleep

Easier said than done, right? Difficult or not, if you don't get enough sleep you can feel sad, anxious, stressed or grumpy. It can also leave you so tired that it's hard to concentrate or get things done. Good-quality sleep rests the brain and repairs and replenishes brain cells. A refreshed brain helps our mood, decision-making and social interactions. If worrying thoughts keep you from getting a good night's sleep, see the next section on healthy thinking.

- *Tip:* Get into a routine. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day—including weekends.

Practice healthy thinking

We know that our thinking affects us. It's tied to how we feel emotionally and physically. It also affects how we decide to deal with things. We often hear about how we should practice positive thinking. The problem with positive thinking though, is that no one can think positively all the time. For example, it's probably hard to think positively about losing your job no matter how much of an optimist you are. So the best thing we can do is think in healthy, helpful ways. Healthy thinking is thinking about something in a balanced way. Balanced thinking means looking at all factors in a situation—the good, the bad, and the neutral—and then deciding how you feel about it. Practicing healthier, more balanced thinking can not only help you respond to life events and relationships better but it can also improve your confidence and self-esteem. It can do this by helping you see your good and not so good qualities in a realistic way.

- *Tip:* Talking to a professional about what's bothering you can really help. Counselors can help you by teaching you how to work through your issues and identify your “thinking traps” which are common ways of thinking that aren't balanced. You may have access to a counselor through school, work or through special services for your cultural or faith community.

Build a healthy support network

Having healthy relationships with friends, family and co-workers is vital to having good mental health. Not only can loved ones be there to lean on and help you get through hard times, they can also help build self-confidence and give you a sense of being valued. A

support network is valuable because friends and family can provide emotional support or practical help, like picking you up from the airport. Your support network can also help by sharing advice or information based on their own experiences.

- *Tip:* Put yourself out there. If you want to build up your support network, you need to take risks. Join a club or sports team, attend that family or work event, or reconnect with people you've lost touch with. Place yourself in situations where the type of people you are hoping to meet will be. If you're not shy, get talking! If you are shy, try situations with smaller groups of people, or start by calling an old friend or sending an email or letter.

connecting to things bigger than you is good for mental health

The desire to have a purpose, and connection to things bigger than ourselves, is one of the qualities that make us human. It boosts our mental health by giving us perspective and meaning, but it can also connect us to people who care about the same things we do and so build a stronger social support network:

- Connect to a cause you care about: join a rally, sign a petition, raise money or volunteer
- Find a spirituality to call your own: individual prayer or meditation, formal services of worship, or even connecting with nature

improving mental health where do I go from here?

While most people say that mental health is important to them, a recent national poll found that only two-thirds of people are committed to making changes to improve their own mental health. To maintain positive mental health you need to take positive action. Reading this sheet was a great start but there are more things you can do to protect yourself. The following resources can provide you with more information about positive mental health.

Resources available in English only:

BC Partners For Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for useful information on positive mental health including our Wellness Modules. These modules are worksheets that can help you learn important skills for maintaining your mental health. There are eight worksheets in total, covering:

- Mental Health Matters
- Stress and Well-Being
- Social Support
- Problem-Solving
- Anger Management
- Getting a Good Night's Sleep
- Eating and Living Well
- Healthy Thinking

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental disorder.

Your Local Crisis Line

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

Resources available in many languages:

*For the service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.



This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.