

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

It's All in Your Mind: Achieving Good Mental Health

It's on everyone's mind, in one form or another. While maintaining good mental health is just as important as maintaining good physical health, many of us don't devote as much attention and care to our psychological well-being as we do to our physical well-being. Why is that?

The Stigma of Seeking Help

For one thing, there is a stigma attached to seeking counselling, whether it's from psychologists, psychiatrists, marital or family counselors or social workers. The stigma of seeking counselling stems from some fundamental misunderstandings and cultural biases around mental illness itself. None of us wants to be perceived as mentally ill.

Indeed, the societal bias against the mentally ill has caused a great deal of unneeded distress. It may be the leading reason why those who need help, fail to get it.

The "Stiff Upper Lip" Syndrome

Another facet of the reluctance to access counselling services is the belief—extremely strong in Western culture, and in many other cultures as well—that needing and seeking support for psychological distress is a sign of weakness. We should be able to handle it on our own, we think. Keep a stiff upper lip, and—goodness, what will the neighbors think?

So we suffer in silence. Our relationships deteriorate; we experience depression and anxiety in record numbers; we may turn to alcohol, drugs or other behavior as coping mechanisms, and then these become problems of their own.

- How many of us have been distracted at work, found ourselves making more frequent mistakes or poor decisions, because we were preoccupied with a personal problem?
- How many of us have felt trapped in an unfulfilling personal relationship, or experiencing conflict with coworkers or loved ones, and not been sure what to do about it?
- How many of us have been concerned that one of our "habits"—smoking, drinking, even compulsive spending—was self-destructive, causing problems at work and at home?
- How many of us have found out about a partner's extramarital affair, or had one ourselves—and been devastated by it?
- How many of us have faced the death of a parent, spouse or child—and needed comfort and support as we worked through our grief?

These are just some of the issues—part and parcel of the human condition—that need to be addressed if we are to achieve good mental health.

What Good Will Talking Do?

Yet a third reason we may not seek the help we need is because we don't believe anyone can help us.

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We have a stereotypical image of lying on a therapist's couch, pouring out our heart and soul, while a therapist reclines in a chair, nods, mumbles "ummmm-hmmmmm" every so often, and takes copious amounts of notes.

Firstly, that's not what typically happens in a counselor's office. If it does (except in the most rigid forms of psychoanalysis), you have every right to choose another therapist.

Just the act of choosing to get help—taking some action for your problem—can make a marked difference in your outlook and your feelings of control over the things that are troubling you.

Okay…So What Do I Do to Achieve/Maintain Good Mental Health?

Mental health means striking a balance in all aspects of your life: social, physical, spiritual, economic and mental. Reaching a balance is a learning process. Your personal balance will be unique, and your challenge will be to stay mentally healthy by keeping that balance.

The following twelve tasks are the critical building blocks to good mental health:

1. **Build a healthy sense of self-esteem.** Know your strengths (and weaknesses); learn to love yourself because of, and in spite of them; ask for and receive respect.
2. **Receive as well as give.** Take time for yourself; accept compliments; don't let resentment build if you feel you give and get nothing in return.
3. **Create positive parenting, family and personal relationships.** Value each member of your family and close circle of friends; give and receive support; listen with open ears and open heart; be there for each other.
4. **Make friends who count.** Enrich your life with friendships that provide solace, comfort and fun.
5. **Figure out your priorities.** Do what's important; live in line with your principles. Consider your time and your energy precious resources, and spend them only on people and activities that have value.
6. **Create a reasonable budget and live within your means.** Financial troubles can spill into every area of your life. Get your financial house in order, make a budget and stick to it.
7. **Learn and practice healthy eating habits and exercise regularly.** Eat nutritious food that fuels your body and your mind; exercise as part of a healthy and active lifestyle, to relieve stress, relax and keep your body fit.
8. **Get involved in your community.** Participate as a volunteer in a community or cultural venue—you'll enrich your mind, your social networks… and your world.
9. **Learn to manage stress effectively.** Pay attention to your unique sources and symptoms of stress, and commit yourself to actively managing them.
10. **Find healthy ways to cope with changes that affect you.** "Change is the only constant." Even if you can't anticipate it, learn coping mechanisms for dealing with change that reduce your anxiety and allow you to navigate through periods of change in healthy and productive ways.
11. **Deal with your emotions.** Neither "acting in" (repressing your feelings) or "acting out" (expressing your feelings in destructive ways) are good for you or those around you. Talk it out, write it out, let yourself feel what you feel, and then find safe and constructive ways to express these feelings.
12. **Have a spirituality to call your own.** Whether through traditional or non-traditional means, engage in activities that enrich your life spiritually and philosophically. Find your "meaning in life" or "place in the universe"; find peace and make peace with yourself and others. Learn to let go and to forgive.

Easier said than done? Perhaps But the first step is always the hardest one to take, and choosing even one or two areas on which to focus can set you on the road to improving your outlook immensely.