

How to...

Look after your mental health



Mental Health
Foundation

What is mental health?

'Hi, how are you doing?'

'I'm good thanks, glad it's the weekend. You?'

'Bit fed up actually; it just feels like everything I do goes wrong.'

This conversation is about mental health. Mental health is about the way you think and feel and your ability to deal with ups and downs.

Being mentally healthy doesn't just mean that you don't have a mental health problem. If you have good mental health, you can:

- Make the most of your potential
- Cope with life
- Play a full part in your family, workplace, community, and among friends

Some people call mental health 'emotional health' or 'wellbeing'.

Mental health is everyone's business. We all have times when we feel down, stressed or frightened. Most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem, and this could happen to any one of us.

Everyone is different. You may bounce back from a setback, while someone else may feel weighed down by it for a long time.

Your mental health doesn't always stay the same. It can change as circumstances change and as you move through different stages in your life.

Unfortunately, stigma can be attached to mental health problems. This means that people feel uncomfortable about them and don't talk about them much. Many people don't even feel comfortable talking about their feelings. But it's healthy to know and say how you're feeling.

1. Talk about your feelings

Talking about your feelings can help you stay in good mental health and deal with times when you feel troubled.

Talking about your feelings isn't a sign of weakness; it's part of taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what you can to stay healthy.

Talking can be a way to cope with a problem you've been carrying around in your head for a while. Feeling listened to can help you feel more supported. And it works both ways. If you open up, it might encourage others to do the same.

It's not always easy to describe how you're feeling. If you can't think of one word, use lots. What does it feel like inside your head? What does it make you feel like doing?

You don't need to sit your loved ones down for a big conversation about your wellbeing. Many people feel more comfortable when these conversations develop naturally – maybe when you're doing something together. If it feels awkward at first, give it time. Make talking about your feelings something that you do.





2. Keep active

Regular exercise can boost your self-esteem and can help you concentrate, sleep, and look and feel better.

Exercise keeps the brain and your other vital organs healthy, and is also a significant benefit towards improving your mental health.

'I get a huge buzz from my rock 'n' roll class. Hours later, my legs ache, but I'm still smiling.'

Exercising doesn't just mean doing sport or going to the gym. Walks in the park, gardening or housework can also keep you active. Experts say that most people should do about 30 minutes' exercise at least five days a week. Try to make physical activity that you enjoy a part of your day.

'It's increased my confidence, as I've proved to myself that I can do things, and I'm also much fitter and have lost weight. We always have a lot of fun.'

3. Eat well

What we eat may affect how we feel – for example, caffeine and sugar can have an immediate effect.

But food can also have a long-lasting effect on your mental health. Your brain needs a mix of nutrients in order to stay healthy and function well, just like the other organs in your body. A diet that's good for your physical health is also good for your mental health. A healthy, balanced diet includes:

- Lots of different types of fruit and vegetables
- Wholegrain cereals or bread
- Nuts and seeds
- Dairy products
- Oily fish
- Plenty of water

Three meals a day or five smaller snacks throughout the day, plus plenty of water, is ideal for maintaining good mental health. Try to limit how many high-caffeine, sugary drinks or how much alcohol you have.





4. Drink sensibly

We often drink alcohol to change our mood. Some people drink to deal with fear or loneliness, but the effect is only temporary.

When the drink wears off, you feel worse because of the way the alcohol has affected your brain and the rest of your body. Drinking is not a good way to manage difficult feelings.

Apart from the damage that too much alcohol can do to your body, you would need more and more alcohol each time to feel the same. This is called building 'tolerance' to the substance. The approaches in this booklet are healthier ways of coping with tough times.

Occasional light drinking is perfectly healthy and enjoyable for most people. Stay within the recommended daily alcohol limits:

- Three to four units a day for men
- Two to three units a day for women

Visit www.drinkaware.co.uk for more information.

Many people smoke or use drugs or other substances to change how they feel. But, again, the effects are short-lived. Just like alcohol, the more you use, the more you crave. Nicotine and drugs don't deal with the causes of difficult feelings. They don't solve problems.

Visit www.talktofrank.co.uk for more information.

5. Keep in touch

Strong family ties and supportive friends can help you deal with the stresses of life.

Friends and family can make you feel included and cared for. They can offer different views from whatever's going on inside your own head. They can help keep you active, keep you grounded and can help you solve practical problems.

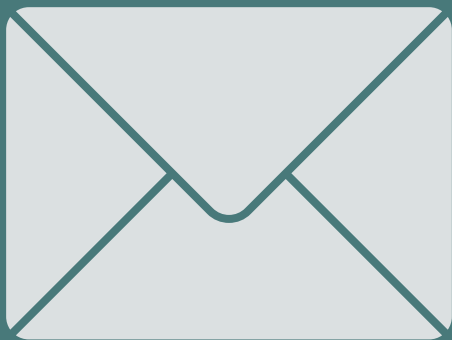
There's nothing better than catching up with someone face to face, but that's not always possible. You can also give them a call, drop them a note, or chat to them online instead. Keep the lines of communication open: it's good for you!

If you're feeling out of touch with some people, look back at our section on talking about your feelings and get started!

It's worth working at relationships that make you feel loved or valued. But, if you think being around someone is damaging your mental health, it may be best to take a break from them or call it a day completely. It's possible to end a relationship in a way that feels okay for both of you.

It can be hard to cope when someone close to you dies or if you lose them in another way. Counselling for bereavement or loss can help you explore your feelings. The next section suggests how to find a counsellor.

'Just chilling out with friends relaxes me. We have a laugh and I feel good.'



6. Ask for help

None of us are superhuman. We all sometimes get tired or overwhelmed by how we feel or when things don't go to plan.

If things are getting too much for you and you feel you can't cope, ask for help. Your family or friends may be able to offer practical help or a listening ear. Local services are there to help you. For example, you could:

- Join a support group, like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, to help you make changes to your life
- Visit www.self-help.org.uk for more information about groups across the UK
- Find a counsellor to help you manage your feelings
- Visit a Citizens Advice bureau, or contact StepChange if you want advice on debt
 - www.citizensadvice.org.uk
 - <http://www.stepchange.org/>

Your GP may be able to refer you to a counsellor. For information about how to find a qualified counsellor yourself, see page 24.

You can also consider getting help from your GP if difficult feelings are:

- Stopping you from getting on with life
- Having a big impact on the people you live or work with
- Affecting your mood over several weeks

Over a third of visits to GPs are about mental health. Your GP may suggest ways that you or your family can help you, or they may refer you to a specialist or another part of the health service.





7. Take a break

A change of scene or a change of pace is good for your mental health.

It could be a five-minute pause from cleaning your kitchen, a half-hour lunch break at work, or a weekend exploring somewhere new. A few minutes can be enough to de-stress you. Give yourself some 'me time'.

Taking a break may mean being very active. It may mean not doing very much at all. Take a deep breath... and relax. Try yoga or meditation, or just putting your feet up.

Listen to your body. If you're really tired, give yourself time to sleep. Without good sleep, our mental health suffers and our concentration goes downhill. Sometimes the world can wait.

You can download our relaxation podcasts at www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help/podcasts-and-videos.

'Sometimes when I'm sitting on the bus, I let my thoughts flow and it really helps me.'

8. Do something you're good at

What do you love doing? What activities can you lose yourself in? What did you love doing in the past?

Enjoying yourself can help beat stress. Doing an activity you enjoy probably means you're good at it, and achieving something boosts your self-esteem. Concentrating on a hobby, like gardening or doing crosswords, can help you forget your worries for a while and can change your mood.

It can be good to have an interest where you're not seen as someone's mum or dad, partner or employee. You're just you. An hour of sketching lets you express yourself creatively. A morning on the football pitch gets you active and gives you the chance to meet new people.

'I'm learning the guitar. You have to really concentrate on getting it right so there's no room in my head for worries.'





9. Accept who you are

Some of us make people laugh, some are good at maths, and others cook fantastic meals.

Some of us share our lifestyle with the people who live close to us, others live very differently.

We're all different. It's much healthier to accept that you're unique than to wish you were more like someone else. Feeling good about yourself boosts your confidence to learn new skills, visit new places and make new friends. Good self-esteem helps you cope when life takes a difficult turn.

Be proud of who you are. Recognise and accept the things you may not be good at, but also focus on what you can do well. If there's anything about yourself you would like to change, are your expectations realistic? If they are, work towards the change in small steps.

'Being happy with who I am now means I enjoy living in the moment.'

10. Care for others

Caring for others is often an important part of keeping up relationships with people close to you. It can even bring you closer together.

Why not share your skills more widely by volunteering for a local charity? Helping out can make us feel needed and valued, and that boosts our self-esteem. It also helps us to see the world from another angle. This can help to put our own problems in perspective.

Find out more about volunteering at www.do-it.org.uk.

Caring for a pet can improve your wellbeing too. The bond between you and your pet can be as strong as between people. Looking after a pet can bring structure to your day and can act as a link to other people. For example, some people make friends by chatting to fellow dog walkers.

'Friends are really important... We help each other whenever we can, so it's a two-way street, and supporting them uplifts me.'



Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

Our website offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Confidential help and support

The Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

www.samaritans.org

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Counselling

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

www.bacp.co.uk

Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk

Telephone: 01455 883300

UK Council for Psychotherapy

www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Email: info@ukcp.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7014 9955

General health information

NHS 111 provides information 24 hours a day.

www.nhs.uk

Telephone: 111

**We hope you found this booklet
informative and useful.**

Please consider making a donation to help us
continue our vital work:

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/donate

The Mental Health Foundation

Good mental health for all

Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.



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