# Mental Health: Maintaining a Healthy Lifestyle

Mental health is part of overall health. Just like we can't be well without good mental health, we can't be healthy if we neglect the rest of our body. When dealing with a mental health condition it can be easy to fall into a rut, relying solely on medication or therapy to be your cure and forgetting to take good care of your body. However, paying attention to lifestyle choices is important for recovery as well.

## Get Active

Engage in any type of physical activity for at least 20 minutes a day. It doesn't matter the type of activity—what matters is to do it. Studies have shown that exercise can reduce anxiety and depression and improve mood, self-esteem and cognitive function. In addition, exercise can prevent or treat medical conditions like obesity, cardiovascular disease, stroke and Type 2 diabetes, and it improves your overall quality of physical health, making you more resistant to illnesses. Some medications taken by individuals being treated for mental health conditions like second-generation, atypical antipsychotic medications used to treat bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, lead to an increased risk for obesity.

## Eat Healthy

A healthy diet emphasizes having the appropriate portions of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or fat-free milk products and should include lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts. Fats and sugars should be limited. People experiencing mental health conditions in particular should aim for a diet low in refined sugar as research has shown that a diet high in refined sugar is associated with worsening symptoms. For more information about how diet can affect mental health, visit ChooseMyPlate.gov.

## Become Mindful

Mindfulness can simply be translated to "self-awareness." It is the process of focusing the mind, body and soul on what is being sensed in this moment, and it gives you the insight to observe and understand negative feelings from a distance.

Mindfulness practices can help relieve stress, improve sleep, and reduce chronic pain, blood pressure and symptoms of heart disease. It also has the power to change the way your brain functions. Studies have found that activities such as meditation and yoga increase the number of signaling connections in the brain and provide better control over processing pain and emotions.

## Avoid Substance Abuse and Smoking

Abusing drugs and alcohol may seem like an effective way to cope with symptoms of a mental illness, but they can actually make a condition worse.

In addition, certain antipsychotic medications cause an increased risk of heart disease. Smoking will elevate this risk even further. Medications are also broken down faster in people who smoke, meaning that smokers being treated with medication for a mental health condition have to take higher doses than nonsmokers, which can lead to more unpleasant side effects.

Though it can seem daunting, quitting is important for both your mental and physical health. For more information on quitting, visit smokefree.gov.

## Try to Think Positive

The thoughts and perceptions we have of ourselves influence how we feel and behave. Low self-esteem is a symptom associated with many mental health conditions including (but not limited to) depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and personality disorders. Here are tips to improve your self-esteem.

- Eliminate negative thoughts or counter them with positive affirmations.
- Find something you love doing and embrace it.
- Learn a new skill.
- Look after yourself. When we feel down it's often easy to neglect ourselves.
- Spend time with people who bring you up.
- Set goals and reward yourself for accomplishing them.

## Get a Good Night's Sleep

Sleep problems and mental health conditions can become a vicious cycle. A person experiencing an anxiety disorder could feel too anxious to fall asleep at night, leaving them feeling frazzled the next day and increasing their anxiety, eventually making it even harder for them to fall asleep the next night.

## Have a Support System

Being affected by a mental health condition can sometimes make you feel isolated and overwhelmed. Since dealing with one of these illnesses can already be tough it's important to find a support system that you can rely on. Being able to talk to a trusted friend, family member, support group or mentor can provide relief and assistance in times of need.

**For more information visit [www.nami.org](www.nami.org).**