



Taking Care of Your Mental Health

Mental health is a vital part of your overall health. Physical and mental health are interconnected and affect each other.

Mental health also involves emotional and social well-being. Emotions affect how you think, feel, and act. The social aspect of mental health determines how you relate to others and make choices. And a healthy mind also helps you handle stress.

Each year in May is Mental Health Awareness month. The focus is for people to be better informed and have fewer biases toward those who may have mental illnesses. Having a better understanding of mental health can make it easier to get help when needed and to support others who may be facing mental health challenges.

As mental health problems can affect many aspects of life, it's important to know the basics such as common causes, signs and symptoms, ways to practice self-care, how to find professional help, and how to live with a mental condition.

Some common causes of mental illness

Mental issues and disorders can arise from:

- Biological factors that may involve genes or brain chemistry
- Serious health conditions such as cancer or heart disease
- Trauma, abuse, or other stressful life experiences
- A family history of mental problems

Warning signs and symptoms

What are the early symptoms of mental health concerns? If you or someone you know has these symptoms, it may be time to consider seeking help:

- Overeating or not eating enough
- Distancing yourself from your usual activities and from friends and family
- Lacking energy
- Feeling like nothing matters
- Noticing aches and pains with no known reason for them
- Feeling hopeless
- Being confused or forgetful
- Feeling angry, upset, worried, on edge, or scared
- Yelling at family or friends
- Dealing with mood swings
- Thinking about harming others or yourself
- Smoking or drinking more than usual
- Finding it difficult to do daily tasks such as going to work or caring for your family

Choosing ways to practice self-care

LaToya White is a Well-Being Coach at American Specialty Health. She holds an MSW (Master of Social Work) and an LSW (Licensed Social Worker). She advocates for self-care for those who are noticing these early signs and symptoms. Self-care refers to taking care of both your physical and mental health. Acts of self-care can give you more energy. White shares some helpful self-care tools:

- Deep breathing to regulate the heart rate
- Exercise to increase adrenaline flow
- Adequate sleep for proper rest
- Connecting with others, perhaps through volunteer work or at a school

“Everyone’s preference for self-care is different,” White says. “I recommend members try more than one skill to find what works best for them. While testing out these skills, journal which ones have the highest success when you are feeling stressed.”

Different approaches may help the same person at different times, too. You may find, for example, that deep breathing before an important work meeting is successful. Then taking a walk in the evening may help ease home stress.

More ways to practice self-care to improve mental health

Here are a few more ways to try self-care if you notice symptoms of mental issues:

- **Eat healthy foods.** Whole foods such as fruits and veggies and whole grain breads can help you feel good.
- **Stay well hydrated throughout the day.**
- **Get enough good-quality sleep by creating a sleep hygiene routine.** You may want to try putting away devices well before bedtime to reduce the harmful effects of blue light on sleep.
- **Practice gratitude.** You may want to make a daily list of what you are grateful for. Keep a journal or a document on your computer. Then you can refer back to this when you are feeling down.
- **Engage in relaxing activities.** Do something you enjoy. Listen to music, read, walk in nature, or meditate. Plan these activities and note them on your calendar so they don’t get overlooked.

How to know when to seek professional help

How do you know when self-care alone is not enough? White says, “A general rule of thumb I like to follow is if symptoms are interfering or keeping you from doing daily activities, such as what you do at work , school, or home, or you are not keeping up with proper hygiene, it is a good time to reach out for support.”

Some symptoms are milder in their effect on daily life. You may feel a bit down, for example. Or you may have trouble sleeping. Professionals can help. But if you have more severe symptoms, it’s vital that you get in touch with a doctor or mental health professional. These symptoms include:

- Finding it hard to get up in the morning due to how you are feeling
- Having a difficult time concentrating
- Losing interest in activities you usually enjoy
- Being unable to do daily activities of living
- Thinking about self-harm or suicide

Reach out to a professional to get help. You may want to start by talking with your primary care doctor. And if you ever experience suicidal ideations or thoughts of harming yourself, contact the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988 or 911 right away.

How you can be a part of the well-being coaching program

As a member of Active&Fit Direct, one-on-one coaching is a feature of the program and comes at no extra cost. Enroll in the Active&Fit Direct program through your company website link. Log into Active&Fit Direct and call the phone number at the bottom of your Dashboard to enroll. Simply sign up and get started enriching your life with this program benefit.

A personalized plan can help

A coach or healthcare professional can help you figure out what will be most beneficial to tackle what you are struggling with. “There are different routes to self-care and mental health concerns,” White says. “No one size fits all. Through coaching, members learn to identify the signs and symptoms of stress. They learn different tools to manage their stress.”

Will the coaching program continue if you are referred to a healthcare professional?

Coaches may refer members to a medical provider for further evaluation and treatment. This may be a licensed mental health therapist or a primary care doctor. “Coaching does not always have to halt once this referral is made,” White explains. “The coaching focus may shift to another area, or to work on habits

and routines recommended by the healthcare professional if coaching is still the right support for that.”

As an example of this team approach, White gives the example of setting health goals. Members work with their coach on SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-Oriented). These SMART goals will allow space for the member to explore current habits, begin to create new healthy habits, and learn from things that may not work.

What you can do to live well with a mental health condition

Living with a mental health condition can be challenging. Along with professional help, you can do things to make day-to-day life more comfortable. Make the effort to practice good self-care: eat well, get enough sleep, exercise, and keep in contact with friends and family. You can also:

- **Follow your treatment plan.** Keep taking any medication or going to therapy, even if you begin to feel better. Follow your doctor’s guidance.

- **Partner with your coach.** Your coach can help you learn how to change habits, consider new perspectives, set achievable goals to build confidence in yourself, and work through barriers that might get in your way. Your coach can also help you consider what other kinds of support might help you reach your goals.
- **Keep your primary care doctor in the loop.** Let your doctor know if you are going to another health care professional or going to therapy. If your meds are changed by anyone else, let your primary care doctor know, too.
- **Learn more about mental health.** You will understand more about yourself. And you can help friends and family be more supportive.

Early help is key to dealing with mental health issues. Pay attention to troubling signs and symptoms and seek the help you need. Self-care may be enough, but counseling or medical care may be the best choice. A coach can help you navigate the many options for good mental health. It is possible to manage issues, overcome challenges, and live your best life.

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