

It's Mental Health Week!



This year, the Canadian Mental Health Association's **Mental Health Week** is May 6th to May 12th. The goal of **Mental Health Week** is to "encourage people from all walks of life to learn, talk, reflect and engage with others on all issues relating to mental health, and encouraging mental health for all."

One of this year's focuses is on *Maintaining Your Mental Health*.

Keeping mentally fit requires that you set aside some time to focus on you. Taking this time may allow you to recognize the things that cause you stress, and to discover what you can do to become more resilient. Life is full of risks and challenges. Recognizing stress, understanding the importance of practicing mind and body fitness and learning traits that make you more resilient will help to keep you mentally healthy.

A CONFIDENTIAL SERVICE PROVIDED 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. 1.800.663.1142

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Quick tips to

MANAGE STRESS



While we all talk about stress, many of us don't really understand what it is and how it affects us. Stress is our body's response to a demanding or threatening situation. When we experience stress, our body tries to meet the demands of the situation by releasing adrenaline; pumping more blood to the heart and muscles and shutting down all non-essential functions. What can we do to ensure we don't end up paying a toll with our health, vitality, and peace-of-mind? Here are some suggestions for increasing stress resistance and avoiding burn out down the road:

INCREASING STRESS RESISTANCE AND AVOIDING BURN OUT

Laughter. Laughter can reduce stress, boost your immune system functioning, and help discharge pent up emotion. If you can't make yourself laugh, then go see someone who makes people laugh for a living, like a comic.

Breathe. Be aware of your breathing. Think "my body can relax," inhale slowly and purposefully noticing the breath as it enters through your nostrils and fills your lungs. Expand your abdomen as you breathe to the count of four, hold the breath for a moment, and slowly exhale to the count of four. For your second breath, visualize warmth and relaxation entering your body as you inhale; tension exiting your body as you exhale. This is a good technique to use when you get a stressful phone call, for example. Put the person on hold, take your breath, release it slowly and thoughtfully, then return to the call.

Say 'no.' Are you a "yay-sayer" (i.e. "sure, I'll do all the cooking for the party," "certainly, I can work overtime anytime you need me to")? Think about the things that you would like to do and separate these from the things that you have to do. Begin to say "no" to some of the expectations other people place upon you if they aren't "have to's." A cautionary note, however. Sometimes we have to do things that we don't like despite temporary feelings of discomfort. You are the best judge. Do what takes care of you, your career, your family, and your relationships. Everything else you agree to is a bonus and should only be considered if you have time and energy.

Set reasonable goals and strive to do your best. Learn from mistakes and failure and don't beat yourself up when things go wrong. Be a bit easier on yourself.

Play with a pet. Playing with a pet can distract you from your worries. So rather than ruminate and feel stressed, focus your thoughts on your pet and thereby begin to feel better. Additionally, playing with your pet may offer you a chance to get active. If you have an animal that likes to run outside, go out and throw a ball for it to retrieve. You'll feel refreshed and consequently, less stressed.

Simplify. A sure way to reduce stress is to do less and re-evaluate your commitments. Is it important that you belong to the bowling league, bridge club, own a luxury car, raise five children, and coach the swimming team? If so, why? Choose one or two activities that you truly enjoy and re-evaluate your commitment to the others. When you reduce the demands on your time, you will have more leisure time and may have less stress.



Get active. Regular aerobic exercise (repetitive movement of large muscle groups as in walking, jogging, swimming) is a healthy and effective way to manage stress. In addition to improving your physical well-being, it can have a positive effect on your mood and your body's immune system. A word about exercise: more is not necessarily better. Too vigorous a workout may suppress your body's immune functioning. This isn't an issue for most of us, however. Just getting enough exercise is the challenge.

Eat well. Stress drains your body of energy. Consequently, you need to ensure that you nourish your body with the nutrients it needs to combat stress, and limit your intake of foods that aggravate stress. This means eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, grains, dairy products, and lean meats, if you like. Also, reduce your intake of caffeine (from coffee and colas) and substitute with green tea.

Talk to others. One of the best ways to manage stress is to share your feelings with others. Supportive relationships will help you manage stress. Find a friend or someone who you feel comfortable sharing things with, and tell them about your day. Similar to the effect of laughter, talking with friends and "getting it off your chest" can help improve your body's physical health. Regardless of whether or not these conversations lead to "solutions" and ways to change your circumstances, just talking things out will help reduce stress.

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Learning to **ADAPT AND BUILD RESILIENCE**



How often have you crossed paths with individuals who seem to navigate the bumpy road of life with comfort and ease...“the glass is half full”...“live each moment to the fullest”...“make lemonade when life gives you lemons” ? You might attribute their positive attitude and strength to exceptional luck in dodging life’s stressful events. What enables them to stay strong and in control when things go wrong?

Research has shown that these individuals have successfully engaged their own personal strategy for building *resilience* — a personal trait that allows them to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress. Can you develop resilience, hardiness, and a talent for good fortune? Absolutely!

TRAITS THAT PROMOTE RESILIENCE AND YOUR ABILITY TO BOUNCE BACK

Resilient people have a passion or purpose that nourishes and sustains them. Build your resilience by identifying those things that “light your fire”, bringing you a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction — then figure out how to translate your desire into action.

Establish and maintain good relationships with close family members, friends, or significant others. Make a commitment to spend time with people who genuinely care for you and accept their encouragement and support. Many people find that being active in a community group, faith-based organization, or a support group can provide a sense of connectedness. When we share information, ideas, and emotions, we help one another and get comfort from knowing that we are not alone in facing the challenges that day-to-day living can bring.

Stay flexible. Resilience involves staying flexible as you deal with stressful circumstances and traumatic events. Learn when to allow yourself to experience strong emotions and realize when it is better to avoid them in order to maintain your balance. Choose when to step forward to deal with your problems and struggles and when to step back to rest and re-energize yourself.

Insist on moving toward your goals. Make realistic plans and take the necessary steps to carry them out. Ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Learn from life's unpleasant experiences. Taking the time to acknowledge your struggles provides an opportunity to learn about yourself. You may realize how you have grown because of dealing with a hardship or stressful event.

Invest in your physical and emotional health. Do whatever it takes to get out and exercise. Choose an activity that you enjoy. Start slowly and increase gradually as you become more comfortable. Walking is very popular and does not require special equipment. Other good exercises include swimming, biking, jogging and dancing. Invest time in maintaining good nutritional habits and eating well. There are many resource materials to help you get started in developing good health habits, and getting help when you need it is crucial in building and maintaining your resilience.

Expect good outcomes and be optimistic. Optimism is a vital ingredient for a life that is creative, productive, and resilient. Research shows that optimists live longer, enjoy better health, and do better in relationships, work and sports. For some, optimism comes naturally but for many a positive attitude towards life must be learned and cultivated. There are many self-help books, seminars, workshops and motivational speakers that can help you in developing the tools to cultivate a positive attitude.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. Develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts. Believe that you are a valuable, capable person who can influence the environment and what happens in your life. If you respect yourself, you can respect others, improve your relationships, your achievements and your happiness.

Change is inevitable. Our journey on life's road will be full of twists and turns. The ability to handle change is a key survival skill for all resilient people. Try to anticipate and look ahead to see what's coming. That way you will be better prepared for the next change. Make a conscious effort to stay flexible. Give yourself a break when you are learning new skills or making a personal change. Be patient with yourself and others in the face of change.

Endeavor to be empathetic towards difficult people. Mentally healthy people have the tendency to try and view life from other points of view besides their own. Empathy is easy with someone you know and like. But how do you react to those people who are less than "likeable?" Remember to remain confident, do not over-react as it will only escalate the conflict and confuse the issue. Approach difficult situations with integrity and a positive attitude. Don't let bitterness, anger, or resentment grow.



GETTING HELP WHEN YOU ARE IN NEED IS CRUCIAL IN BUILDING AND MAINTAINING YOUR RESILIENCE.

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