

MAINTAINING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Whether you realize it or not, mental health plays a big role in your overall well-being. When you're mentally healthy, you are able to enjoy your life and the people in it, feel good about yourself, keep up good relationships, and deal with stress. It's normal for your mental health to shift over time – we all face difficult situations in our lives. Creating positive habits is a great way to support your mental health when you're doing well and helps you build skills to use if you do face symptoms of a mental health condition.

FOOD CHOICES AND NUTRITION

The quality of food you eat can impact your overall physical and mental health. Your gut is often called "the second brain" and communicates with your actual brain – physically through the vagus nerve and chemically through hormones and neurotransmitters (chemical messengers that carry signals between cells). The bacteria, viruses, and fungi that live in the gut are called the "gut microbiome" – eating nutritious foods is the number one thing you can do to keep your gut microbiome healthy and protect your brain.

Important nutrients for mental health:¹

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS:

essential to brain health and reduce inflammation and risk of heart disease

B-GROUP VITAMINS:

help to regulate brain chemicals, immune function, and amino acids (the building blocks of proteins)

VITAMIN D:

important for brain function, including mood and critical thinking

Learn more at mhanational.org/food and mhanational.org/gut-brain.

EXERCISE

Staying active benefits many aspects of health and can prevent physical and mental health symptoms from worsening. Making time for exercise and movement each day improves self-esteem, brain function, and sleep and has been found to lessen social withdrawal and stress.

Getting exercise doesn't have to be intimidating!

You don't have to work out for hours on end – just 15 minutes of intense exercise at a time, ten times a week, will get you the recommended amount of physical activity. Just one hour of exercise per week can help prevent symptoms of depression.²

Choose activities that are easy to work into your life – walk the dog for an extra 20 minutes or do some floor exercises while you're watching a movie or your favorite show.

Learn more at mhanational.org/exercise.

SLEEP

Your health heavily depends on how rested you are. Sleep plays a role in your moods, ability to learn and make memories, organ health, immune system, and other bodily functions like appetite, metabolism, and hormone release.³ It also helps the body re-energize its cells and clear out toxins.⁴

Quality of sleep matters, not just how many hours you get.

Good quality sleep means:⁵

 **BEING ASLEEP FOR 85% OF THE TIME YOU'RE IN BED OR MORE.**

 **FALLING ASLEEP IN UNDER 30 MINUTES.**

 **WAKING UP NO MORE THAN ONCE PER NIGHT FOR NO LONGER THAN 20 MINUTES.**

Learn more at mhanational.org/sleep.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Dealing with stress is a normal part of life – we all experience it during times of too much responsibility, too little sleep, or external worries like money or relationships. In most cases, stress comes and goes fairly quickly, and the body can return to its typical state. However, consistently high stress – because you are unable to relieve your stress or are constantly facing stressful situations (chronic stress) – can negatively impact attention, memory, and how you deal with emotions in the long term.

Learn more at mhanational.org/stress.

IDENTIFY COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are activities or strategies you can use to reduce or tolerate tough feelings. No one thing works for everyone, so it might take a few tries to figure out what helps you. Test out a range of techniques so that you're prepared for those times when your well-being starts to slip.

You may want to keep a running list (on your phone or on paper) of what works for you, like calling a friend or doing an at-home workout. This makes it easier to get started when you're in a tough mental state.

If you're starting from scratch, MHA has resources for "Building Your Coping Toolbox."

Learn more at mhanational.org/coping-toolbox and mhanational.org/manage-emotions.

BUILD A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Having people in your life who you relate to and can lean on goes a long way in improving your mood and general well-being. Humans are social beings, and our brains are wired to seek connection. Having people to support you during times of hardship protects your long-term mental health. Not only can a strong social support system often prevent mental health concerns or symptoms from developing into a diagnosable mental health condition – a strong social support system has also been shown to improve overall outcomes in recovering from a mental health condition.

Find your people:

Connect with people over shared hobbies and interests – it's less intimidating to make new friends when you already have something in common.

Consider community service or volunteering. Giving back is a great way to feel less alone – you'll meet new people and likely learn about local events and resources.

Focus on quality relationships – having one person you really trust will serve you better than many surface-level connections.

Learn more at mhanational.org/social-connections.



A graphic with a dark blue background. In the center, a laptop and a tablet are shown. The laptop screen displays the MHA website, and the tablet screen shows a checklist or form. Below the devices, the text "IF YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH OR JUST WANT TO CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF, TAKE A SCREEN AT MHASCREENING.ORG." is written in white, bold, uppercase letters.

SOURCES

- 1 Seide, M. (2022, January 27). *Vitamins and supplements to boost your mood and brain health*. <https://www.verywellmind.com/your-brain-needs-these-vitamins-5114455>
- 2 Harvey, S.B., Øverland, S., et al. (2017). Exercise and the prevention of depression: Results of the HUNT Cohort Study. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 175(1), 28-36. <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ajp.2017.16111223>
- 3 National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. *Sleep deprivation and deficiency*. <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/sleep-deprivation-and-deficiency>
- 4 Xie, L., Kang, H., et al. (2013). Sleep drives metabolite clearance from the adult brain. *Science*, 342(6156), 373-377. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1241224>
- 5 The National Sleep Foundation. (2020, October 28). *What is sleep quality*. <https://www.thensf.org/what-is-sleep-quality/>

