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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

tips for improving mental health

info sheets 2013 www.heretohelp.bc.ca



*Mental health means
feeling good about
who you are, having
balance in your life
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When it comes to our physical health, we all have strategies to stay healthy. We might take the stairs instead of the elevator, make sure we eat our veggies, or wear sunscreen to protect our skin. Safeguarding our mental health is just as important. Unfortunately, many of us don't consciously make an effort to stay mentally healthy. Many people see mental health as only meaning not having symptoms of mental illness. In reality it is much, much more than that. Mental health means feeling good about who you are, having balance in your life and in your thinking, and responding constructively to life's highs and lows. Everyone should practice good mental health. It help protect you from mental illness, and it can help you get the most of out of life.

So what does it take to be mentally healthier? Here are some tips and advice on protecting and improving your mental health:

Healthy bodies = Healthy minds

Exercise—We know how good it is for our bodies, and exercise is also good for our mental health. Research confirms that exercise is a great stress reliever. It reduces muscle tension, improves blood flow and floods your

body with feel-good chemicals. People who exercise often report having less anxiety. Exercise has also been shown to reduce symptoms of mild depression.

- **Tip:** Small changes can lead to a big difference. Take a brisk walk on your lunch break. Play outside with the kids. Find activities you enjoy and work them into your schedule. Aim for realistic goals—no one becomes a marathon runner overnight.

improving mental health

mental health meter

Read the 5 statements below. For each statement decide if you agree or disagree with it.

- ☐ I'm able to enjoy the present instead of regretting the past and worrying about the future.
- ☐ When I'm faced with a difficult situation I focus on what I can learn from it.
- ☐ I make time for the things I love to do like hobbies, vacations or spending time with friends and family.
- ☐ I recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses and work on making both better.
- ☐ I cope well with change.

If you disagreed with any of these statements or would like to take a full online mental health quiz* to learn more about mental well-being, please visit www.cmha.ca/mental-health-meter.

**available in English only*

Eat well—Eating right is good for your physical health, and evidence suggests that healthy eating can help boost your mental health, too. Choosing the right foods more often, having a healthy breakfast, and eating regular meals can keep your mood and energy levels steady. Certain kinds of nuts, fish, fruits and vegetables also contain ingredients that are good for both mind and body.

- **Tip:** For more information on healthy food choices, visit www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthyeating or call HealthLink BC at 811 to talk to a dietitian. It's free and available to everyone in BC.

Watch what you drink—Caffeinated drinks like coffee, black tea, and cola can all affect your mental health. Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it temporarily gives you more energy, but it can also make you feel nervous, irritable or restless.

- **Tip:** Avoid caffeinated drinks at least two hours before bedtime. This can help reduce the effects these substances have on your sleep patterns.
- **Tip:** Get your water. Drinking water is important because it replenishes brain cells and helps fight fatigue.

Think about why you drink alcohol—Drinking sensibly can be relaxing and enjoyable, but it's important to think about why you drink. Some people use substances like alcohol to cope with difficulties or problems. This may be a sign of a larger problem in your life. You may also need to rethink drinking if it's causing problems, such as financial problems or problems in your relationships with others. It's also important to recognize times in your life when not drinking may be a healthier option. For example, alcohol interacts with many different kinds of medications.

- **Tip:** Seek help and support if you feel like your drinking is causing problems or if you feel like you can't stop drinking. You'll find contact information in the 'Where do I go from here?' section of this info sheet.

you can have a diagnosed mental illness and still have mental health

A person can have a mental illness and still have positive mental health. Because mental illness can happen in cycles, most people have times when they are well. And during those times, people being treated for a mental illness often have great mental health. Through the process of treatment and recovery, they have learned that taking care of their mental health can help prevent relapses in their mental illness, and help them stay well longer.





Loved ones can help you get through hard times, build your self-confidence, and show you that you're valued.

Get enough sleep—Sometimes this is easier said than done, but it plays a huge part in your mental health. If you don't get enough sleep, you can feel sad, anxious, stressed or grumpy. It can also leave you so tired that it's hard to concentrate or get things done. Good-quality sleep rests the brain and repairs and replenishes brain cells. A refreshed brain helps our mood, decision-making and social interactions. If worrying thoughts keep you from getting a good night's sleep, see the next section on healthy thinking.

- **Tip:** Get into a routine. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day—including weekends. For more on a healthy sleep routine, see Wellness Module 7: Getting a Good Night's Sleep at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-modules

Practice healthy thinking—We know that our thinking affects us. It's tied to how we feel emotionally and physically, and it affects how we deal with problems. We often hear that we should practice positive thinking. The problem with positive thinking, though, is that no one can think positively all the time. For example, it's likely hard to think positively about unexpectedly losing your job no matter how much of an optimist you are. The best thing we can do is think in healthy, helpful ways. Healthy thinking is thinking about something in a balanced way—looking at a situation or problem for what it

really is. It means looking at all factors in a situation and then deciding how you feel about it. Practicing healthier, more balanced thinking can help you respond to life events and relationships, and it can also improve your confidence and self-esteem.

- **Tip:** Talking to a professional about what's bothering you can really help. Counsellors can help you by teaching you how to work through your issues and identify your “thinking traps.” Thinking trap are unhelpful ways of thinking that make it difficult to problem-solve or handle different situations. You may have access to a counsellor through school, work or through special services for your cultural or faith community.

Build a healthy support network—Healthy relationships with friends, family and co-workers is vital to good

mental health. Loved ones can help you get through hard times, build your self-confidence, and show you that you're valued. Different people in your support network can help in different ways. For example, friends and family can provide emotional support or practical help, like picking you up from the airport. They can also help by sharing advice or information based on their own experiences.

- **Tip:** Put yourself out there. If you want to build up your support network, you need to take risks. Join a club or sports team, attend that family or work event, or reconnect with people. Place yourself in situations where the type of people you are hoping to meet will be. If you're not shy, get talking! If you are shy, try situations with smaller groups of people, or start by calling an old friend or sending an email or letter.

connecting to things bigger than you is good for mental health

The desire to have a purpose and connection to things bigger than ourselves is one of the qualities that make us human. It boosts our mental health by giving us perspective and meaning, and it connects us to others who care about the same things.

- Connect to a cause you care about: join a rally, sign a petition, raise money, or volunteer
- Find a spirituality to call your own: individual prayer or meditation, formal services of worship, or even connecting with nature

improving mental health

where do I go from here?

While most people say that mental health is important to them, a recent national poll found that only two-thirds of people are committed to making changes to improve their own mental health. To maintain positive mental health, you need to take positive action. Reading this sheet was a great start, but there are more things you can do to protect yourself. The following resources can provide you with more information about positive mental health.

Resources available in English only:

BC Partners For Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for useful information on positive mental health, including our Wellness Modules. These modules are worksheets that can help you learn important skills for maintaining your mental health. There are eight worksheets in total, covering:

- Mental Health Matters
- Stress and Well-Being
- Social Support
- Problem-Solving
- Anger Management
- Getting a Good Night's Sleep
- Eating and Living Well
- Healthy Thinking

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental illness. You can also learn more about two helpful programs:

- **Bounce Back: Reclaim Your Health** helps those with mild-to-moderate depression and anxiety. It's a self-guided program with videos and booklets that teach you helpful skills, plus telephone coaching.
- **Living Life to the Full** is an eight-week course to help you take control and make a difference in your life.

Your Local Crisis Line

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or talk with a pharmacist about medication questions.

Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service

To get help anywhere in British Columbia, call Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service 1-800-663-1441 (throughout BC) or 604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver).

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.