

How to Be Mentally and Emotionally Healthy

"The brain is a world consisting of a number of unexplored continents and great stretches of unknown territory."

Santiago Ramon y Cajal

Follow these simple tips for maintaining good mental and emotional health:

Run it out.
Talk it out.
Wash it out.
Then move on!

Give your brain a break. Like your body, your brain needs regular rest and relaxation. When you sleep and dream, your brain produces chemicals and proteins to replace those you used while you were awake.

Exercise your brain. Like your body, your brain thrives on regular exercise. It stays flexible and gets stronger. So keep your brain active! Read, think, ask questions, solve problems, learn and try new things. (Homework is good brain exercise.) TIP: Staying *physically* active is one of the best things you can do for your brain. Studies have shown that aerobic exercise improves memory, thinking, and mental response time.

"No brain is stronger than its weakest think."

Thomas L. Masson

Eat well and healthfully. Like your body, your brain needs nourishment. Although researchers can't agree on any specific foods that improve brain functioning, they do agree that a varied, balanced diet is what your brain needs most.

CHECK IT OUT



The Brain by Jim Barmeier (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1996). Explores how the human brain works and examines new technologies that are helping us to learn more about it. Ages 11–15.

Neuroscience for Kids

<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~chudler/neurok.html>
Experiments, activities, brain games, facts about the

much more, all for elementary and secondary students and their teachers. This fun and fascinating site is maintained by Eric H. Chudler, Ph.D., a Research Assistant Professor at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Feel your feelings. Don't worry about "feeling bad" from time to time. It's okay to sometimes feel sad, frustrated, angry, worried, guilty, and/or afraid. Be brave and face your emotions. Peek inside yourself and try to figure out why you're feeling a certain way. Recognizing, acknowledging, and experiencing your feelings is good for you. It's only when you try to shove painful or uncomfortable feelings out of sight that they grow into monsters. So give yourself permission to cry, to go outside and throw rocks at the dirt or into a lake, to scream or stomp your feet. Release your "bad" feelings in ways that don't hurt you (or anyone else). If you have feelings you just can't handle—if you're overwhelmed or knocked flat by powerful emotions—find an adult you trust and can talk to.³

Avoid escape routes. It's tempting to want to dodge painful or uncomfortable feelings. It's easy to sleep too much, watch too much TV, put things off until tomorrow, skip school, ignore homework, evade responsibilities, retreat into a shell, or numb yourself with alcohol, drugs, or food. You can't run away from your emotions. Wherever you go, they go, too.

Accept the sad or bad things that happen in your life. This doesn't mean that you throw your hands in the air and just give up. Instead, it means that you take sad or bad things in stride.⁴ Why kick yourself over and over again for missing the final free throw in the last game of the season? Why beat yourself up for losing a friend? Don't waste your energies on things you can't change. Learn from these experiences and move on.

Help yourself to feel better. You can do it. Here's how:

1. Focus on things you *can* change. Brainstorm things you *can* do that won't hurt you or other people.

³ If there's no adult available, see "Endurance," pages 87 and 88, for crisis hotlines.

⁴ See "Endurance," pages 86–93, and "Forgiveness," pages 94–102.

2. Write down your feelings in your journal.⁵ Write about what happened and how you feel. This can release some of your tension, sadness, and anger.

3. Draw your feelings. Don't worry about what your drawing looks like. Don't worry about making mistakes. Just draw.

4. Listen to soothing music.

5. Do something you enjoy. Read a book, ride your bike, take a walk, watch a video, pet your cat, spend time with a friend.

6. Meditate or pray.

7. Practice relaxing. Stretch out spread-eagle style, or sit in a comfortable chair. Relax every muscle as you breathe in and out. Think or say to yourself: "I can face this. I can fix this. I can do this."⁶

8. Do a service for someone. You'll be amazed at how good you feel if you focus on helping someone else. This won't make your problems go away, but it will increase your ability to handle them. Try it and see.

9. Set a time limit on your sad feelings. Decide that you *will* feel better in an hour, four hours, a day, or a week.

10. If steps 1–9 don't work, get a second opinion. Talk with someone you trust who cares about you. Brainstorm solutions together. Or seek professional help. Ask your parent, school counselor, youth group leader, or religious leader to recommend someone you can call. If you had a toothache, you'd go to the dentist. Don't let your emotions fester.

CHECK IT OUT



Facts for Families

<http://www.aacap.org/web/aacap/factsFam/>

An award-winning series of fact sheets on problems and issues that affect children and teens, developed by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP). Available in English, Spanish, and French.

⁵ See "Endurance," pages 88, 89, and 92, for journaling resources.

⁶ See "Peacefulness," pages 175–176, for a relaxation exercise.

Mental Health Net

<http://www.cmhc.com/>

A guide to over 6,000 mental health resources including information about anxiety, depression, and substance abuse; professional resources in psychology, psychiatry, and social work; journals and self-help magazines.

Character Dilemmas

For journaling or writing essays, discussion, debate, role-playing, reflection

Suppose that . . .

① Someone you know is infected with a highly contagious disease. How might you help the person and still protect yourself?

② Nearly 14 percent of the children in the United States don't have health insurance.⁷ Should the U.S. be responsible for ensuring that *all* citizens have access to health care? Or only *some* citizens? (Which ones?) What about illegal aliens? Who should fund the health care system?

③ Only 75 percent of all two-year-olds in the United States have been immunized against preventable diseases.⁸ Some parents object to immunization for religious or personal reasons; others just don't get around to having their children immunized. Do parents have the right to keep their children from being immunized? Why or why not? Which is most important—the parents' freedoms of religion and expression, or the children's health?

④ Almost 21 percent of all children in the United States are living in poverty.⁹ Who should feed the thousands of kids who go to bed hungry each night? Are the parents responsible? The government? The schools? State health agencies? How do you think this problem should be addressed?

⑤ A new policy says that people with HIV (the AIDS virus) may keep their identities private.

⁷ This is true, by the way. *Source:* The U.S. Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey, March, 1995.

⁸ This is also true. *Source:* The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *MMWR Weekly Report*, 1995 statistics.

⁹ True again. *Source:* The U.S. Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey, March, 1996.

Some people are *against* the policy, believing that the public should be told when someone has HIV so they can protect themselves from infection. Other people are *for* the policy, believing that the patients' privacy should be protected because of the negative ways in which people with HIV are treated (and the specific ways in which the virus is spread). What do you think? Would it make a difference if you knew what kind of work someone with HIV was doing? *Examples:* A bank teller; a food service worker in your school cafeteria; a doctor; a teacher; a landscaper; an airline pilot; the manager of a restaurant; a bus driver; a musician in an orchestra; a day-care provider.

Activities

BRAINSTORM THE EFFECTS of poor health and nutrition on people in the U.S. or other countries. Think of as many ways as you can in which people's lives are affected.

BRAINSTORM THE VARIOUS "ESCAPE ROUTES" people take to avoid facing their feelings. *Examples:* sleeping too much, eating too much, watching too much TV. Combine your list with other people's lists. How many different "escape routes" can you come up with?

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR of your local newspaper, a newsletter, or school newspaper. Express how you feel about hunger, malnutrition, health care, being an organ donor, or any other health-related issue you feel strongly about.

FAST FOR A DAY. Try going without food for one day to see how it feels to be hungry. Then write in your journal about the experience. **IMPORTANT:** Get your parents' permission first. Make sure you're in good health. Don't take part in any strenuous physical activity while you're fasting.

RESEARCH AND REPORT ON SOMEONE who has made important contributions to health and medicine. *Examples:* Albert Schweitzer, Jonas Salk, Florence Nightingale, Pearl Kendrick, Alexander Fleming, May Chinn, Sigmund Freud, C. Everett Koop, Gertrude Elion.

RESEARCH AND REPORT ON A HEALTH CARE topic or issue. *Examples:* nutrition, food preparation, smoking,

exercise, teen pregnancy, heart disease, stress management, allergies, asthma, environmental health, HIV/AIDS, etc. Come up with a creative or unusual way to present what you've learned. *Examples:* Create a board game; write and illustrate a comic book; make a slide show or video. You might want to research both conventional and alternative approaches to your topic or issue.

CHECK IT OUT



Alternative Health News Online

<http://www.altmedicine.com>

Links to hundreds of conventional and offbeat resources for up-to-the-minute news and information. Log on to learn about Ayurvedic Medicine, Massage Therapy, Environmental Medicine, and more. Maintained by journalist Frank Grazian.

Healthfinder

<http://www.healthfinder.gov>

An excellent source of medical information online, sponsored by the U.S. Government, Healthfinder offers hundreds of health-related sites pre-screened for accuracy.

CALCULATE YOUR TARGET HEART RATE (THR). Here's the formula:

$$\frac{(220 - \text{your age}) \times 70\%}{6} = \text{Your THR}$$

Your THR is the specific heart rate that offers you the most benefits during periods of physical activity. It's the rate your heart should be at (or near) while you spend 20–30 minutes walking, biking, swimming, running, playing tennis, or whatever activity you choose. Check your pulse rate at your wrist or at the carotid artery alongside your Adam's apple while you're still active. (After 10 seconds of rest, a healthy heart is already starting to return to its normal rate.) If your pulse is above your THR, you're working too hard. If it's below your THR, you need to work a little harder.

Variation: Check your pulse after you've been sitting or resting. Check it after 20–30 minutes of activity. Compare your resting rate with your active rate.

CALCULATE THE COST OF HEALTH CARE in the United States. As of the second quarter of 1996, the U.S. spent 13–14 percent of its GDP (Gross Domestic