HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF MENTALLY
Basics

Your brain controls everything. How you see, how you feel, how you behave, and how you react. And just like your body, your brain can be subject to disorders, diseases, mishaps, and injury.

Your mental health is the health of your brain, as well as your emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. And mental health is just like your physical health. It requires on-going maintenance and consistent work to make sure everything runs correctly.

Think of your mental health like a car. It needs to be washed regularly, filled with energy, watched to make sure everything looks good, taken to checkups, and taken seriously when warning signs happen.

Also like your physical health, your mental health is not a one and done process. It’s an on-going journey, and one that requires you to work on multiple things to figure out what works for you. If you don’t actively work to maintain your mental health or do things detrimental to it, you can develop a mental illness. Not everyone who has mental health issues will have a mental illness, but everyone who has a mental illness has at some point had mental health issues.

Although everyone has a different experience with mental health and mental illness, many people want to have mental wellness, which is a level of mental health where you can cope well through adversity, properly manage your emotions, have healthy thought patterns and self esteem, as well as having good coping mechanisms and actions.

Despite it being seen as a choice, mental health is not something that many people can control without work. A lot of people have mental health issues, and a smaller amount of people have mental illnesses. And because so many people have issues, it’s important to know that it’s ok to struggle with it. But the main thing you need to know is that to have good overall health, you have to have good mental health.

Your body is a complex system that requires multiple things to be ok. And your mental health is one of the biggest systems that controls how you feel, behave, act, cope, and work within the world. And because of how much it controls everything you do, it deserves to be cared for.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Term</strong></th>
<th><strong>Definition</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Mental health is the health of your brain and thoughts. Mental health is defined as how well and healthy your actions, behaviors, thoughts, and coping mechanisms are in the world and to yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>Mental illness is an illness affecting you psychologically. Mental illness can affect your actions, behaviors, thoughts, and coping mechanisms in a negative or unhealthy way that is detrimental to the person’s mental health or physical health.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td>Therapy is the process of meeting with a mental health professionals to understand and find ways to cope through mental health issues and mental illness by setting goals and working to reach them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td>Trauma is a reaction to a distressing event. People who have had a certain large traumatic event or many traumatic events happen can develop PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self care</td>
<td>Self care is a routine or tasks that you do to make sure your mental health is stable. This involves taking care of yourself physically, cleaning your environment, declining choices that are bad for you, and doing tasks you need to do to avoid stress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>A point or line that you set to stop yourself from being in dangerous situations that have a negative impact on your mental health. For example, if you have PTSD and are triggered by loud noises, someone yelling at you can be a boundary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Wellness</td>
<td>The level at which people have very good mental health, and can cope well with stress and adversity, have good self esteem, use healthy thought patterns, use healthy communication in relationships, and could generally manage through whatever comes their way in a healthy way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Stigma is a term for false ideas surrounding mental health that can hurt people or stop them from reaching out for treatment. Stigma is perpetuated by misunderstandings of mental illness and lack of empathy for people with mental illness and health issues, or experiences with them.</td>
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Environment

The environment is the ways in which you interact with the world in your life. Your environment is comprised of where you live, where you work, what you see, what you do, and who is around you. All of these things contribute to how you interpret and deal with the world.

Toxic

Toxic is an umbrella term for things that are bad for your mental health, and are counter-intuitive to mental wellness. People, environments, relationships, and ideas can be toxic.

Coping Mechanism

Coping mechanisms are the ways in which you deal with stress. Coping mechanisms can be good (art, cleaning, singing, running) and bad (drinking, self harm, reckless spending).

Self Harm

Self harm is hurting yourself on purpose as a punishment or coping mechanism. Self harm is not only limited to cutting. It can include burning, drinking, or any other activity you do specifically to hurt yourself.

Trigger

A trigger is an action, word, sensation, sound, or sight that specifically brings back trauma or starts a negative trait.

Although it has been stigmatized and belittled by being used within memes, being triggered is a serious issue that people with abuse, PTSD, and other mental illnesses have.

Someone who has been in a war can be triggered into having a flashback by the sounds of a gunshot, or someone who has an eating disorder can be triggered back into relapsing into their eating disorder after hearing a negative comment about their body.

Develop a good environment

You’re only going to be as healthy as the place you’re in allows you to be. Make sure you aren’t putting yourself in a place where your boundaries and limits are being pushed negatively, and where you feel comfortable in your own skin, if only for a small piece of your time.

There are always things we don’t want to deal with but we have to. A lot of issues are necessary for growth, but some can be a nuisance and make you feel negatively about yourself. But there are some aspects of things that we don’t have to deal with on a day to day basis that can negatively affect us. If you’re in an environment you can control, you can set and remove the information and things that come into your life.
To do so, determine the things that don’t make you feel good and the things you can control. This can be small things such as the notifications you get on your phone, the people you see on your Instagram feed, the snacks you buy, or the companies you support. For example, if a clothing company posts only thin models that make you feel bad about your body, unfollow them, and replace your feed with more people who look like you and make you feel good about yourself.

The things we see and deal with and exist in on a daily basis affect your outlook on life - make sure the things you let into your life are the things that will affect you positively.

**Your physical environment**

Make sure your environment supports your positive coping mechanisms and makes negative coping mechanisms harder to access. If you’re trying to stop drinking and start doing art, it will be hard to with bottles of alcohol around and no art supplies. It doesn’t need to be a complete 180 into a healthy lifestyle, but where you are should reflect the goals of what you want to do.

This can mean going through things you own and getting rid of things that no longer serve a purpose or that you use for negative coping mechanisms, more items and spaces for positive coping mechanisms, and making sure you have the space to compress and take steps back from life when you need to.

**Your digital environment**

Your digital environment can also have a huge impact on your mood. If you are looking at things that constantly drain you, stress you out, make you feel bad about yourself, and apps that constantly want your attention, it will be hard to fix those things by not directly working on the root problem.

Figure out the things on your phone that impact you negatively, and work on fixing them. You have the ability to set time limits on apps, turn off notifications, block words on social media apps, unfollow pages that share draining content, and find pages...
that share content that uplift you.

Having a good environment also ties into everything else: setting boundaries for people who enter it, exercising or working on your physical health, setting a self care routine to maintain it, removing toxic things from it, and developing coping mechanisms for when you have to be in a bad environment.

**Know Your Limits And Set Boundaries**

There is a fine line between getting out of your comfort zone to grow, and putting yourself in a situation that actively harms you. Setting points where you won’t go any further because you know there will be negative consequences is called a boundary.

Boundaries are for you and for other people to follow, and they are generally a rough guideline of things that you will not do or tolerate. **Boundaries protect you from being unsafe, or putting yourself into situations that will adversely affect your mental health.** You can set your boundaries by:

- Thinking of past experiences and relationships. What went wrong and how can you prevent that from happening again?
- Your values and your culture. What are things that need to be respected no matter what?
- Your rights and what you need for your mental health. What are things people need to respect for you to feel safe? What are things you do to preserve your mental health?

From those, define boundaries. For example, if you’ve had past abusive relationships...
and need more support from someone you’re dating, dating someone who goes through your phone when you’re not looking can be a boundary.

You can also set boundaries for yourself if you have a history of past negative behavior. If you used to self harm, you can set a boundary that you won’t purchase things or engage in behaviors that could result in self harm.

**Think of boundaries as a personal security system for you.** If the boundary gets crossed, you know what to draw attention to and when you are in danger.

Boundaries can be fluid, and don’t have to be set in stone. But you should have a good idea of where they lie and where they’re important to you so you can keep them in mind as you move forward. Setting boundaries can be incredibly helpful in defining lines in where you need to be to achieve mental wellness.

**Your mental health needs physical health.**

As much as it might not be fun, your body needs the proper fuel to make things happen. How you physically feel and how you behave cognitively are directly intertwined. If you treat your body like trash, your mental health will feel like trash.

If you constantly travel, code, never sleep, or never stop when you get sick, you will feel the impact of that sooner or later. Some physical issues also show their impact cognitively. That's why it's important to make sure you do everything in moderation (even the good things).

Make a list of the basic things you know you need to do to develop a baseline: a general idea of how to make your body physically healthy. This can include going outside for 10 minutes a day, trying to drink more water, walking your dog, and more. It doesn’t have to mean changing your entire lifestyle, it can mean just tweaking parts of your every day life to contribute to your overall health. You can start by setting up small goals to achieve small bits of progress, and include in your self care routine how to do those things.

**Take notice of what your body says to you.**

- Do you work too much or not take enough time to rest?
- Do you not sleep enough or rely solely on coffee to get your energy?
- Do you exercise too much or not enough?
- Are you drinking enough water and eating food that is good for you?

You don’t have to be at the gym every day and switching your entire diet, but you should watch how the small changes in your lifestyle can impact you mentally. By starting to understand where you are now, you can start to set small goals and get ideas on how to achieve the goals you set.
Develop a self care routine for different parts of your life.

Self care is a term used to describe the routines and rules you set for yourself to keep you healthy. Self care is important for everyone, but especially important for people with mental health issues who might not remember to take care of themselves. You and your body will be the only constant thing in your life. That's why it's so important to invest in taking care of it.

It's a great idea to set different self care routines for different times. For example, what you do on a day when you feel incredibly healthy is not what you might do on a day when you have anxiety, or when you’re depressed.

Start your self care routine with a base: a list of what you have to do to take care of yourself no matter how you feel. This means basic day to day things, such as drinking water, taking meds, feeding your pets, etc.

From there, set a list of things you need to do on a bad day, then a good day, and a regular day.

Listing these things in advance and having them written down makes it so you already know what to do when the time comes, and allows you to keep yourself on a routine, as well as keeping yourself accountable. When coming up with your self care routine, keep some things in mind.

- What do you need to have on a day to day basis?
- What are you bad at remembering or consistently doing?
- Can you break that into smaller chunks and put that into a routine?
- What are the things that your environment needs to be good for you?
- What do you need to grow?

By setting these routines, you have the ability to manage and break down a bunch of abstract ideas within mental health into actionable items and a
workable list. Think of it as an algorithm for you being a healthy human being, and the items as steps to maintain or better your mental health.

Developing good coping mechanisms

It’s easy to deal with life by doing whatever you can at the time. But sometimes, these ways to cope with difficult issues make the issues you’re trying to cope with worse. Think of how you deal with stressful situations or issues in your day to day life now. For some people, these can be a combination of both good and bad coping mechanisms.

A coping mechanism gets you from where you are to where you want to be.

This can mean different things for different people. If someone has an anxiety attack, the goal of their coping mechanism will be to reduce the severity of attack. If someone is stressed or overwhelmed, the goal of the coping mechanism would be to manage their stress and take a step back, and then start working to tackle it.

Try to identify what you do to cope now.
- Does it help?
- How good is it for you?
- What coping mechanisms would you like to use more?
- Which ones would you like to use less?

Try to create a list of 5-10 coping mechanisms and things you can do during difficult times to use when you have difficulty or issues. The goal is to give you a general list of things to do in difficult times. When bad things come up, you’ll be prepared and able to respond with things instead of potentially reaching for bad coping mechanisms or letting yourself spiral.

Building a support system

Having a community behind you is a huge help when dealing with issues that may come up. It’s important to surround yourself with people from

![Support](image1)

![Distraction](image2)

![Relaxing](image3)

![Venting](image4)
different walks of life to be there for you as you grow and work on your mental health.

Find at least 1 person who you can talk to and can rely on during bad times, and people who are regularly in your life to check up on you. If you don’t have people like that, get into online and physical communities to meet people and grow based on common interests.

The most important thing is to have people who you can trust and rely upon, and be around. Humans are naturally social, and being around people is scientifically proven to be good for your mental health! It’s important for everyone to feel as if they have people to be there for them during the ups and downs in life.

Even if you don’t feel as though you have people who can be this for you, create a list of resources or organizations you can go to in an emergency. This can be a crisis hotline, a hospital or treatment center near you, or a therapist that you regularly see.

Your support system spans across your friends, family, co-workers, local organizations, and resources you have access to. You just need to find people and places to be in times of crisis or negative emotions.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>People I can call</th>
<th>Resources I can use</th>
<th>Places I can go</th>
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Planning for bad times

Life has ups and downs. That’s true no matter who you talk to. You can’t plan to fix things or make it so that everything is ok all of the time. No matter how much preventative work you do, you may end up in a bad situation, relationship, or health issue. And that’s ok. You can’t be 100% ok all of the time.

Even though you can’t stop these, you can plan to make sure that you know what to do when things go bad. Making sure you have a support system, good coping mechanisms, boundaries, and a self care routine is important.

When going through tough times, it’s hard to prioritize doing things healthily and working on positive mental health when you’re dealing with tough emotional issues.
That's why it's important to plan and think ahead, especially if you have mental illness and are more likely to have negative consequences or symptoms going through stressful situations.

Make sure you have resources and a crisis plan, which is a plan you can do when you should do whenever you’re having a mental health crisis or emergency.

Many people who suffer with anxiety or panic attacks may not be in a stable state of mind where they can fully process or think things through, especially when contemplating suicide.

Try to think back to the last time you were having mental health issues.

- What did you need and get?
- What did you need and not get?
- What didn’t you want?
- What did you want?
- What was the way you got through that?

Screening for mental illnesses
According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Almost 1 in 5 US adults have a mental illness. If you have a pattern of mental
health issues, it’s worth researching and learning about the symptoms of the various types of mental illnesses.

In general, if you have any of the following, it’s worth looking into more in depth.

- Feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and to people
- Problems with alcohol or drug use
- Major changes in eating habits
- Sex drive changes
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence

If you’re concerned and have access to medical care, talk to your doctor or a psychiatrist about the issues. They will be able to diagnose you, and help you understand treatment or coping options.

You can also look for online screening tools to help you get an answer or a general idea of the things you’re dealing with. MHA has tool at https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools. It’s important to note that mental health issues don’t always lead to a mental illness, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

**Reaching Out for Help**

Mental health is a complex thing. Sometimes, it’s not manageable on its own. Although this is a great start to working on your mental health, it’s not a replacement for actual medical help.

Although your friends may be great to vent to, they aren’t replacements for therapists. And even though self care is a great way to make sure you have a routine and stay on track, it’s not a replacement for fixing the root cause of issues or taking responsibility.

A general rule of thumb with mental health is that if you can’t reasonably fix something in your life that’s been going on for more than 1 month, ask for help.

**Overall, if you feel you can’t handle something: ask for help.**
You don’t need to hit rock bottom before you reach out for help, especially with mental health. If you’re driving your car on a freeway and your tire blows out, you don’t wait until you crash until you fix it. You pull to the side and call for help so you don’t endanger yourself more. So why wouldn’t you do that for your own health? You don’t need to be a certain amount of sick or a certain amount of lost or hurt. Although only 40% of people who commit suicide have mental illnesses, almost 90% had mental health issues. Ignoring these signs comes at a real cost and risk to yourself.

Although adversity is important, your mental health is integral to so much of what you do. It’s worth making sure you dedicate the time and take care of it. And it’s even more important when you’re having issues with it and are unable to deal with it. However scary it is, sometimes to get what you deserve, you have to ask for it.

In many societies and cultures, mental health and illness seems like a choice or a “mindset”. However, mental health is complex. It’s not always something you can control, especially with mental illnesses. There’s no one way to take care of yourself mentally, or to fix your entire life, or to solve your mental illnesses immediately.

It’s a journey of you learning what works for you, and continually experimenting and learning yourself. It’s a lonely journey, and sometimes there are huge bumps in the road. But you deserve to get help. You deserve to have good mental health. You deserve to feel ok and safe with yourself. And you deserve to see the future that you’re meant to have.