**Benefits of Good Mental Health**

Just as physical fitness helps our bodies to stay strong, mental fitness helps us to achieve and sustain a state of good mental health. When we are mentally healthy, we enjoy our life and environment, and the people in it. We can be creative, learn, try new things, and take risks. We are better able to cope with difficult times in our personal and professional lives. We feel the sadness and anger that can come with the death of a loved one, a job loss or relationship problems and other difficult events, but in time, we are able to get on with and enjoy our lives once again.

Nurturing our mental health can also help us combat or prevent the mental health problems that are sometimes associated with a chronic physical illness. In some cases, it can prevent the onset or relapse of a physical or mental illness. Managing stress well, for instance, can have a positive impact on heart disease.

Chances are, you are already taking steps to sustain your mental health, as well as your physical health – you just might not realize it.

Three important ways to improve your mental fitness are to get physical, eat right, and take control of stress.

**Get Physical**

We’ve known for a long time about the benefits of exercise as a proactive way to enhance our physical condition and combat disease; now, exercise is recognized as an essential element in building and maintaining mental fitness.

So, if you already do exercise of some kind, give yourself two pats on the back – you’re improving your physical and mental fitness.

Exercise has many psychological benefits. For example:

* Physical activity is increasingly becoming part of the prescription for the treatment of depression and anxiety. Exercise alone is not a cure, but it does have a positive impact.
* Research has found that regular physical activity appears as effective as psychotherapy for treating mild to moderate depression. Therapists also report that patients who exercise regularly simply feel better and are less likely to overeat or abuse alcohol and drugs.
* Exercise can reduce anxiety. Many studies have come to this conclusion. People who exercise report feeling less stressed or nervous. Even five minutes of aerobic exercise (exercise which requires oxygen, such as a step class, swimming, walking) can stimulate anti-anxiety effects.
* Physical exercise helps to counteract the withdrawal, inactivity and feelings of hopelessness that characterize depression. Studies show that both aerobic and anaerobic exercise (exercise which does not require oxygen, such as weightlifting) have anti-depressive effects.
* Moods such as tension, fatigue, anger and vigor are all positively affected by exercise.
* Exercising can improve the way you perceive your physical condition, athletic abilities and body image. Enhanced self-esteem is another benefit.
* Last, but not least, exercise brings you into contact with other people in a non-clinical, positive environment. For the length of your walk or workout or aqua-fit class, you engage with people who share your interest in that activity.

**Feel the Rush**

We may not realize what caused it, but most of us have felt it. Whether we’re engaged in a leisurely swim or an adrenaline-charged rock climb, there is that moment when suddenly pain or discomfort drops away and we are filled with a sense of euphoria.

We have endorphins to thank for these moments of bliss. Endorphins are chemicals produced in the brain, which bind to neuro-receptors to give relief from pain.

Discovered in 1975, the role of endorphins is still being studied. They are believed to: relieve pain; enhance the immune system; reduce stress; and delay the aging process. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, sending these depression-fighting, contentment-building chemicals throughout the body. No wonder we feel good after a workout or brisk walk!

Endorphin release varies from person to person; some people will feel an endorphin rush, or second wind, after jogging for 10 minutes. Others will jog for half an hour before their second wind kicks in.

You don’t have to exercise vigorously to stimulate endorphin release: meditation, acupuncture, massage therapy, even eating spicy food or breathing deeply – these all cause your body to produce endorphins naturally.

So enjoy some moderate exercise and feel the endorphin rush!

**Eat Right**

Here’s some food for thought – Making the right nutritional choices can affect more than the fit of our clothes; it can have an impact on our mental health.

A new [study](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/feeding-minds/) by the UK’s Mental Health Foundation suggests that poor diet has played a role in the significant increase in mental health problems over the past 50 years.

The trend away from eating less fresh produce and consuming more saturated fats and sugars, including substances like pesticides, additives and trans-fats, can prevent the brain from functioning properly, says the Feeding Minds study. It makes a persuasive link between changing food fads and increases in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Alzheimer’s disease and schizophrenia.

The message is not a new one, but it is perhaps the most forceful argument yet for paying more attention to the nutrition-mental health connection. What we put on our plates becomes the raw material for our brains to manufacture hormones and neurotransmitters – chemical substances that control our sleep, mood and behaviour. If we shortchange the brain, we also shortchange our intellectual and emotional potential.

Our diet also supplies the vitamins which our bodies cannot create, and which we need to help speed up the chemical processes that we need for survival and brain function. Vitamin deficiencies sometimes manifest themselves as depression and can cause mood swings, anxiety and agitation, as well as a host of physical problems.

Mental health professionals point out that good eating habits are vital for people wanting to optimize the effectiveness of and cope with possible side effects of medications used to treat mental illnesses.

Clearly, selecting which foods to eat has consequences beyond immediate taste bud satisfaction. To optimize our brain function, we need to eat a balanced diet of:

* Fresh fruits and vegetables
* Foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish, nuts, seeds and eggs
* Protein
* Whole grains

**Take Control of Stress**

Stress is a fact of life. No matter how much we might long for a stress-free existence, the fact is, stress is actually necessary. It’s how we respond to stress that can negatively affect our lives.

Stress is defined as any change that we have to adapt to. This includes difficult life events (bereavement, illness) and positive ones. Getting a new job or going on vacation are certainly perceived to be happy occurrences, but they, too, are changes, also known as stress, that require some adaptation.

Learning to effectively cope with stress can ease our bodies and our minds. Meditation and other relaxation methods, exercise, visualization are all helpful techniques for reducing the negative impact of stress.

Stress can be beneficial – in moderation. That’s because short episodes of stress trigger chemicals that improve memory, increase energy levels and enhance alertness and productivity. But chronic stress has debilitating effects on our overall health. Physically, it can contribute to migraines, ulcers, muscle tension and fatigue. Canadian researchers found that chronic stress more than doubled the risk of heart attacks.

Persistent stress also affects us emotionally and intellectually, and can cause:

* Decreased concentration and memory
* Confusion
* Loss of sense of humour
* Anxiety
* Anger
* Irritability
* Fear

The link between stress and mental illness has yet to be fully understood, but it is known that stress can negatively affect an episode of mental illness.

**Managing Stress**

First, it’s important to recognize the source(s) of your stress. Events such as the death of a loved one, starting a new job or moving house are certainly stressful.

However, much of our stress comes from within us. How we interpret things – a conversation, a performance review, even a look – determines whether something becomes a stressor. Negative self-talk, where we focus on self-criticism and pessimistic over-analysis, can turn an innocent remark into a major source of stress.

Understanding where your stress originates can help you decide on a course of action. External stressors, like bereavement or career changes, can be managed over time and with the support of family and friends. Internal stressors, caused by our own negative interpretation, require changes in attitude and behaviour.

The goal of managing stress is to cue the “relaxation response”. This is the physiological and psychological calming process our body goes through when we perceive that the danger, or stressful event, has passed.

Here are some tips for triggering the relaxation response:

* **Learn relaxation techniques** – Practicing meditation or breathing awareness every day can relieve chronic stress and realign your outlook in a more positive way. Good breathing habits alone can improve both your psychological and physical well-being.
* **Set realistic goals** – Learning to say no is essential for some people. Assess your schedule and identify tasks or activities that you can or should let go. Don’t automatically volunteer to do something until you’ve considered whether it is feasible and healthy for you to do so.
* **Exercise** – You don’t have to train for a marathon, but regular, moderate exercise helps ease tension, improves sleep and self-esteem. Making exercise a habit is key.
* **Enjoy yourself** – Taking the time for a favourite hobby is a great way of connecting with and nurturing your creative self.
* **Visualization** – Athletes achieve results by picturing themselves crossing the finish line first. Use the same technique to practice “seeing” yourself succeed in whatever situation is uppermost in your mind.
* **Maintain a healthy lifestyle** – A good diet is often the first thing to go when we’re feeling stressed. Making a meal instead of buying one ready-made may seem like a challenge, but it will be probably cheaper and certainly better for you and the simple action of doing something good for yourself can soothe stressful feelings.
* **Talk about it** – Sharing your troubles with a friend may help you to put things in perspective and to feel that you’re not alone. You may also learn some other ways to manage stress effectively.

**https://calgary.cmha.ca/mental\_health/benefits-of-good-mental-health/**