



# Ten Strategies for Improving Mental Wellness, Part One

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Traditionally, mental health researchers have studied problems. They have concentrated on identifying what goes wrong with our thinking and our feelings. In other words, they have studied mental illness, not mental wellness.

In some of the newer research however, scientists have studied what goes right. This research has revealed many positive actions that people can take in order to improve their mental and emotional health.

Here are the first five of ten key strategies the researchers have identified:

1. Sleep. Of all the data on healthy activities, adequate sleep has been shown to be the best predictor of good mental health. It is during sleep that our bodies and minds recover from the worries and stresses of the day.

The problem is, most Americans are sleep deprived. Studies show that most of us are not getting the optimal amount of 8 hours of sleep a day. Of course, this amount is an average and the optimal amount varies from person to person. For some, it could be as little as 7 while for others the optimal amount might be as much as 9 hours a day. This is the recommended range, somewhere between 7 and 9 hours a day.

One indicator of sleep deprivation is how fast you fall asleep once you lie down for sleep. On average, it should take about 10 minutes to fall asleep. This is the usual time it takes for the body and mind to settle into sleep. If you fall asleep more quickly, that may mean you're sleep deprived, that your body needs it so badly that it falls asleep right away.

2. Exercise. Perhaps the second most powerful influence on mental health is exercise. Consistent exercise has been shown to reduce both depression and anxiety. That means doing a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise a day at least 5 days a week.

The more robust the physical activity, the more it helps to burn off tension. It can burn off excess muscle tension that's associated with stress, which results in improved physical, mental, and emotional relaxation.

You can add a dimension to this by doing as much of your exercise outside as possible. In some studies, and with children especially, researchers have shown that exercising or "playing" in a natural environment produced improvements in numerous mental health symptoms including problems with focus such as ADHD. Apparently the "green" of the outdoors and perhaps the fresh air makes the difference.

3. Friendship and socialization. Communicating with others, including talking with family and friends, correlates positively with mental wellness.

Connecting with others represents a deep, ingrained need in all of us. The survival of our species has depended upon our ability to form and to flourish in communities. We live as part of a community and need to participate at some level with others.

This goes beyond just sitting in someone's presence. It means participating in "supportive interaction." In fact, this is what friends and family do. They support each other and they do so through their communication.

4. Helping others. Doing something for someone else takes us out of ourselves for a period of time. While we're involved in doing good for someone else, we concentrate on that person and how we can help.

This is one sure way to generate good feelings about ourselves. Yes, doing something good for someone else makes us feel good. It works every time. In fact, among all of the strategies listed here, this one may produce the highest level of personal satisfaction.

5. Nutrition. The mind tends to go in the same direction as the body. When our bodies are undernourished, our minds are too. In fact, many vitamins and minerals, such as the B-vitamins and magnesium and calcium, have proven to be essential in supporting healthy levels of neurochemicals.

Interestingly, being hungry has been shown to correlate with reduced will power. So if you have to face any challenges that require you to use your will power, being adequately nourished will help.

Of course, certain foods in our diets cause more mental health problems than other foods. Sugar foods, for example, when used in excess over time can lead to increased anxiety and depression. Too much caffeine can lead to sleeplessness, anxiety, and even paranoid thinking. On the other hand, increasing the amounts of vegetables and fruits in our diet can have a calming effect.

Hopefully you can use some of these ideas to improve, not only your mental health, but your physical health as well. Please check back next week to see the other five strategies for improving mental wellness.

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