



Ten Strategies for Improving Mental Wellness, Part Two

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

As noted last week, mental health researchers have traditionally 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.

But in some of the newer research, 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.

The first five, noted last week, were Sleep, Exercise, Friendship and Socialization, Helping Others, and Nutrition. Here are the second five of 10 key strategies researchers have identified:

6. Humor. There's extensive research showing the positive effects of laughter. As you might expect, a good laugh can lift your mood but also it supports the immune system, improves blood pressure, and reduces pain. Laughter has been shown to be not only physically healing but relaxing as well.

Laughter actually offers us a distraction from our worries, a momentary relief. If we can pause for a few laughs, we can return to our worries and meet them refreshed.

7. Spirituality. We all need a sense of purpose to our lives and we need to feel that our lives have some meaning. That sounds like a tall order. But that's where spirituality or religion can play a key role.

It helps each of us to have an image of the world around us and to feel as though we're personally connected. If we can see the big picture and feel that we fit into that picture, that's an ideal situation for us as it increases our sense of security.

8. Optimism. Recently there has been a lot of psychological research on optimism. Having an optimistic attitude has been shown to be a strong predictor of positive mental and physical health. Studies show that people with optimistic outlooks have longer life expectancies and report having a greater sense of happiness.

To become more optimistic, we need to focus on positive possibilities in our lives. We can cultivate this skill through the practice of refocusing. If we pause and think about it, we can find it's possible to look on the bright side. Even when facing adverse circumstances, we can look for that silver lining, a positive outcome that will result, and this shift of focus will help to pull us through.

9. Acceptance. The world doesn't always give us what we want. In fact, the world can often bring us pain and suffering.

That's where this talent can help. By accepting things the way they are, we can meet the challenges. If we can accept a bad situation, we can figure ways to deal with it and move on. Step One is acceptance. Step Two is what to do about the situation.

Acceptance is similar to, but varies from, optimism in the sense that we're not trying to put a positive spin on things. We're just acknowledging facts. By doing this, we can better monitor our emotions and manage the way we respond.

10. Managing stress. Individuals who are chronically stressed are more likely to develop numerous mental and physical illnesses. Chronic stress has been associated with an increased health risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or stroke. Also high levels of stress exaggerate symptoms of depression, restlessness, sleeplessness, and anxiety.

So what can help to reduce our stress? If we're physically, emotionally, or cognitively stressed, first we need to recognize it. Then we need to find a way to take a break from it. Think of it as a vacation, even if it's just a 5-minute vacation, from the stress.

Another recommendation when facing increased stress, especially from a sad event, is to remember that "this too shall pass." In addition, all of the abovementioned techniques will help to reduce stress as well.

Of course each one of these ten strategies could be the topic of an article by itself. Hopefully you can use some of these ideas to improve, not only your mental health, but your physical health as well.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

###