

50 REALISTIC WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Featuring Tips from The Family Institute's Therapists

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Nurture your relationships

1. Value and cultivate the relationships in which you can be both imperfect and loved.
2. Stay connected. It takes effort to connect with people amidst a busy life, but taking the time to visit, have people over or send a thoughtful text is beneficial in the long run.
3. Take a risk with someone you trust and share about your struggles. Be vulnerable and ask them to just listen and understand.
4. Remember that no human interactions are perfect. It is a process of "Tear and Repair" to preserve your relationships.
5. Share something beautiful, especially if it doesn't cost anything, with someone else.
6. Calming yourself down takes a lot of energy. Calming yourself down with the help of someone you trust takes a lot less energy. We exist in relation to other people. Without talking about relationships, we miss one wall that's holding the roof up. If you want to be mentally healthy, you should have some good friends.
7. Have realistic expectations about your romantic relationships, friendships, family connections, etc. and establish clear personal boundaries regarding what is reasonable.
8. Take time for yourself as individuals and as a couple. Plan date nights, take a yoga class once a week, go for a walk, etc. Make time for the activities you enjoy and for activities that help you feel closer to your partner or spouse.
9. If your relationships are experiencing some road bumps, consider seeking couples therapy. Therapy can help couples strengthen their relationships, but success depends on *when* they come in.

Practice mindfulness

10. Be curious about your emotions, especially the hard ones such as fear, anger, shame and sadness. Ask them questions and be patient with trying to understand and learn from them.
11. Accept what you feel as a feeling, not a fact. Step back and notice it, accept it, breathe, watch it move through you. Feelings are information. You have to gather quite a bit to get a useful picture.
12. Set the intention to pay attention. Studies show that for most of us, our minds are wandering more than half of the time and that we're unhappy while it is doing so. You can do this either from a top-down approach (by giving yourself gentle reminders to pay attention) or bottom-up (by tuning in with your senses to what it feels like in the present moment).
13. Take several breaths in which the exhalations are twice as long as the inhalations. In doing so, you're activating the calming, centering parasympathetic nervous system and telling the fight-or-flight-prone sympathetic nervous system that it doesn't need to work so hard.
14. Cultivate a "resourcing" practice by thinking of the things in your life that support you and make you feel cared for. Examples could include nature, a pet, an engaging hobby or music. Call these things to mind to serve as a resource during times of challenge.
15. If you find yourself having a positive experience, stay with it. Really savor that experience and take it in. Since "neurons that fire together, wire together," you are using your own attention to integrate these new feeling states into your body-mind.
16. Breathe. It's so simple, it's an automatic function, and yet sometimes when we're overwhelmed, we forget just how in control we are. Breathing deeply and slowly for a few minutes throughout the day can make a world of difference, and you can do so at any time/place.
17. If you're overwhelmed/anxious with everything you need to do or emotions you're having, write them down. Jotting down your feelings, thoughts and even tasks left undone can help you harness some control and feel more grounded.

18. Take a break. Having a rough morning? Take a minute to do something else, like watching a funny YouTube video. When we rush ourselves into productivity mode, we can end up feeling like we aren't doing enough and then we become overwhelmed. Taking breaks throughout the day or during large tasks can help you remain focused and not forcing your brain to work at full speed for the entire task/day.
19. If you attach something like a mindfulness exercise to a habit you already have — like brushing your teeth — it can be easier to build the new habit.

Remember that self-care is important

20. Make time for exercise, try to have physical movement every day.
21. Play, do things that you enjoy to entertain yourself. After a long week, you deserve to destress.
22. Get enough sleep — seven to nine hours is recommended for young adults and adults.
23. Eat healthy. You are what you eat!
24. It's great that you put your kids or other beloved friends and family members first, but it shouldn't be at the expense of your own emotional well-being. Find ways to take good care of yourself or "secure your mask first" before you do that for others.

Pay attention to how you communicate with others

25. Find healthy ways to assert yourself. Not speaking up in productive ways can lead to bottled up emotions that will fester and leak out later on.
26. Expressing your appreciation of others will make you happier and healthier and help you build stronger relationships. Say thank you and take actions to show your gratitude to the people you love.
27. Use your phone settings to limit your time on social media.

Shift your mindset to positive thinking

28. Remember that you are a human BEING, not a human DOING.
29. Check our thoughts — we often get caught up in negative thinking without realizing it. Take the time to doubt your fears and question them as they

arise – if you made a mistake at work, does this actually mean you are not smart, or do you just feel a little out of control right now? Seek evidence for times where you've proven your fear is wrong and hold those examples close to you.

30. Appreciate the bigger picture. When you are able to feel gratitude or awe about your life, you can better withstand any difficulties you might face. Examples might be, what a beautiful sunset, what a tasty clementine, I love being a therapist, etc.
31. Remember that behavior has meaning. Ask yourself, "What was my child or partner feeling inside when they did that?" to understand where they're coming from.
32. Find something to laugh or smile about every day.
33. Practice positivity.
34. Practice gratitude — when there are dirty dishes, be grateful for food; dirty laundry, be grateful for clothes; toys on the floor, be grateful for your children; clothes on the floor, be grateful for your partner....
35. Keep a daily list of things you are proud of yourself for. It is far too easy to forget the moments throughout our week where we felt proud of ourselves — even for things like being on time or putting effort into having a nice lunch for the next day. Give yourself credit, write it all down, and look back on it later when you feel like things have become more difficult. We are far more capable than we ever give ourselves credit for.
36. Before doing any self-help thing, no matter what, if you can ask yourself, "What do I know about myself, my strengths and my weaknesses, that will help me formulate a plan that works for me?" you can save yourself some enormous headache, because there is plenty of advice that only applies in certain conditions.
37. If you catch yourself ruminating on embarrassing experiences in the past, understand that it's a normal part of being human beings. Realize that your mind is signifying to you that you should make a change and actually take action to adjust your behavior. Doing this will go a long way to stopping the rumination.

38. Try to adopt and maintain a growth mindset. It's important to note the opportunities and accompanying challenges to grow, evolve and make healthy changes within ourselves and in relationship with others. This growth process occurs throughout our *entire* lives, from age 1 to 101.
39. Learn to strengthen and flex your "flexibility" muscle. Life and the inevitable myriad of circumstances we must face require us to adapt and change each and every year we're alive.

Overcome perfectionism

40. Paralyzed by what you have to accomplish? Break down big goals into smaller, manageable pieces that you can execute one step at a time. Celebrate your achievement of each step.
41. Plagued by the critical voices in your head? Counteract these messages by starting a positivity journal. Write five positive things about yourself every day.
42. Feeling overwhelmed? Practice mindful breathing for three minutes. Focus your attention on breathing from your belly instead of your chest. Pay attention to the sounds and sensations of each breath over three minutes.
43. Fed up with perfectionistic self-standards? Experiment with your definition of success to help you learn that you'll survive a less than perfect life.
44. Need encouragement? Create a positive mantra to repeat to yourself during times you experience perfectionistic thoughts. For example, "I am enough. My best is enough. Fighting perfectionism is really hard."
45. Contact a professional mental health provider who can help you develop awareness and coping skills around their perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors.

Become engaged and self-aware

46. Always engage in learning, whether it be professional-related or for fun (a hobby). Engaging your mind in new ways helps distract you from the daily noise in your head, help you find new ways to build confidence and feel mastery.

47. Find your way to be expressive and creative, whether it be in the garden, writing, making something, cooking, drawing, dancing, etc.
48. Focus on kindness — your oxytocin, the hormone of connectedness, rises, your heart rate slows and you feel more benevolent, which makes you healthier and happier. Your system should help you feel in control without overwhelming you. If you are forgetful, a lot of reminders might help, but if you're anxious, so many reminders could make it worse.
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50. Educate yourself on common signs of mental health issues so you can recognize them in yourself and others as they emerge.