

Staying Well When You Have a Mental Illness

When you have a mental illness, you may not realize how important your overall health is to your recovery. Having poor overall health can get in the way and make recovery harder. Finding ways to take care of your health can aid your recovery and help you feel better overall. Here are some things you can do.

Advocate for yourself. You deserve good health care. All too often, people with mental illnesses develop other health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes, because their health is overlooked. If your doctor is not asking about your overall health, let him know that it's important to you and essential to your recovery.

Get the care you need. Get routine check-ups and visit your doctor when you're not feeling well. It may be due to your medicine or a symptom of your mental illness. But it could also be a different health problem.

Manage stress. Everyone has stress. It is a normal part of life. You can feel stress in your body when you have too much to do or when you haven't slept well. You can also feel stress when you worry about your job, money, relationships, or a friend or family member who is ill or in crisis. Stress can make you feel run down. It can also cause your mind to race and make it hard to focus on the things you need to do. If you have a mental illness, lots of stress can make you feel worse and make it harder to function. If you are feeling stressed, there are steps you can take to feel better:

- **Slow down and take one thing at a time.** If you feel like you have too much to do, make a list and work on it one task at a time.
- **Know your limits.** And let others know, too. If you're overwhelmed at home or work, or with friends, learn how to say "no." It may be hard at first, so practice saying "no" with the people you trust most.
- **Practice stress reduction techniques.** There are a lot of things you can do to make your life more peaceful and calm. Do something you enjoy, exercise, connect with others or meditate.
- **Know your triggers.** What causes stress in your life? If you know where stress is coming from, you will be able to manage it better.
- **Talk to someone.** You don't have to deal with stress on your own. Talking to a trusted friend, family member, support group or counselor can make you feel better. They also may help you figure out how to better manage stress in your life.

Plan your sleep schedule. Sleep can affect your mood and your body and is important to your recovery. Not getting the right amount of sleep can make day-to-day functioning and recovery harder. For tips on how to sleep better, contact the National Sleep Foundation at 202-347-3471 or visit www.sleepfoundation.org.

Watch what you eat. Sometimes, medicine can cause you to gain weight. Other times, eating unhealthy foods can cause weight gain. Foods high in calories and saturated or "bad" fats can raise your blood pressure and cholesterol. This can increase your chances of gaining weight and

having other health problems, like heart disease and diabetes. Here are some short cuts you can take to healthy eating:

- If fresh vegetables are too costly, buy frozen vegetables. They can cost less and last a long time in your freezer.
- If you eat at fast food restaurants, many now offer healthy foods such as salads or grilled chicken.
- Talk to your doctor to learn more about how to have a healthy diet.

Exercise. Along with a healthy diet, exercise can improve your health and well-being. Exercising regularly can increase your self-esteem and confidence; reduce your feelings of stress, anxiety and depression; improve your sleep; and help you maintain a healthy weight. Find a type of exercise that you enjoy and talk to your doctor. You might enjoy walking, jogging or even dancing. You don't have to go to a gym or spend money to exercise. Here are some things you can start doing now to get active:

- Check out your local community center for free, fun activities.
- Take a short walk around the block with family, friends or coworkers.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Make sure the stairs are well lit.
- Turn on some music and dance.

Do something you enjoy. During the week, find time—30 minutes, a couple of hours or whatever you can fit in—to do something you enjoy. Read a book or magazine, go for a walk or spend time with friends. Taking time for yourself to have fun and laugh can help you relax, ease stress and improve the way you feel.

Connect with others. Spending time with positive, loving people you care about and trust can ease stress, help your mood and improve the way you feel overall. They may be family members, close friends, a counselor, members of a support group or a local drop-in center. Call **MHA of Southwestern PA** at **724-834-6351** for information on local counselors, support groups, and drop-in centers.

Substance Abuse. If you find yourself drinking or using drugs to cope, it is time to seek help. Although using drugs and alcohol may seem to help you cope, substance abuse can make your symptoms worse, delay your treatment and complicate recovery. It can also cause abuse or addiction problems. To find help now, call 800-662-HELP or visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov.

Smoking. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting. Smoking puts you at risk for problems like heart disease and cancer. For more information about quitting, call 800-QUIT-NOW or visit www.becomeanex.org.