

# Therapeutic lifestyle changes as useful as drugs in improving mental health

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Getting more exercise, spending time outdoors and helping others are among the activities that can be as effective as drugs or counseling in treating an array of mental illnesses, including depression and anxiety, according to a UC Irvine study.

In determining this, Dr. Roger Walsh, professor of [psychiatry](#) & human behavior, philosophy and anthropology, as well as adjunct professor of religious studies, reviewed research on the effects of what he calls "therapeutic lifestyle changes." Other TLCs might relate to nutrition, relationships, recreation, relaxation, and religious or spiritual involvement.

"I found that lifestyle changes can offer significant advantages for patients, therapists and societies, yet they're insufficiently appreciated, taught or utilized," Walsh said. "TLCs can be effective, inexpensive and enjoyable, with fewer side effects and complications than medications. In the 21st century, therapeutic lifestyles may need to be a central focus of mental, medical and public health."

Study results appear online in *American Psychologist*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association. Among Walsh's findings:

- Exercise doesn't just boost people's sense of well-being. It can help children do better in school, improve cognitive performance in adults, reduce age-related memory loss in the elderly, and

increase neuron formation in the brain.

- Diets with plenty of fruits, vegetables and fish may enhance kids' school performance, help maintain cognitive function in adults, and reduce symptoms in schizophrenic and affective disorders.
- Spending time in nature can promote cognitive function and overall well-being.
- Good relationships can reduce health risks ranging from the common cold to strokes, as well as multiple [mental illnesses](#), and can dramatically improve psychological health.
- Recreation and fun can lessen defensiveness and foster social skills.
- Relaxation and stress management can treat a variety of [anxiety](#), insomnia and panic disorders.
- Meditation can enhance empathy and emotional stability; decrease stress and burnout; and boost cognitive function and even brain size.
- Religious or spiritual involvement that focuses on love and forgiveness can promote well-being and reduce anxiety, [depression](#) and substance abuse.
- Contribution and service, or altruism, can foster joy and generosity, benefit both physical and mental health, and perhaps even extend lifespan. A major exception, Walsh noted, is "caretaker burnout experienced by overwhelmed family members caring for a demented spouse or parent."

Obstacles to TLCs, he said, are the sustained effort they require and "a passive expectation that healing comes from an outside authority or a pill." Walsh also observed that people contend with a daily barrage of psychologically sophisticated advertisements that promote unhealthy lifestyle behaviors such as smoking, drinking alcohol and eating fast food.

"You can never get enough of what you don't really need, but you can certainly ruin your life and health trying," he added.

Provided by University of California - Irvine

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