

# Am I OK? How to do a mental health check

January 18 2021, by Alia E. Dastagir

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How am I doing?

It's a question most of us have likely asked ourselves, especially during the pandemic, which has distressed us, upended us, disconnected us. Maybe you asked it when two bad days turned into four, or when you lost something, or someone, and the grief never abated. Maybe you

asked it when melancholy edged toward hopelessness, when you grew tired of treading water, when you inhabited the same body but no longer felt like the same self.

People are often told to check in with others when they notice someone struggling. "Just reach out" we say. But what about reaching in? Mental health experts say everyone should perform regular mental health checks to assess their own well-being. There's a process for determining if you are OK, and it's not unlike what you would do if you were concerned about someone you love.

"It's sort of in some way shifting this mindset of what questions would I ask my friend if I was worried about them and then using that on yourself," said Vaile Wright, senior director of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association.

USA TODAY spoke with Wright and Lynn Bufka, associate executive director for practice research and policy at The American Psychological Association, on how to perform a mental health check.

## **Find someplace quiet**

It can be hard to listen to what our brains are telling us when we're working, caring for others or distracted. Wright says to do a mental health check, you need quiet.

"We're so used to multi-tasking that we don't really give ourselves space to sit down and reflect," she said. "Scheduling that time for yourself is going to be an important component."

## **Start with the big picture question**

An important measure of well-being is whether you're able to function in daily life.

"One of the biggest indicators is whether the person is really having trouble doing their day-to-day life," Bufka said. "Are you able to fulfill your role as a mom, a teacher, a spouse, a daughter?"

If you're really struggling in domains that you previously weren't, that's a sign things are off track.

## **Look at your feelings and behaviors**

No one's baseline normal is the same, so experts say it's important to look for changes in your mood. Questions you can ask yourself:

- How have my behaviors changed?
- How have my feelings changed?
- Do I still find joy in the things that once brought me joy?
- Am I being irritable or snapping at people?
- Am I really down more than I usually am?
- Do I find that I'm catastrophizing more than I usually do?
- Am I avoiding people?

Also consider the duration of your symptoms. Everyone has bad days. But experts say from a diagnostic point of view, if you're feeling down for longer than two weeks, that's cause for concern and may mean its time to seek professional help.

## **Look at your body**

Our bodies try and communicate when our brains are not well. Mental health and physical health are inextricably linked. You should ask

yourself:

- How am I sleeping?
- Am I eating well?
- Am I grinding my teeth?
- Do I feel muscle tension in my neck or shoulders?
- Am I being active the way I usually am?

## **Don't wait until things are bad**

In a perfect world, people would do these check-ins even when they weren't struggling. It's much easier to prevent a crisis than it is to climb out of one.

"The way in which we see a physical doctor even when we're feeling OK, just to make sure that everything's still going right, is kind of how we need to be approaching our emotional wellbeing as well," Wright said.

If you or someone you know may be struggling with [suicidal thoughts](#), you can call the U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) any time day or night, or chat online.

Crisis Text Line also provides free, 24/7, confidential support via [text message](#) to people in crisis when they dial 741741.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has resources to help if you need to find support for yourself or a loved one.

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Citation: Am I OK? How to do a mental health check (2021, January 18) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-mental-health.html>

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