

Anxious, depressed? These tips to self-care may help

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A lot of people are dealing with anxiety, depression or just general

unhappiness.

Worry, sadness, restlessness, irritability and trouble sleeping are just a few symptoms of [depression](#) and [anxiety](#), according to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

Therapy and medications can help. But some simple self-care ideas can lift a person's mood and add a sense of peace and joy to [everyday life](#).

"Fortunately, there are things that people can do on their own, either in place of a professional mental health professional or while waiting in line to see someone either virtually or in person," said James Maddux, professor emeritus in the Department of Psychology and senior scholar in the Center of the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

All of these techniques can help people dealing with the stress and emotional traumas of life to be happier, Maddux said.

Mellow out with meditation

Doing this quiet activity for just 10 to 20 minutes helps a person slow down and pay attention to what's going on inside, Maddux said.

"And research shows that those brief periods can carry over into the rest of the day," Maddux added.

Becoming more aware of what you're thinking and feeling is a big step toward learning how to better manage thoughts and feelings, he said.

"Mindfulness activities can be helpful for dealing with anxiety," psychologist Richelle Concepcion, of Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, said in a recent [American Psychological Association](#) story on

clinician self-care. "Meditation, yoga, even mindful breathing are ways to slow things down," she advised.

Get moving

Research points to exercise as a way to help manage anxiety and depression, Maddux said.

"It's probably one of the best anti-anxiety activities you can engage in, one of the best antidepressant activities one can engage in," Maddux said.

Evidence suggests that exercise leads to physiological changes in the body and brain that help deal with these issues, he said. It also requires focus, which can help distract you from the day's problems.

Just 30 minutes of walking daily help boost mood and improve health, the [NIMH](#) says. Don't be discouraged if you can't do those 30 minutes consecutively, the NIMH said. They add up.

"I think a lot of people seem to think that you need to work out an hour, two hours a day, five days a week in order to get the benefit. And the research shows that actually a few minutes here and there of exercise, whether it's walking or climbing the steps in your home or in your office, these have a cumulative effect," Maddux said.

A review published recently in the journal [JAMA Psychiatry](#) found that walking briskly for just 2.5 hours a week, lowered the risk of depression.

Spend time in nature

Take that walk outdoors to get extra benefit.

Being in nature is associated with improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and increases in empathy, according to an [APA](#) story.

"You can boost your mood just by walking in nature, even in urban nature. And the sense of connection you have with the [natural world](#) seems to contribute to happiness even when you're not physically immersed in nature," Lisa Nisbet, a psychologist at Trent University in Ontario, Canada, said in the story.

Healthy diet helps

The NIMH suggests a [balanced diet](#) with plenty of water can improve both energy and focus.

[Harvard Health](#) says that foods with lots of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants protect the brain from oxidative stress, while those high in refined sugar impair [brain function](#).

About 95% of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that helps mediate moods and more, is produced in the [gastrointestinal tract](#), according to Harvard Health, which suggests two weeks of eating a clean diet followed by adding foods back and seeing how you feel.

That story also notes that studies on traditional diets, including Mediterranean and Japanese, have found risk of depression 25% to 35% lower than with those on a typical Western diet. Those diets are high in fruits, veggies, unprocessed grains and fish, with small amounts of lean meat and dairy.

Are you sleeping enough?

When people are overtired, they're more vulnerable to extreme emotions, Maddux said.

"Disrupted sleep makes people vulnerable to all kinds of psychological and emotional problems, whether it's anxiety, depression, anger," Maddux said. "The brain needs rest and the brain needs sleep. And when the brain does not get enough rest, the brain is not going to function properly."

The sleep stage known as rapid-eye movement (REM) is when the brain processes emotional information, according to the [Sleep Foundation](#).

Lack of sleep may interfere with the brain's consolidation of positive emotional content, influencing mood and emotional reactivity, according to the foundation.

Schedule activities and set goals

While people tend to block out time for work and appointments, it's also important to plan time for fun.

"People often get so busy that they don't stop and take the time to do the things that they used to that they previously found gratifying and satisfying before they got too busy, before they became too anxious or depressed," Maddux said.

Think about what you liked doing and schedule it, even if it's just for 10 to 15 minutes, Maddux suggests. It might be getting together with other people or just watching something you find fun on Netflix.

Writing down goals is a part of that. Not only does it help limit stress to break down projects into small pieces, but people like the feeling of checking off a list.

"Most people get a sense of satisfaction out of accomplishing goals that are important to them," Maddux said.

Step back from social media

Sometimes it's what you don't do that matters. Social media not only eats away at time that could be spent on more fruitful self-care, but it can impact a person's self-esteem.

"Social media encourages people to engage in what psychologists call social comparison, literally comparing our lives to the lives of other people," Maddux said. "And, of course, everyone on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, whatever, they're mainly putting out there the best parts of their lives."

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