

A Boost for Your Mental Wellness

Depression is about ten times more common than it was two generations ago. About one in four Americans will meet the criteria for major depression at some point in their lives. Experts attribute the depression epidemic to the fast-paced lifestyle of the 21st century.

Research shows that mental illness is a rare concern among modern-day hunter gatherer bands, such as the Kaluli people of New Guinea highlands. Yet, these societies are more likely to experience tragic events, and live without any of the material luxuries and advanced medical treatments that are readily available to industrialized nations. It appears their lifestyle functions as a natural antidepressant.

The 21st century lifestyle has been described as sedentary, indoor, sleep-deprived, fast-food laden, and high-stressed. Experts suggest simple adjustments we can make to our lifestyles to improve our mental health.

Eat more omega-3 fatty acids

Research shows that countries that eat a better dietary balance of omega-3 fatty acids tend to have lower rates of depression. Omega-3 fats increase chemical responses in the brain that reduce stress and activate brain areas that improve our mood. An imbalance of omega-3 fatty acids can cause inflammation that triggers stress hormones and interrupts our memory function. Fish-oil capsules, salmon, walnuts, and flax seeds are good sources of omega-3 fatty acids.



Redirect your attention

People in industrialized societies today often find themselves alone, without activities to stimulate the brain, leading to unproductive and negative thinking, worrying, and increased stress. Reading, conversing with others, listening to upbeat music, or becoming active in the community are all great ways to redirect your attention.

Move your body

Physical activity is important for physical health and mental health. Physical activity increases the activity of brain chemicals that make us feel happy and reduce our feelings of stress. It also sharpens memory and helps us think more clearly. Try something you enjoy, such as riding your bike to work, playing a team sport, walking to the store, or dancing. Finding a fitness friend is another way to redirect your attention. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week

(<http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/index.html>).



Get some sunlight

Although too much sunlight enhances the risk of skin cancer, a small amount of sunlight is particularly important for people struggling with depression. Sunlight stimulates a release of chemicals in the brain that enhance a sense of well-being and brighten our mood. A lack of sunlight disrupts hormone levels in the body and saps our energy. Just 30 minutes of sunlight a day is enough to help depressive symptoms. A sun lamp during winter months is another alternative if natural sunlight is inhibited by climate conditions. Be sure to wear sunscreen if you are exposed to sunlight for prolonged periods of time.

Get connected

Avoid alone time and withdrawing from others, especially if you are experiencing depressive symptoms. Engaging in honest dialogue with friends about your feelings promotes healthier relationships. Try to schedule just three activities each week with friends or acquaintances to take a walk, go out for a (healthy) meal, or see a concert or play.



Sleep Well

The average American gets only 6.7 hours of sleep each night, below the recommended 7 to 9 hours for adults. Sleep deprivation causes decreased memory function and concentration, irritability, poor judgment, declines in coordination, and decreased immune system functioning. Physical exercise and exposure to sunlight help regulate our body clocks. Experts recommend using your bed for sleeping only, developing a consistent sleep schedule, avoiding alcohol before bed, and turning down the thermostat at night.

Adapted from *Experience Life Magazine*, "A Path out of Depression," by Stephen, Ilardi, PHD. For more resources or to seek professional advice, contact the city of Columbus EAP program at 645-6894.

<http://www.experiencelifemag.com/issues/may-2011/life-wisdom/a-path-out-of-depression.php>