

## What is Mental Health?

When we hear the term mental health, many of us think of mental illness. Mental health is far more than the absence of mental illness and has to do with many aspects of our lives including:

- How we feel about ourselves
- How we feel about others
- How we are able to meet the demands of life.

How do I manage my mental health?  
The most important thing is to develop a healthy lifestyle. The following suggestions may prove helpful.

To enjoy good mental health, it is essential to maintain a realistic but positive view of one self. The way we view ourselves has a direct bearing on what we believe which can effect relationships and our expectations of the world.

## Self Esteem

When we hold ourselves in high self esteem, we can live comfortably with both our strengths and weaknesses because we accept and respect ourselves.

### We have the ability to:

- Feel secure
- Trust ourselves and others
- Enjoy life
- Accept credit for what we do
- Feel confident
- Be decisive
- Be assertive
- Communicate effectively
- Respect self and others.

### Tips for positive self esteem:

- Take time out for yourself, exercise and eat healthily on a daily basis
- Set regular achievable goals by deciding what you want
- Replace negative self talk and self doubt with encouraging and positive messages like – I can, I will, I am able, I will succeed
- Develop positive attitudes.

## Diet

Our brain needs a constant flow of energy in the form of glucose to nourish the millions of cells. However, glucose alone cannot sustain us and we need a supply of other ingredients such as vitamins, minerals, essential fats and protein. Some foods can be high in fuel or energy but low in these essential ingredients.

What we eat has a major affect on our general health both physically and mentally. Achieving balance in our diet is important. Where possible eat a variety of freshly prepared nutritious foods. Some people find that their mood effects their appetite, comfort eating when feeling low or bored, or having no appetite when feeling anxious or depressed.

### Tips for a healthy diet:

- Eat a variety of foods – meat, fish, vegetables, fruit
- Eat plenty of carbohydrates for energy – bread, potatoes, rice, pasta
- Restrict fatty and sugary foods – chips, biscuits, chocolate, fizzy drinks
- A regular intake of vitamin B & C can help combat stress. Vitamin B can be found in green leafy vegetables, wholemeal bread and butter. Vitamin C can be found in fresh fruit, orange juice, blackberries.
- A high fibre diet helps to cleanse the system – whole wheat, bran, vegetables.
- Drink plenty of fresh water. Too much tea and coffee over-stimulates the system.
- Try to avoid rushed meals. Sit down, relax and enjoy your meal.
- Remember eating should be a pleasant experience.

## Sleep

We spend approximately one third of our lives asleep. Along with food, water and shelter, sleep is essential for normal functioning. The amount of nightly sleep that we require varies from person to person. Although there is no 'normal' length of good night's sleep for a given age group, sleeping requirements generally decrease with age. Adults sleep on average between 7 to 8 hours each night. The quality of sleep is also important for a person to wake feeling refreshed and rested. The function of sleep is to let the body repair itself both physically and mentally.

### Tips to help you sleep:

- Take some gentle outdoor exercise early in the day
- Avoid tea, coffee, nicotine and alcohol for at least 4 – 6 hours before bed
- Have a warm milky drink
- Take a warm bath before bed
- Make sure that the bedroom is quiet and comfortable
- Have a light snack before bedtime
- Listen to some gentle music
- Try getting up and going to bed at the same time every day so that your body has a routine
- Some light reading can help
- Make sure that you are warm.

## Communication

Keeping lines of communication open is important – sharing ideas, expressing opinions or just an encouraging smile. Some people feel a little bit shy in certain situations which is quite common. Being able to express your feelings, disappointments and joys is essential to good mental health.

### Tips for good communication:

- Adopt a relaxed posture
- Make eye contact and speak slowly
- Try not to become too self conscious
- Listen carefully to what is being said or asked
- If you are not clear, ask the person to repeat the question
- Don't feel the need to fill silences in conversation
- When making inquiries try some 'open questions' (open questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no)
- If something 'comes out the wrong way', say so and correct it
- Humour is a great communications tool
- Some people may find it easier to use the phone
- Remember, silence is o.k. – don't be afraid of it
- Become involved with a sport or project in your area – having a shared interest is the best way to open conversation.

If you are concerned about your health, relationships or have financial worries, talk to someone you can trust and feel comfortable with – a close friend, a family member or your doctor.

## Relationships



How we feel about ourselves has a direct bearing on how we relate to others. Having healthy, satisfying relationships is important. Some basic ingredients are – trust, honesty and respect – these features are mutual and two-way. Friends and family members can be a great source of comfort and support in times of distress. Remember the best way to make friends is to be one.

## Alcohol and Tobacco/Nicotine

Alcohol is widely used in many cultures as a means to relax and enjoy a social occasion, and has become an integral part of modern living but alcohol is not necessary in order to develop social relationships.

The early warning signs of alcohol dependance are important to note. When a person loses control over their drinking, they can often become defensive or secretive about the extent of their problem. The sensitive but honest support of friends and family is essential if alcohol abuse is to be successfully addressed. Alcohol should never be taken with medication. Never drink and drive.

Consult your doctor or pharmacist for advice on the safe use of alcohol.

### Smoking

Smoking is harmful to your health. The dangers associated with cigarette smoking are well known. Smoking is known to lead to an increased risk of cancer, heart and lung disease. Other unpleasant effects include discolouring of fingers and teeth; an increase in your pulse and blood pressure; a stale odour on your breath, hair and clothes.

Cigarette smoking can effect the health of other family members especially children (passive smoking).

Addiction to nicotine can make giving up difficult – but it is never too late to try. There is help available from the Department of Health & Children (Smoking Cessation Programme) if you would like to quit.

## Exercise

Exercise helps to reduce stress and work off muscle tension. Physical activity is known to stimulate the release of endorphins (a brain chemical) which gives a natural feeling of health and well being. Start gently and build up to a pattern of 20 minutes per day of exercise. A brisk walk can be a good starting point. Taking part in sport also improves your social circle and can be a great way to meet new friends with a common interest.



## Relaxation



As life becomes busy and hectic, finding time to relax is difficult. Take at least 20 minutes a day for relaxation. Always plan your time to relax, otherwise it may not happen. Relaxation can be a few moments of quietness or simply enjoying a hobby or interest.

There are many relaxation techniques for you to discover, see which one suits you best.

Managing your Mental Health is one of a series of information fact-sheets developed by Mental Health Ireland, with support from Comhairle.

**Mental Health Ireland**  
**Mensana House**  
**6 Adelaide Street**  
**Dun Laoghaire**  
**Co. Dublin**  
**Tel: 01 2841166**  
**Fax: 01 2841736**  
**Email: [info@mentalhealthireland.ie](mailto:info@mentalhealthireland.ie)**  
**Website: [www.mentalhealthireland.ie](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie)**

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