



STAND UP FOR HOPE: BUILDING HEALTHY HABITS

When it comes to taking care of ourselves, we often focus more on our physical body. However, maintaining your mind is just as important, and there are habits we can do every day to improve our mental health. Just like our body needs to get into a routine, so does our brain. Focusing on your mental health can build confidence and hope, improve your immune system, increase productivity, and even help you live longer. What better way than to start off small and add in little activities each day? To boost your overall happiness, lower stress, and even improve your physical health, do these things daily.

Sustaining hope and well-being takes work. Listed below are exercises that, when practiced frequently, can build genuine and lasting happiness.

Gratitude: Write down three things for which you are grateful for every day. Don't worry if they seem simple or mundane- just get something down on paper. This simple exercise will help you identify positive aspects of even the worst days, and develop a more hopeful perspective.

Acts of Kindness: Make a conscious effort to do something nice for no reason other than to help. You might be surprised how a simple act of kindness can turn around the day for both you and the kindness recipient.

Exercise: The positive effects of exercise are astounding. Physically active people have increased energy, superior immune systems, and a frequent sense of accomplishment. Exercise can reduce insomnia, stimulate brain growth, and even act as an anti-depressant. Beginning an exercise plan doesn't have to be difficult. Walking for as little as 30 minutes, 3 times a week, has been found to be beneficial. Aerobic and anaerobic exercises are both effective at improving mental health.

Here are some more tips to help:

- Get an exercise partner to hold you accountable.
- Park at the back of the parking lot and walk.
- Do an activity you enjoy, and it won't be a chore.
- Skip the elevator and take the stairs.
- Head outside for 10 minutes during lunch.
- Set an alarm to remind you when to exercise.
- Get into a routine by exercising at the same time every day.
- Reward yourself for a job well done. Treat yourself to something you enjoy when you exercise.

Sleep: Establish a regular sleep schedule every day of the week. Don't sleep in more than an hour, even on your days off. If you haven't fallen asleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something calming. Read a book, draw, or write in a journal. Avoid computer, TV, and phone screens, or anything else that's stimulating and could lead to becoming more awake. Consuming caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine can affect your ability to fall asleep and the quality of your sleep, even if they're used earlier in the day. Remember caffeine can stay in your body for up to 12 hours, and even decaf coffee has some caffeine. Napping during the day will make sleep more difficult at night. Naps that are over an hour long, or those that are later in the day, are especially harmful to sleep hygiene.

Meditation: Research has linked meditation with reduced anxiety and more positive emotions. Those who meditate regularly may even permanently restructure their brains to create sustained happiness.





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For some, meditation might be doing yoga. For others, it is the stillness that comes through prayer. Whatever your practice, find what works for you to get still, and begin raising the volume of your own inner voice.

Positive journaling: Take some time to write about positive events in your life. Write about a fun day spent with friends, a good movie, or an activity you enjoyed. Positive journaling will get you into the habit of focusing on the positive and maintain hope.

Fostering relationships: Strong social connections are thought to be one of the most powerful influences on our mood. Those who are dedicated to spending time with friends and family show the highest levels of happiness. If you can't see your loved ones every day you can still send an email or make a phone call.

Spend time outside: Even just spending 10 minutes in nature can boost not only your mood, but your self-esteem as well. Sun exposure helps your brain release the hormone serotonin, which is a natural mood enhancer.

Sit up straight: If you're someone who slouches, you may want to work on your posture. A study published in the Journal of Health Psychology found that sitting in a slumped position makes you feel more sluggish, fearful, quiet, and hostile than sitting up straight, which instead elicits more happy and powerful emotions.

Learn something new: Keep your mind fresh by picking up a new hobby or reading about a topic you don't know about. As we age, we narrow down our learning based on career choices, but it is essential to expand our knowledge to keep a positive outlook on life and continue to grow. People who spend their time learning new things show greater overall wellbeing and better abilities coping with stress.

Smile: Smiling can trick your brain into happiness and boost your health. A smile spurs a powerful chemical reaction in the brain that can make you feel happier. The physical act of smiling can make a difference in building your immunity. When you smile, the brain sees the muscle activity and assumes that humor is happening. The brain doesn't bother to sort out whether you're smiling because you're genuinely joyous, or because you're just pretending. Even forcing a fake smile can reduce stress and lower your heart rate. One study found that people who could not frown due to Botox injections were happier on average than those who could frown.

Each of these habits are things you can start implementing daily. At first, change takes focused attention to become a habit. Once a habit is formed, it will give the budding change momentum and add a helpful inertia that makes it easier and easier to maintain the change. Soon then, the change will take root, transforming into a healthy new habit and hopeful perspective.

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