

Nature, nurture, and mental health. Part 3: Living your best life

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This is the third article of a 3-part series delving into the influence of nature and nurture on mental health. The first article focused on many of the nature, or person-related aspects: the genetic, psychological, and biological factors that can influence mental health (1). The second article focused on a range of nurture, or environment-related aspects: the exposures and experiences from conception onwards that can influence mental health (2). This final article offers a range of strategies to improve mental health, including those aimed to counter the nature and nurture aspects that increase the risk of mental illness. Ultimately, it is through awareness, acceptance, and then action — taking the right steps — that each of us can optimize our mental health.

Taking the right steps means making the right choices. This article offers a wide range of options from which to choose to best support your mental health, based on your understanding of *you in your world*. Although they may sound somewhat prescriptive, they're not meant to be. Instead, they're offered as opportunities to make choices. JC Maxwell said, "*Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you.*" This seems worthy to keep in mind as you consider the options before you.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is foundational to supporting mental health. A healthy lifestyle starts with sustaining good physical health. Why? The better you feel, the brighter your outlook will be (3), and the brighter your outlook, the greater your potential to achieve whatever it is you want to achieve. Consider the basics of diet, exercise, and good sleeping habits.

- Choose nutritious foods in appropriate portions and watch your weight. It's easier to not gain, than to lose, the extra pounds. It's helpful, especially for those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), to avoid diet soda, caffeinated beverages, and sugary treats.
- Find a form of exercise that you enjoy. Exercise elevates endorphins, *serotonin* and other pleasurable brain chemicals, which promotes a sense of well-being, and it reduces *cortisol*,

the stress hormone. Exercise also helps to discharge negative emotions (4).

- Practice good sleep hygiene and habits. Good quality of sleep is known to mitigate the negative effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on mental health (5).

Seek medical attention for your health concerns. Remember that mental and physical health conditions share many of the same symptoms (*e.g.*, fatigue), which can reduce the chances of recognizing co-existing conditions and receiving proper treatment (6). If you have a condition, such as depression or ADHD, medication may be helpful to boost and balance the neurotransmitter levels. If a family member has a condition, you may want to consult with a mental health professional who can help you understand the risk and preventive factors. Likewise, you may want to consult with a genetic counsellor who can help you understand how hereditary conditions might affect you and your family.

Challenge yourself to learn something new every day. It's called exercising your mind! Stretch your perspective in different directions. Discover more about yourself, your family, and your friends to better understand "you in your world" (7). Challenge yourself to do at least one kind thing each day. Acts of kindness increase the production of the feel-good neurotransmitter *dopamine*. Even something as simple as giving someone a smile or a compliment can generate happiness (4). And laugh! Laughter releases *serotonin*, which calms the amygdala, the brain's "stress center" (4).

Take time for things that boost your self-confidence and bring you joy (7). Doing so will make you feel good about yourself and your place in the world, providing a sense of worthiness that will naturally enable you to take even better care of yourself.

Stay connected with others

Social support is crucial in coping with stress. Having a network to draw on, such as family, friends, coworkers, or even a formal support group, is important to boost your mood during difficult times (4). This is especially important for those with a minority group status. Group affiliation and identity, and the sense of community therein, can offer the social and emotional support and coping resources needed to counteract the effects of stress on minority groups (8,9). Such support also mitigates the negative effects of ACEs on mental health (5).

Choose your people. Be with people you trust and care about and know care about you. This is vital to sustain self-esteem. If you don't have family or close friends, then consider joining a support group or volunteering (10). Volunteering will not only enrich your community (as well as benefit a cause that's

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important to you!), but will also boost your self-esteem, make you happier, and make you more grateful (11). Helping others is a great way to help yourself (10).

Although social media can enhance connectedness, it's best to limit its use. Various studies have reported that reducing social media use to 30 minutes a day results in a significant reduction in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep problems, and fear of missing out (FOMO) (11,12). Consider social media as a tool for facilitating the face-to-face real-life connections that we all need to be happy and healthy (11).

Appreciate yourself

Take stock of your uniqueness and accomplishments. Write these things down to fully appreciate who you are. Post it to remind yourself. This will support a healthy sense of self-esteem, vital to authentically connect with yourself as well as others. Stay true to yourself. Don't let yourself be held back in any relationship that invalidates who you are or minimizes what you're capable of. Find a life partner and friends who will support you for who you are. This will nurture your self-esteem. And stop comparing yourself to others. Comparing yourself is dead-end. It makes you feel undervalued and 'less than' (13). *Connect* rather than compare. Every person is unique and has special talents.

Be gentle with yourself. You may think that self-compassion is natural, or inborn, but self-compassion can be taught and learned (14). Both *Mindful Self-Compassion Training* and yoga have been shown to boost self-kindness and help quell the self-criticizing inner voice, which is especially important for perfectionists (14). It's helpful to remind yourself that whatever goals you set out to achieve in life *will be difficult*. Budget for the difficulties that any worthwhile achievement will entail rather than blame yourself for self-alleged inadequacies. Be your own best friend. And enjoy the process. One important way to recover from perfectionism is to begin focusing more on the process of working toward a goal, rather than just on the goal itself (15).

Mind your attitude

Focus on the positive. Softening the tendency to notice the bad by making a conscious effort to notice the good is especially important for perfectionists (15). Trying to find the good in every situation, even at difficult moments, is especially important for pessimists (3). And when faced with a challenge, focus on achieving a positive outcome rather than expecting a defeat. Instead of focusing on all the things that could go wrong, find the things that are going right. If it feels like everything *is* going wrong, notice even the smallest thing that is going right (13).

Challenge negative thoughts. Catch and redirect them to create more helpful interpretations (16). Negative thoughts can perpetuate unhealthy behaviors and wreak havoc on your self-esteem (4). When you notice negative thinking, ask yourself whether the thought is helpful or not. If not, stop it, even if you cut yourself off in mid-thought (13). This is especially important for perfectionists, pessimists, and those who lean towards neuroticism.

Choose self-empowering language. When you tell yourself that you "should," "ought to," "must," or "have to," you are oppressing yourself. Instead, tell yourself you "choose to". Feel

the freedom that choice gives you. Self-empowering language supports your sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Likewise, choose your response. There are, of course, times when you can't control what happens to you, but you *can* control how it affects you. In other words, you can choose how you respond: what you think, how you feel, and what actions you take (16). You do have choice in the matter.

As you start your day, get in the habit of saying a positive affirmation. Write and display affirmations as well. This can help you to approach life more positively (13). Gratitude can be helpful for this too. Write out 3 things you're grateful for before going to sleep every night. Keep track of the good things as well as the things (and people) you'd miss if they were suddenly gone from your life. Gratitude motivates healthy behaviors; reduces the lifetime risk for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorders; and enhances overall happiness (4,17). And the more often you focus on gratitude, the more optimistic you will become.

Root yourself in hope for the future of our world — not "hope that," but "hope to," which is hope linked to action. It's the only way to tackle the alarming problem of climate change in a holistic manner (18). Hope goes hand-in-hand with psychological adaptation, which necessitates acknowledging the threats posed, coping with the thoughts and feelings that arise, and adjusting lifestyles to reduce the threat and protect ourselves and the planet (18).

Get centered

Practice mindfulness. Learn to live more in the moment (11). Most negative thoughts are about the past and future, which can't be addressed. Your power lies in the present, so try to address what is right in front of you in the most adaptive, constructive way possible (4). Slow your mind. Bring yourself to the "now" and use your mental energy toward things that benefit you (16). Mindfulness can be discovered in activities such as meditation, yoga, gardening, a coffee on the porch, or a relaxed walk. Mindfulness is especially beneficial for those who are highly sensitive, pessimistic, or neurotic, and who have experienced ACEs. Mindfulness-based approaches are effective in the reduction of stress, anxiety, depression, and substance use (19).

Strive to experience life deeply. Take moments each day to connect with your senses. Intentionally notice, listen, smell, touch, and taste (7). Get closer to 'who you are in your world' through journalling. Deepen into it. Expressive writing can be especially helpful to heal from ACEs (20,21). Becoming more aware of your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and the patterns therein, can fuel positive change.

Find ways to connect with your spiritual self and the strength therein. This may be through time spent in nature, yoga, meditation, or attending a place of worship. It can help you get centered and find a sense of balance in the broader scheme of life. It can also help train your brain to be more optimistic (4).

Ask for help

Professional help can change your life for the better. There are many forms of psychotherapy, also known as psychological counselling or talk therapy, that have proven effective in helping

people resolve problems in life and living, positively modify attitudes and behavior, and feel better. Many kinds of psychotherapy can be helpful for many kinds of life circumstances. There is no one right or perfect type of therapy and very often it's not the type of therapy, but the therapeutic relationship that makes the greatest difference.

For those with ADHD, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can be helpful. It can help to improve time management, organizational and problem-solving skills, and better manage impulsive behavior. For the gifted, who face unique issues, CBT and psychodynamic therapy can be of benefit (22). For the highly sensitive, who struggle with emotion regulation and cognitive reactivity, CBT can be helpful (19). Cognitive-behavioral therapy can also be helpful for those who are perfectionists, making life easier as well as more rewarding by identifying thinking errors, letting go of negative self-talk, and developing a healthier mindset (15). Acceptance-based behavior therapy is also helpful with perfectionism.

For those with low self-esteem or who are pessimistic, CBT can help to identify the reasons behind the negative thoughts and transform them into more positive ones (10,23). Changing the negative schemas about the self and world can improve self-esteem and lead to a more optimistic view of life. For those in minority groups, especially those of sexual and gender minority, minority-affirmative psychotherapy can be helpful (8). And lastly, for those who have experienced racial trauma or ACEs, trauma-informed approaches can be helpful. In fact, they can be life-changing. Ask for help. Life is short.

Living your best life

For some, mental health is just a passing thought, whereas for others, it can be a daily challenge... but it doesn't have to be. Each of us is *one of a kind* with strengths and vulnerabilities. Each of us can build *on* our strengths and *from* our vulnerabilities. Recognizing the importance of awareness, acceptance, and action, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I *aware* that these aspects of myself can impact my mental health?
2. Do I *accept* myself as I am, with my natural and acquired strengths and vulnerabilities?
3. *Knowing* what I do and *accepting* myself as I am, what can I *do* to optimize my mental health?

Remember, it's all about choice. Make choices in your favor. They will help you to live your best life, being the best "you" that you can possibly be. As CS Lewis said, "*You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.*" Life is a journey to be lived to the fullest. It's not easy, but it's yours.

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