

Reaching Out CHE Article
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Mental Health Self Care Strategies

Stress is a common condition for millions of people. There are a number of things individuals can do to deal with stress and enhance mental health. First and foremost staying physically healthy can maintain and/or improve one's mental well-being. The CDC recommends eating a healthy diet including fruits, vegetables, lean protein and whole grains; getting seven or more hours of sleep each night; and maintaining a regular exercise routine.

Meditation is an effective tool to deal with stress. According to Melanie Greenberg, author of *The Stress-Proof Brain*, meditation can recondition your brain to become more stress tolerant over time. Stress can cause increased levels of cortisol in the body causing inflammation. This can disrupt sleep, promote anxiety and/or depression, increase blood pressure and contribute to fatigue. Research studies show eight weeks of mindfulness meditation led to noticeable improvements in stress and anxiety levels.

Maintaining relationships and connecting with people is important to both one's physical and mental health. The Cleveland Clinic advises: staying connected with people who you enjoy, make you happy, provide emotional support and give you a sense of belonging.

According to the Mayo Clinic "Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke." A good laugh can increase your intake of oxygen which stimulates many body organs resulting in a flow of endorphins making you feel more relaxed. Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress. While negative thinking creates chemical reactions in the body which increase stress and weaken the immune system, positive thoughts and laughter can release neuropeptides that help combat stress enhancing the immune response.

Volunteering provides many benefits to both mental and physical health. According to *HelpGuide.org* volunteering helps counteract the effects of stress, anger and anxiety. The social contact helping and working with others can have a huge impact on one's psychological well-being. Nothing relieves stress better than a meaningful connection with another person. Researchers have studies measuring hormones and brain activity indicating that helping others provides a sense of satisfaction and pleasure to the volunteer. Volunteering often results in increased self-confidence and provides a sense of purpose. Whatever one's age or situation, volunteering can take your mind off your problems and keep you mentally stimulated.

Stress is a part of modern life. Awareness of these strategies provides one the tools to manage stress symptoms and lessen the emotional load that can affect both physical and mental health. Let's nurture relationships with family and friends, laugh every day, volunteer frequently, meditate often, and stay active.

