Mental Health Toolkit

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING STRONG MENTAL HEALTH



MOMENTOUS INSTITUTE

About Momentous Institute

We are a team of passionate individuals bound by the belief that the mental health of young people and their families is momentous to their success.

Founded in 1920, Salesmanship Club of Dallas unites its more than 600 members to strengthen the mental health of children and families. Throughout the year, members focus their efforts to support Momentous Institute.

As the only Dallas nonprofit offering mental health services and operating an elementary school, Momentous Institute offers a unique synergy between education and mental health.

The integrity of our work is critical to delivering effective outcomes. Through a detailed approach, we have developed a comprehensive method to assess impact and measure successes. Through the evaluation of these results, we are confident in our ability to strengthen the lives of 1,000,000 children and families by 2031.

Thank You to Our Contributors

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Why a Mental Health Toolkit

Mental health is not a state of being, but a state of action. Having devoted over 100 years to treating the mental health of children and families, we have seen the profound impact that various challenges can have on our mental health and wellbeing. Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted our overall mental health. The impact of such mental health challenges is not confined to a small subset of people; rather, it has far-reaching implications for the entire population.

In 2021, the office of the U.S. Surgeon General, which is focused on the most pressing public health issues, declared a national crisis on youth mental health. In 2023, for the first time, the office also released an advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation, which states that about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. The lack of social connection poses a risk for health and longevity, increasing the risk for premature death by over 25%. Loneliness is just one factor affecting the population. Anxiety, trauma, stress, depression and grief are among other challenges many adults are experiencing every day.

Studies such as the Surgeon General report and the ACE study show that mental health also affects our physical health across the lifespan. Much like efforts to decrease smoking, substance use and risk factors for heart conditions, we must also make efforts to prioritize our mental health.

This toolkit is built upon decades of evidence-based research in neuroscience and the leading mental health theories and practices. It is our hope that this toolkit provides a basic understanding of mental health and offers practical strategies and accessible resources to achieve our vision of seeing a world full of emotionally thriving people.

What is Mental Health?

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which a person can cope with stressors, work towards goals and contribute to their community. It is helpful to think of mental health as one part of overall health.

Components of mental health include:
Psychological wellbeing: a state of mind including our thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and cognitive functioning.

Emotional wellbeing: how we experience and regulate our emotions, including how we understand our feelings.

Social wellbeing: pertaining to our relationships and interactions with others.

Conversations about mental health often focus on mental illness. In reality, mental health falls upon a continuum, with mental wellness on one side and mental illness on the other. We all fall somewhere along this continuum, and we move closer to one side or the other throughout our lives. Just like with physical health, sometimes we are in top shape, and other times we are facing illness or injury.

Strong mental health allows us to manage our emotions, form healthier relationships with others, work towards our goals and contribute to our communities.

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Brain and Body

We often think of the brain and body as separate entities, but actually, they're very connected! It is helpful to think of the brain and body as an integrated system. What happens in one affects the other. Here are a few basic things to know about how the brain and body are linked.

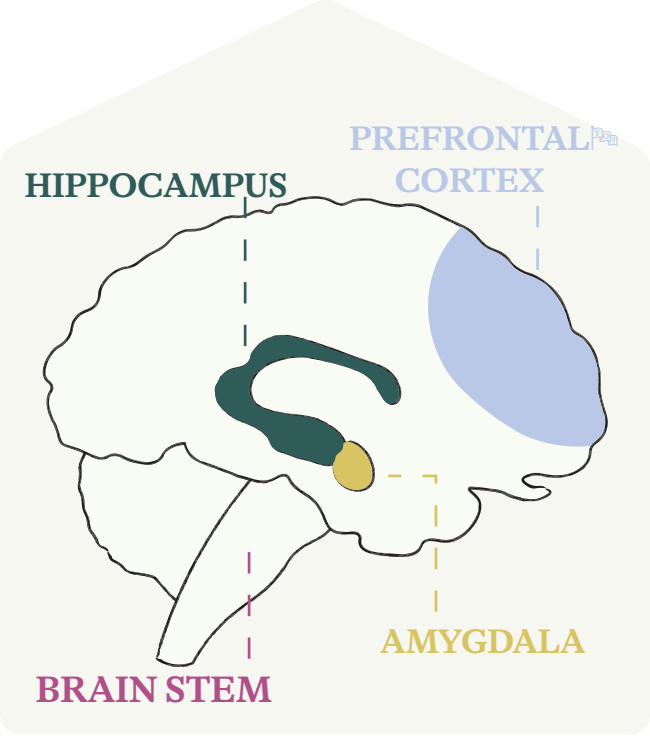
The brain is the central processing network that guides everything we do. It controls our body's movements, our decision making and our emotions. Understanding the basics of the brain helps us manage our actions and feelings. The brain is a highly complex organ, but for simplicity's sake, we will focus on a few key components.

The Prefrontal Cortex

Part of the frontal lobe, the prefrontal cortex is the logical, reasoning part of the brain. The prefrontal cortex helps us make decisions, problem solve, and analyze and interpret our experiences.

The Amygdala

The amygdala is the emotional center of the brain. It is almond shaped and tucked inside the center of the brain. When we are operating from the amygdala, we react quickly (the term fight, flight, or freeze applies here). The amygdala also responds to novelty.



The Hippocampus

The hippocampus processes and stores information. It is positioned directly above the amygdala, which explains why memories can often cause strong emotional responses.

The Brain Stem

The brain stem is the most primitive part of the brain. It connects the brain and spinal cord and controls essential body functions including heart rate and breathing.

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The Brain and Body Connection

The brain sends signals via chemicals called neurotransmitters. Think of them as little messages that are carried throughout the nervous system by neurons. The brain and body also communicate using hormones. Hormones are chemical messengers for the body. They are produced by the endocrine system and travel via the blood stream.

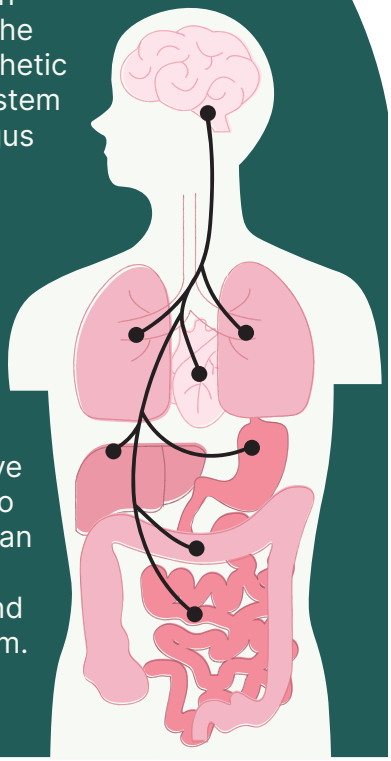
The Nervous System:
a network of nerves and cells that carry messages between the brain and body.

The nervous system has two parts:

Parasympathetic Nervous System
calms the body; often referred to as the 'rest and digest' system

Sympathetic Nervous System
activates the body

The main nerve in the parasympathetic nervous system is the vagus nerve.



The vagus nerve is connected to every major organ including the heart, lungs, and digestive system.

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Polyvagal Theory

The work of Dr. Stephen Porges has helped us further understand the brain and body connection through his Polyvagal Theory. Through his work, Porges explains that our nervous system has three states: **Ventral Vagal, Sympathetic,** and **Dorsal Vagal.** Throughout the day, we may flow from one state to the other. However, there is one optimal state we want to strive towards. In the Ventral Vagal state, we feel safe, calm, regulated, and can make connections with others.

Ventral Vagal: *Social Engagement System*		Safe Connection Calm / Regulated Healthy Balance Resourced / Resourceful
Sympathetic: *Mobilization*		Cues of Threat or Danger Chronic Stress or Anxiety Fight or Flight Response Greater Conflict in Relationships
Dorsal: *Immobilization*		Threats Feel Life Threatening Collapse / Shut Down Unhealthy Coping Behaviors Despair / Hopelessness

In the Ventral Vagal State, a person's internal narrative is, "I can." They feel empowered to take actions and manage emotions and relationships. In the Sympathetic state their internal narrative is, "I must now." They become hyper focused on their task, their body is in fight or flight mode, and they are often irritable and stressed. In the Dorsal Vagal state, the internal narrative is, "I can't." They feel defeated and numb. They often withdraw from others and cannot have meaningful connections.

KEY TAKEAWAY: BRAIN AND BODY

The brain and body are constantly working together to support your mental health by helping you respond to cues in your environment, keeping you safe and helping you process and regulate your feelings and emotions.

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Emotions and Feelings

Feelings and emotions are an important component of mental health. People who are emotionally healthy can manage their behavior, engage in healthy relationships with others and bounce back from challenges. Here are a few things to know about emotions and feelings.

Emotions

Emotions are brief and sometimes intense reactions to something in the environment. Emotions begin as a sensation in the body. A trigger or event occurs (a stimulus), the brain receives a signal, chemicals are released throughout the body and this feedback loop creates an emotion.

Feelings

Feelings are generated from our thoughts about those emotions. They are how we interpret emotions and experiences. Feelings can be physical or emotional states, such as feeling tired or hungry, or feeling disappointed or worried.

Both emotions and feelings are an innate part of the human experience. Emotions are often brief (lasting just seconds or minutes) while feelings are how we make sense of our emotions and move forward.

It takes self-awareness to notice emotions and feelings and respond in a healthy way. When we are able to understand our emotional states and manage our responses, we can experience improved mental health.

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Five Things to Know about Feelings and Emotions

1. **Varied emotions and feelings are normal.** We all experience a wide range of emotions and feelings, some that we enjoy and others that we don't. It is important not to assign value to them, labeling some as "good" and others as "bad". All emotions and feelings are part of the human experience.

2. **Emotions are information.** Sometimes we know right away what we are feeling. Other times, we may feel something and not know why. Emotions can show up in our body as sensations or discomfort. Noticing emotions in our bodies helps us to process them in a healthy way.

3. **Emotions and feelings are meant to be felt.** It is important to feel the full range of our emotions. Some may be uncomfortable, and it is tempting to try to move past it as quickly as possible. But ignoring feelings and emotions doesn't help us make sense of them or manage them. It is okay to sit with the discomfort of certain emotions and feelings and allow others to do the same.

4. **Emotions and feelings come and go.** We experience emotions and feelings all day long. Sometimes we feel like we're on top of a mountain, other times we feel like we're gasping for air and that the feeling will last forever. But emotions are like waves in the ocean, they come and go. Sometimes they knock us down and sometimes they pick us up. They are continually changing.

5. **We are affected by the emotions of others.** Other people's feelings may differ from our own, and that may affect how we feel. We each respond differently based in part upon our experiences and how we make meaning of those experiences. The good news is that we can learn to manage our feelings and improve our interactions and relationships with others.

KEY TAKEAWAY: EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS

Emotions and feelings are an important part of the human experience. They can provide information that allows us to manage our responses in a healthy way.

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Stress

Stress is the brain and body's response to a stressor or threat in the environment. There are different types of stress, and not all stress is bad. But when it is continuous and we don't have adequate resources or support, it can be detrimental to our mental health and wellbeing. Let's break this down a bit more.

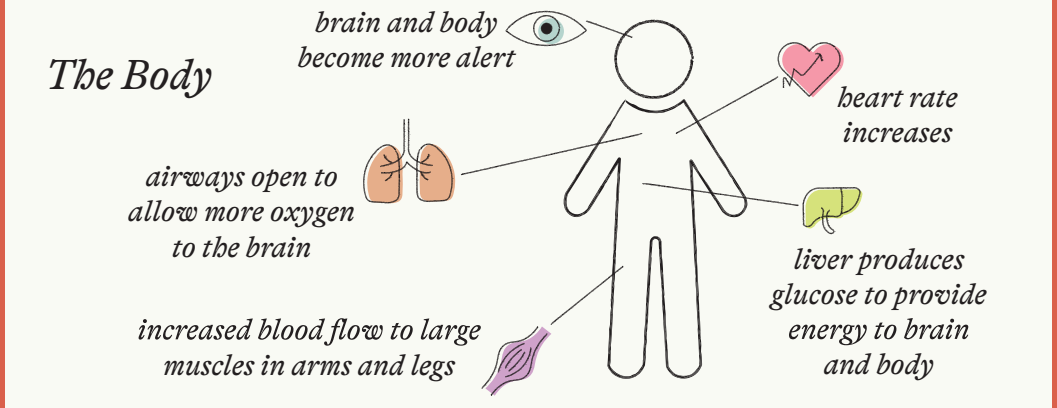
Positive stress is the stress one gets when working on achieving a goal, or stress that motivates someone to take a healthy risk.

Tolerable stress is serious, but temporary stress that is buffered by safe and supportive relationships.

Toxic stress is strong, frequent or prolonged adversity without a buffering of safety and supportive relationships.

What Happens in the Brain and Body

1. *The body* receives sensory input that suggests a threat
2. *The brain* receives the message through the amygdala (the alarm center)
3. *Stress hormones* are sent throughout the body



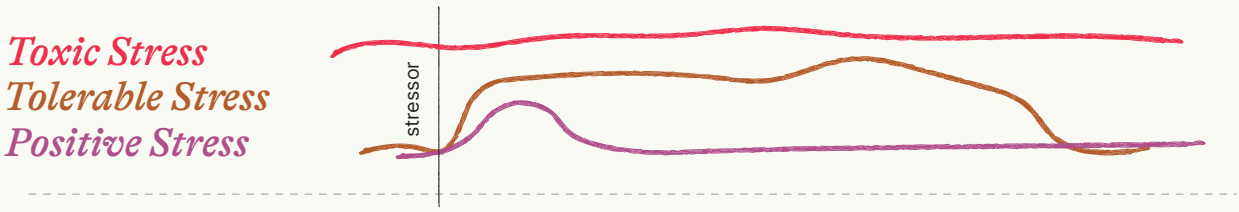


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The body is designed to manage positive stress. The body will have a temporary reaction and will return to a state of calm easily or quickly. For example, if a driver swerves to avoid an oncoming car, that stress has helped them avoid an accident. A short while later, their body will calm down.

Tolerable stress is more prolonged and lasts longer than just a few moments. This type of stress may pile on top of itself, so just when one stressor is getting managed, another one comes along. But what keeps this stress tolerable is having some level of support and resources to help you manage and push through it.

With toxic stress, the stressors keep coming and seemingly, there is no end in sight. When this happens, the brain is on such high alert that it communicates to the body that it is not safe. The body can be in a constant state of fight, flight or freeze. This type of stress is the most difficult to manage because it requires not only the lessening of stressors, but also the regulation, or calming, of the stress response system in the body.



Stress and Hormones

Hormones are chemical messengers for the body. We are made up of over 50 different hormones that control our body's biological processes.

Cortisol is nicknamed "the stress hormone". It's an important part of the body's built-in alarm system. During moments of stress, cortisol is released in the body. It helps the body become alert and signals to certain functions of the body to take a back seat, such as digestion and growth.

Oxytocin is sometimes known as the "love hormone" because it spikes when we have positive social interactions with those around us. Oxytocin is released as part of the stress response system to encourage us to connect with other people. This is called the "tend and befriend" response. It is one way that people manage stress, by connecting with others who are important to them and care for them.

While cortisol is the hormone that raises our stress, oxytocin is the hormone that relieves our stress. Both impact our mental health in different ways.

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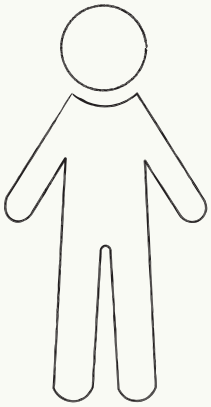
Chronic Stress

When we experience too many stressors and/or have unhealthy or insufficient stress response systems, we can encounter damaging long-term effects. This is referred to as chronic stress. Chronic stress can have a long-term impact on the brain, body and mental health.

The Body

Increased risk of heart attack or stroke

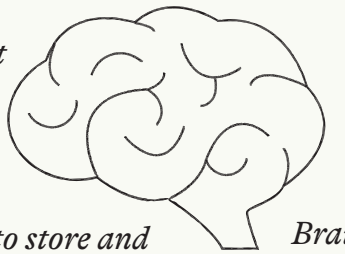
Potential for less-healthy stress management tools such as excess use of alcohol, smoking or food intake



Possibility of weight gain, indigestion, inflammation and resistance to disease

The Brain

Brain stays on high alert



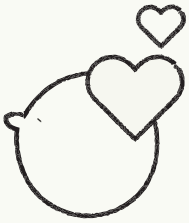
The connection between amygdala and prefrontal cortex is weakened

Less ability to store and retain memories

Brain is more reactive and less guided by logical thinking

Mental Health

Can lead to depression or anxiety



Increased possibility of addiction or substance use

KEY TAKEAWAY: STRESS

Stress shows up in our brain and body, and can have long-term effects if not managed. Some stress can be helpful and motivating, but it is important to prevent and manage toxic and chronic stress.

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Trauma

Trauma is the brain and body's response to an event that exceeds a person's ability to cope. Trauma is not the event itself, but it's what happens when the experience overwhelms the mental and emotional resources a person has to manage it. Trauma is more personal in nature. A traumatic event for one person may not be traumatic for another, depending on the person's support system and coping resources.

Most people have experienced a traumatic event in their lives, whether from a childhood event, or later in life, or more recently, the experience of living through a global pandemic. Some people are living with unresolved trauma which can affect their emotions, behaviors, and relationships. Because of the trauma, they may find it difficult to feel settled and secure in their lives. However, just because someone is living with unresolved trauma doesn't mean they can't improve their mental health and have a better quality of life.

Some events are likely to create trauma just because of their nature. These are things like violence, natural disasters, or the sudden loss of a loved one. These are considered **Big T** traumas. They are likely to cause a traumatic response in most people, regardless of circumstance. They are significant milestones in a person's life, ones which may alter or affect a person's long-term health and wellbeing.

Other events may be traumatic for some, such as visiting the dentist, a breakup, or the loss of a pet. We call these **little t** traumas. They may not necessarily be traumatic for everyone, but they are traumatic for some.

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Adverse Childhood Experiences and Positive Childhood Experiences

Much of what we know about the prevalence and long-term impact of trauma comes from a large-scale public research project called the **Adverse Childhood Experience** (or ACE) study. The ACE Study is one of the largest investigations of childhood trauma correlated to later-life health and well-being.

The ACE study was conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente to study the adverse experiences that children face in the first 18 years of life and their long-term consequences. The study found that a higher prevalence of ACEs was linked to chronic health problems, mental illness and substance misuse in adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.

A misconception about Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs is that the long-term negative impacts are inevitable.

A 2019 study done by Johns Hopkins University researched **Positive Childhood Experiences** (or PCEs). While more research is still needed to explore the impact of positive experiences, this study had some truly hopeful findings. These researchers found that the more positive experiences children had, even if they had also experienced ACEs, the more likely they were to have improved mental health, a lower risk of depression, and healthier relationships.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)	Positive Childhood Experiences (PCES)
Emotional, physical or sexual abuse	Being able to talk with family about feelings
Violence in the home	Feeling that families stood by during difficult times
Substance abuse in the household	Enjoying participating in community traditions
Mental illness in the household	Feeling a sense of belonging in high school
Parental separation or divorce	Feeling supported by friends
Incarcerated household member	Having at least two non-parent adults take genuine interest
Emotional or physical neglect	Feeling safe and protected by an adult in their home

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Other Types of Trauma

Just as there are different types of stress, there are different types of trauma. Other types of trauma include:

RELATIONAL TRAUMA
Trauma that happens within the context of relationships. This might include child abuse, domestic violence or emotional neglect.

COMMUNITY TRAUMA
Trauma that occurs at a community level and impacts most, if not all, members of a community. This might include an act of violence in the community, war, or death of a community member.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA
Trauma that is passed down from one generation to another. This might include abuse or unsafe discipline practices.

SYSTEMIC TRAUMA
Trauma that is created or maintained by institutions or their leaders that can cause harm to individuals within the system. This might included traumatic experiences in the workplace, healthcare systems or educational systems.

ENVIRONMENTAL TRAUMA
Trauma that comes from the physical environment, such as unsafe living conditions or weather-related disasters.

KEY TAKEAWAY: TRAUMA

Most people experience trauma in their lives, but it is never too late to improve mental health outcomes. Mental health research shows that healthy relationships, the ability to manage emotions and a sense of belonging help improve mental health even when facing traumatic experiences.

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Relationships

Relationships are a critical component of mental health. We spend our lives in relationship with others, and in these relationships, we develop and maintain our mental and emotional wellbeing. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Epidemic of Loneliness report, lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social connection is an important component of mental and physical health. Let's dive deeper into the science of relationships and how they are developed and maintained.

The Social Brain

The human brain is a social brain. It is wired to connect, meaning that connection with others is a basic human need. Many regions of the brain support our social behavior and are activated when we engage in social interactions.

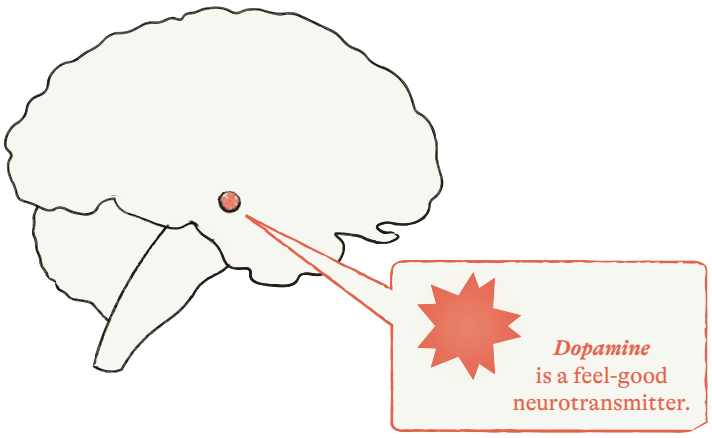
When we engage in a social interaction with another human, the medial prefrontal cortex lights up. Its job is to analyze other people's facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. It helps us make sense of another person's feelings and intentions.

For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a loss in social connection, and many are still recovering from this setback. This lack of social connection has caused a decline in mental health across much of the population. It is important to remember that relationships aren't just nice to have, they are part of our brain's biological function.

The Reward System

The reward system of the brain is designed to push us towards activities that are pleasurable and/or helpful for our survival and lead us away from activities that are harmful.

Dopamine is a feel-good neurotransmitter that is released and serves as a pick-me-up for the brain and body. When we engage in pro-social behavior, the reward system is activated in the same way as if we were receiving a physical reward.

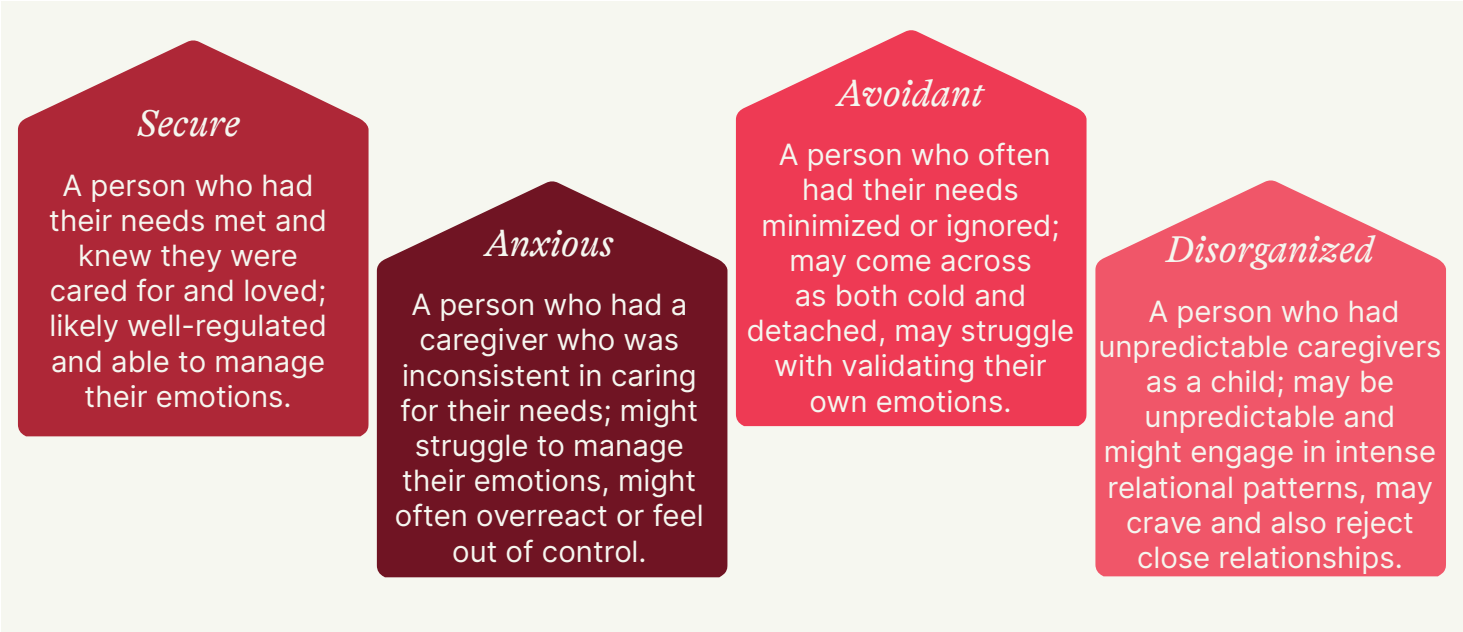


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Attachment

Attachment is the basic framework for understanding human connections – how well a person is connected to others. Attachment theory is grounded in the work of Dr. John Bowlby and was later expanded by Dr. Mary Ainsworth, Dr. Mary Main and Dr. Judith Solomon. Attachment theory says that we begin forming connections as infants with our primary caregivers, and those early experiences can lead to a person developing either secure or insecure attachment. We develop a secure attachment style when our primary caregivers reliably meet our needs. When our needs are not reliably met, we develop an insecure attachment style.

There are four distinct styles of attachment. These attachment styles are not fixed, but are a way of understanding our interactions with others.



Everyone has patterns of attachment beginning in infancy and through adulthood. Many people have more than one type of attachment, and most people find themselves on a continuum. As we grow to understand our attachment history and gain support that helps us to feel more secure, we are better equipped to navigate our adult relationships. Our brains never stop changing and growing. This means our attachment styles can also change and grow throughout our lifetimes.

KEY TAKEAWAY: RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships and social connection are essential to our mental health. Our social brain is wired to connect with others and rewards us for social behavior. Learning about our relational patterns helps us understand our interactions with others and sets the stage for forming healthy bonds.

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Strategies

The following pages provide simple strategies to support strong mental health. We invite you to try these strategies and find those that work best for you. These tools will be most successful if they become an integrated part of your life, so we encourage you to build a practice of the strategies that best support your mental health.

Strategies for Brain and Body

Sleep
- The Science of Sleep
- Sleep and Mental Health
- Tips for Healthy Sleep

Exercise
- The Science of Exercise
- Exercise and Mental Health
- Tips for Getting Active

Nutrition
- The Science of Nutrition
- Nutrition and Mental Health
- Nutrition Tips

Strategies for Emotions and Feelings

Name It to Tame It
Feelings Questions

Strategies for Stress and Trauma

Mindfulness
- Breathing
- Grounding

Gratitude
- Journaling
- Affirmations

Relaxation and Fun
- Hobbies
- Rest
- Play

Strategies for Healthy Relationships

Combating Loneliness: Three Ingredients for Deep Friendship

Sleep

The Science of Sleep

Sleep is more than just lying dormant for hours at a time. Your brain is hard at work! During sleep, your brain does two things:

1. Neural pathways in the brain are connected and strengthened, helping us process and store information. (This helps us remember what we've learned!)

2. A process called pruning helps us get rid of things we don't need and clear the brain of toxins. (This makes our brain more efficient!)

Sleep and Mental Health

Research has found a strong link between sleep and mental health. Poor sleep is one of the key symptoms of depression and can often be one of the first reasons people seek help.

Sleep challenges can lead to mental health challenges OR mental health challenges can lead to poor sleep. In other words, sleep can be either the cause or the consequence of mental health issues.

Sometimes we need to address a mental health concern, and sleep will improve. Sometimes we need to work on sleep, and our mental health will improve.

How to Improve Sleep

The term "sleep hygiene" is used to describe healthy sleep habits that encourage a restful night's sleep, including:

- Maintain a consistent bedtime
- Create a wind-down routine prior to bed, to prepare your brain and body for rest
- Limit caffeine, alcohol and tobacco in the evening
- Turn off screens and devices at least one hour before bedtime
- Get exercise and exposure to natural light during the day

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Exercise

The Science of Exercise

Getting your body moving...

- releases endorphins, hormones that give you feelings of pleasure and help reduce stress.
- strengthens the brain/body connection by activating the receptors that send information to the brain from the body.
- improves circulation which is important for moving nutrients throughout the body and removing waste from the body.
- improves cognitive function by increasing blood flow to the brain, stimulating new connections between brain cells.

Exercise and Mental Health

The brain releases feel-good neurotransmitters such as endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin when you exercise. Because of this, exercise has been linked to decreased anxiety and depression.

Research shows that 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise three days a week can improve mental health outcomes. The best part is that it doesn't even have to be 30 minutes all at once, you can have three 10-minute dance parties and still gain some health benefits.

In addition to improving mood, regular exercise can also improve sleep and digestion.

Tips for Getting Active

- Choose a physical activity that you enjoy and that is within your physical capability.
- Not a runner? No worries. You can dance, take a walk, do yoga, swim laps or play with a pet.
- Make it a priority to get your body moving. Don't worry about how you look or if you are doing it right, just focus on moving your body in a way that feels good.

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Nutrition

The Science of Nutrition

There is a lot of science around food, hunger and how nutrients affect our physical and mental health. Let's look at some fun facts about the brain and the gut.

- The body needs six types of nutrients to function: fats, water, minerals, proteins, vitamins, and carbohydrates. The primary source of energy for the brain come from carbohydrates.
- The gut is the body's second largest sensory organ. With a network of nerves that is as large and complex as the brain's, the gut does more than just waste management.
- When the brain is experiencing a stress response, the gut will reroute resources and energy to the brain, causing digestion to slow down and loss of appetite.

Nutrition and Mental Health

Research shows that eating a well-balanced, nutrient rich diet can lead to improved mental health. Studies have shown that people who eat diets rich in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains and healthy proteins have a lower risk of depression than those who eat a diet with refined foods and sugars.

It's important to remember that food is cultural and communal, and nutrition can vary depending on communities, access and more. But paying attention to nutrition can be an important step in managing mental health.

Nutrition Tips

- Make time for stress-free meals. Sometimes eating on the go is necessary, but taking time to eat at a slower pace and without pressure can help prevent stress and improve digestion.
- Listen to your body. Learn your hunger cues so that you can honor them. This will help you eat when you are hungry and recognize when you are satiated.
- Try mindful eating. Taking time to savor a snack by focusing on how it tastes, smells and feels can help you better understand how food affects your mood and body.
- Eat meals in community, without screens and media, and help children do the same.

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Recognizing Emotions

NAME IT TO TAME IT

In *The Whole Brain Child,* Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson describe a strategy called Name it to Tame It. When we accurately name what we are feeling, it helps take the logic and explanation from the left brain and the feelings and emotions from the right brain and integrates them. An integrated brain is more flexible, stable and energized.

Naming the emotion or feeling is a healthier option than minimizing, ignoring or deflecting. Practice naming your emotion or feeling next time you notice one! When you name it, you can use a strategy to tame it.

FEELINGS QUESTIONS

When faced with a big feeling, try asking these questions:

1. What am I feeling?
2. Where am I feeling this in my body?
3. Why am I feeling this way?
4. Is this feeling working for me?
5. What should I do with this feeling?

For example:

1. What am I feeling?
   I am feeling angry.

2. Where am I feeling this in my body?
   My stomach is feeling queasy and I have a light headache.

3. Why am I feeling this way?
   My colleague was rude to me, and I didn't deserve to be treated that way.

4. Is this feeling working for me?
   I am allowing this anger to keep me from being productive today.

5. What should I do with this feeling?
   I think I should take a walk or step outside for a few minutes to help move the anger out of my body. Then I think I should have a conversation with my coworker to talk about how our interaction has impacted me.

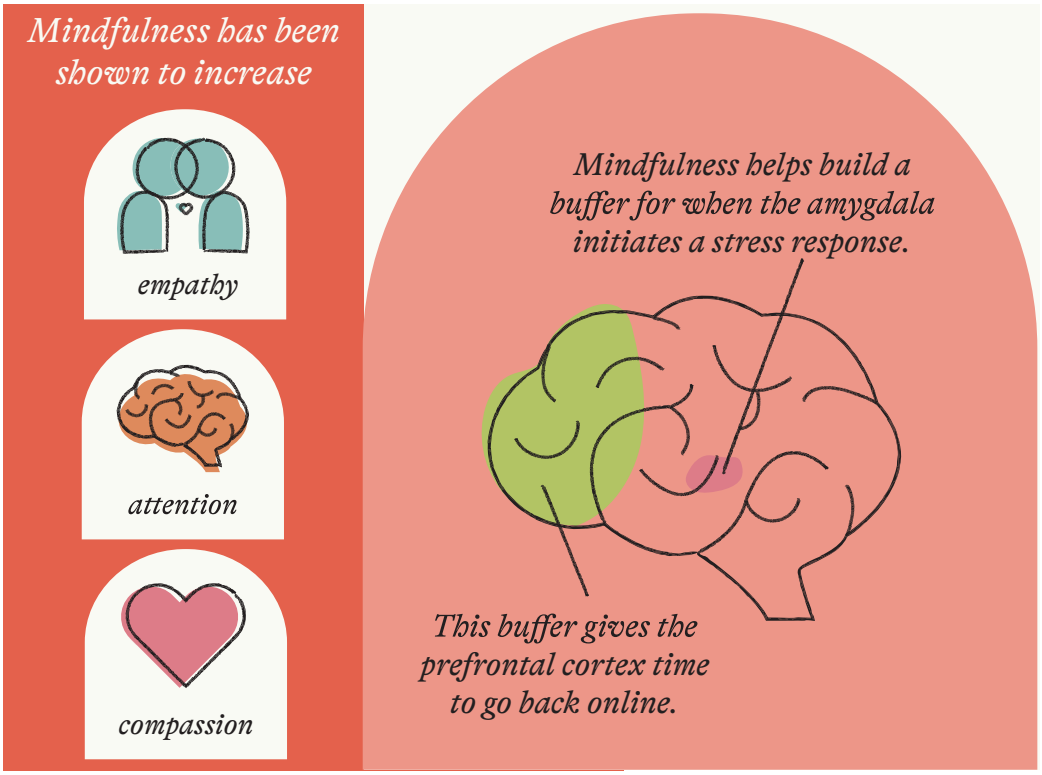
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Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of being present in the moment. There is significant research about the positive effects of mindfulness. At the core of mindfulness practice is mindful awareness, beginning with breathing. Mindful breathing helps with focus and self-regulation. Self regulation is the ability to understand emotions, control impulses, and calm down when you are experiencing intense emotions or stress

When the breath is shallow and rapid, it can trigger the release of stress hormones (fight, flight or freeze). When the breath is slow, deep and measured, it signals the body to release hormones that are associated with feelings of calm and centered well-being. Research shows that breath control is especially helpful for people with ADHD, chronic pain and a history of trauma, to name a few.

Mindfulness, particularly mindful breathing, is an accessible tool that can be used in a variety of settings.

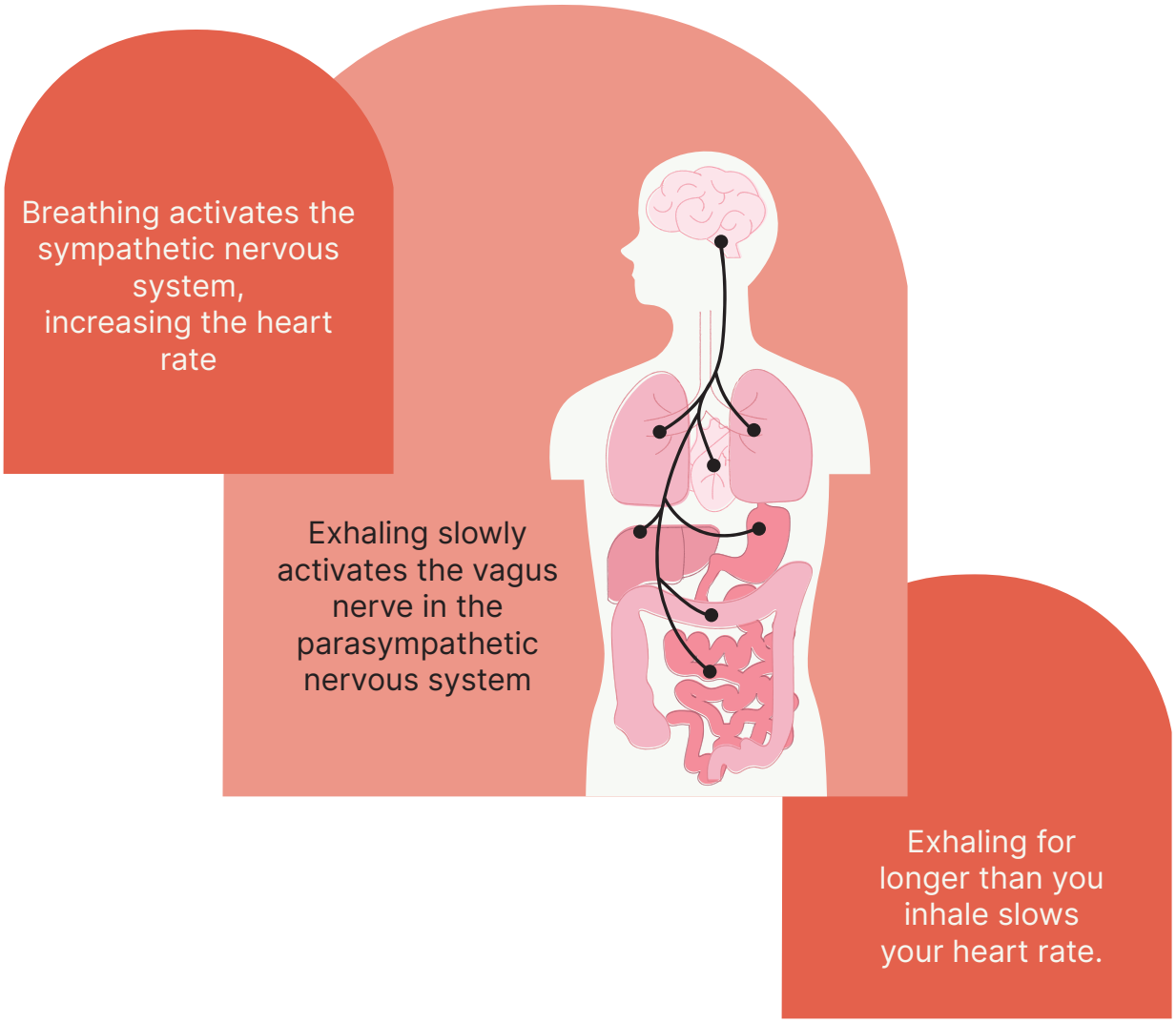


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Mindfulness

BREATHING

Mindfulness, particularly mindful breathing, is an accessible tool that be used in a variety of settings. Because of the strong neurobiological connection that occurs during deep breathing, mindful breathing is one of the quickest ways to return to calm. It can trigger the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol, and signal the body to release hormones that are associated with feelings of calm and centered wellbeing, such as oxytocin.



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Mindfulness

BREATHING STRATEGIES

In with the Good, Out with the Bad

As you breathe, in think of something positive that has happened recently or a positive thought about yourself.

As you breathe out, take a negative experience or thought and push it away with your breath.

Make some Noise

Breathe in deeply for a count of four.



As you release the breath, make a noise. You can hum, hiss, sigh, sing, or get creative with it.

The Lie Down

A bonus of this breathing strategy is that you get to lay down for a few minutes!



Lay down flat and place a hand over your stomach. Take several mindful breaths. As you breathe, focus on the rise and fall of your stomach and the feeling of the ground beneath your body.

Stretch and Release

As you inhale, stretch your arms above your head. Stretch a bit as you hold the breath.



As you exhale, slowly lower your arms back down to your side.

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Mindfulness

GROUNDING

Grounding is the act of bringing yourself into the present moment using your body and/or senses. We often need to return to safety in our bodies after we experience significant stress or trauma or when we recall a painful experience. Grounding strategies tell your brain and body that you are safe using physical movement to remind your body that it is on steady ground.

Try these grounding strategies to reduce stress.

5-4-3-2-1

This strategy supports your ability to stop and notice your environment and bring you back to present. Notice: **5** things you can see, **4** things you can touch, **3** things you can hear, **2** things you can smell and **1** thing you can taste.

GROUNDING IN THE GROUND

Place both feet flat on the floor. Press your feet firmly into ground and focus on the feeling of the soles of your feet touching the floor. You may wish to pair this with a grounding statement, such as, “I am safe.”

CONNECTING WITH NATURE

Research shows that being in nature can make us kinder, happier, healthier and more creative. Here are five ways to connect with nature:

1. **Get comfortable with nature.** What does your body feel when you are in nature? What elements make you feel comfortable or curious? Identify ways you can interact with nature that allow you to get the most out of your experience.
2. **Think reciprocity.** Instead of thinking just about what nature can do for you, think about what you can do for the natural world. This might include tending to a plant or learning more about the spaces, plants and animals you interact with.
3. **Look for what nature offers in the moment.** What can you learn from mindfully focusing on what you are experiencing in the moment? What has nature offered you that was unplanned or unexpected? Allow yourself the freedom to disconnect from everything else and embrace what nature has served up.
4. **Focus on the journey, not the destination.** Remember to look around and enjoy the path rather than focusing on the finish line.
5. **Include the five senses.** Remember to (safely) smell, touch, listen, and maybe even taste something while interacting with nature.

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Gratitude

Gratitude is the act of being thankful and showing appreciation in return. People who practice gratitude feel better about their lives as a whole, are more optimistic about the future, are more likely to help others and have better relationships. Two strategies to practice gratitude are journaling and affirmations.

JOURNALING

Journaling is an activity that is unique to the person doing it. From the type of notebook to what is written on the page, there is no right or wrong way to journal.

When it comes to stress management, the goal of journaling is to work through, release or even just name the emotions you have felt throughout the day. Research has shown that journaling about thoughts and feelings can reduce the intensity of the amygdala's response to stressors.

Starting a journaling practice can be daunting. Consider these tips:

Set a Timer
When you first start out, pick a time each day and set a timer for five minutes to sit down and write.

Get Messy
Don't worry about perfection! Writing doesn't even have to be legible. The magic happens in the thinking and writing, not what results from that process.

Go with the Flow
Once you start writing, let your pen follow your thoughts. Don't feel like you have to keep writing about something if your mind is wanting to move on.

Journaling: the act of expressive writing...

- boosts mood
- reduces anxiety and depression
- lessens the impact of stress on overall health and wellbeing
- improves working memory
- increases health-promoting immune responses

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Gratitude

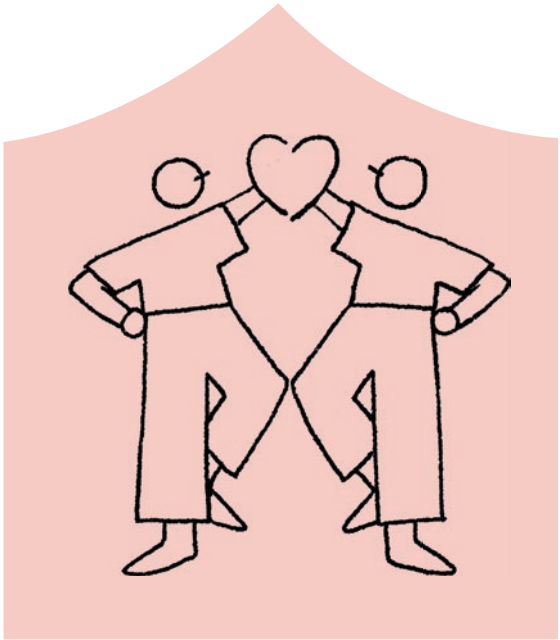
AFFIRMATIONS

Affirmations are sentences that we use to encourage and empower ourselves, often used to challenge a limiting thought or belief. For example, you might say, "I am capable" while trying to finish a big project, to counter the thought, "I'm never going to finish this."

Affirmations are used to challenge unhelpful or negative thoughts. Affirmations can help you change your mindset and re-write the story that you're telling yourself.

Consider these tips for helpful affirmations:

Write Your Affirmation Down
Keep it short and simple, using a sentence such as, "I am capable" or "I am strong." Write it on a sheet of paper and post it somewhere prominent.



Say it Out Loud Often
Saying an affirmation out loud repeatedly re-wires the pathways of the brain to replace a limiting thought with a new story. The more you repeat it, the more it changes the brain.

Pair it with a Visual
Picture yourself living out the affirmation. For example, if your affirmation is, "I am capable", picture yourself finishing the project you are working to achieve. This helps you see a finish line as you repeat your affirmation. If your affirmation is, "I am strong", pair this with a visual in your mind of what strong looks like for you. Helping your brain visualize the end goal helps you achieve it.

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Relaxation and Fun

Engaging in activities that are enjoyable reduce stress. A brain in a state of trauma or stress does not rest or relax. When we choose rest, relaxation and fun, we tell the brain that it is safe. This helps reset the brain and nervous system.

However, when we experience stress and trauma, rest and enjoyable activities are often the first thing to go. This can be problematic, because when we remove these activities from our lives, we don't get a break from the stress, and we further create more stress. Rest, relaxation and fun are not just nice to have – they're essential to our mental health!

HOBBIES

Hobbies are activities for enjoyment. Hobbies are not productivity based and are not tied to a skill. You don't have to be good at a hobby and you don't have to improve at it. You don't have to achieve a goal by a certain time, monetize it, or share it. Hobbies are more about enjoying the process than the outcome.

It's important to pick a hobby that will work with your life. You may need to find a hobby that can be done at home, at night, with supplies you already have, or with limited training to get started.

To find a hobby that works for you, consider these questions.

When in the day/week can I do my hobby?

How much time do I have each day/week for my hobby?

How often can I do my hobby?

What supplies or materials will I need for this hobby?

What might get in the way of my ability to do this hobby?

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Relaxation and Fun

REST

Rest is the joy of doing nothing, the opportunity to slow down. Rest sends your body the signal that you are safe. During rest, your heart rate decreases, and your body becomes regulated.

We often think of rest as just lying down or sitting, but it can also include activities like:

- Stretching or gentle movement activities
- Getting a massage
- Taking short breaks
- Walking
- Spending time with others
- Experiencing nature

Rest can look different for each person. What is restful to one may not be to another. It is important to be mindful of your own body and brain and notice when an activity begins to pull you out of a state of calm. Identifying 2-3 restful activities that work for you in different settings can help you rest when you need it most.

PLAY

Play is not just for kids! Play is anything physical, mental or social that is fun for you. During play, our brain releases a host of feel-good hormones and endorphins. When we play, we access our most creative selves. Play also improves our connection with others, allowing us to make friends and have meaningful experiences with those around us.

Examples of play:

- Engaging in imaginative play with a child, allowing the child to take the lead
- Playing with a pet
- Joining a team or club
- Hosting a game night
- Attending a local meet up on a hobby of interest
- Trying a new sport or physical activity
- Playing board games with friends

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Relationships

COMBATING LONELINESS: THREE INGREDIENTS FOR DEEP FRIENDSHIP

Friendships are one of life's greatest treasures and create a sense of community and belonging. Being in community can lead to safety and support, and can bring joy, fulfillment and connection. Friendships can be hard to build, and sometimes even harder to maintain. All relationships take work and require intentionality. Here are three ingredients that can build and sustain lasting friendships.

1. VULNERABILITY

When we want a relationship to extend beyond the superficial, vulnerability must be present. Vulnerability means to be okay stepping outside of our comfort zones and accept the "emotional exposure", as Brene Brown calls it. When we are vulnerable with others, we invite others to be vulnerable with us.

Vulnerability in friendship might mean:

- Asking for help when you're having a hard time
- Being honest about something that bothers you
- Sharing about a part of yourself you don't tell everyone

2. FUN

An essential component of friendship is shared experience. Most of us need a break from heavy things from time to time, and our relationships do, too. Fun, shared experiences can release tension, add relaxation, and help to create memories.

You might:

- Plan a fun outing
- Watch a favorite movie together for the 100th time
- Have a game night or party
- Make plans to visit each other (or meet somewhere in the middle)

3. CONNECTION

Connection is the small heartbeat that keeps a friendship alive. It can often go unnoticed and unappreciated, but we are always aware when it stops. Connection means checking in about the things that are happening in each other's lives.

That might mean:

- Remembering to ask how things went after a friend's parent had surgery
- Sending a "thinking of you" note on a friend's first day at a new job
- Calling or texting when you see something that reminds you of them

With these three ingredients, we can make and sustain friendships – a truly essential component of our mental health.

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Additional Resources

It is our hope that the information and strategies in this toolkit have provided you tools to grow and support your mental health. We believe that understanding your brain and body, the impact of stress and trauma, and the incredible power of relationships can set you up for mental wellness across the lifespan.

Want to sharpen your mental health even further? Consider these resources.

Visit **momentousinstitute.org/resources** for a wealth of tools and strategies.
Topics include:
How to Find the Right Therapist for You
Understanding Grief
The Science of Stress
How Men and Women Respond to Stress
... and more

Visit **momentousinstitute.org/shop** for physical resources and digital downloads.
Products include:
Starting Point: An Introduction to Social Emotional Health for Adults
Untangle: A Starting Point for Stress Management
In the Moment: A Starting Point for Mindfulness
A Week of Wellness: A Mental Health Workbook
... and more

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cdc.gov
Child Mind Institute, childmind.org
Mental Health America, mhanational.org
National Alliance on Mental Illness, nami.org
National Child Traumatic Stress Network, nctsn.org
National Institutes of Health, nih.gov
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, samhsa.gov
Psychology Today, psychologytoday.com

HOTLINES FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT
988 Lifeline: free, confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours/day, 7 days/week in the US. Call/text 988, or visit 988lifeline.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-7233, the hotline.org

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline
800-422-4453, childhelphotline.org

Build Your Own Support System

Who can you go to for help?

Create a list of 3-4 people you can turn to in a time of need. These may be friends, community members, faith leaders, or mental health professionals. Build your list when you don't need them, so it's ready when you do!

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