



The Foundations of Mental Health

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Being a human is difficult; at the same time, there are steps we can take to make the journey a little easier. Some of these you've surely heard of before, but perhaps have underestimated the extent to which they provide a sound basis for good mental health and thus, a springboard for whatever else you might want to do in life.

If you've been feeling overwhelmed, stuck, or completely lost lately, try some of the interventions below to help stabilize and recalibrate your mind and body. While these tips and tricks may not completely resolve what's been troubling you, they're sure to improve your situation, even just a bit. If you find you're in need of additional assistance in any of these areas, please reach out for a free 15-minute consultation to see how we can work together to get you where you want to be.

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Physical Health

Visit Your Doctor (or find one and make an appointment)

Schedule an annual check-up with your Primary Care Physician (PCP), to include lab work. Request to have your **Vitamin D** and **B12** levels checked. Both have a significant impact on mental health symptoms, particularly depression and anxiety. Ask your PCP if you're okay to take an **Omega-3 Fatty Acid** supplement, and if so, take it regularly. Omega-3 Fatty Acids are crucial to the development of the neurotransmitters, neurohormones, and neurochemicals that help our moods remain stable. *These are all particularly important if you are vegan/vegetarian.* Ask your doctor if you're okay to take a multivitamin, and do so regularly if cleared to do so.

Nutrition

Eat plenty of (naturally) **brightly-colored foods** (i.e., fruits and vegetables). **Limit processed foods** where possible, and when not possible, choose processed foods with **shorter ingredient lists**. **Reduce sugar consumption** and consumption of artificial sweeteners. When your cravings get the best of you, try to approach sweets with a "harm reduction" approach and swap out artificial sweets with natural ones, or make your own. **Limit caffeine** to early in your day, and try to avoid having too much in general, but particularly within about 6 hours of bedtime. **Drink plenty of water** throughout the day to flush out toxins.

Exercise

If cleared by your doctor, **move – regularly**. It doesn't matter so much what you do; it matters more that you're enjoying it enough to be consistent with whatever it is. If you're able to get some movement in outdoors for about **15-20 minutes** in the morning and again in the evening when the angle of the sun is low, you'll also be benefitting your body's ability to make melatonin, which will help regulate and deepen your eventual sleep.

Sleep Hygiene

Avoid eating about three hours before bed, and ideally, **turn off all electronic devices** about 30 minutes before bed. If this isn't possible, engage a blue-light blocking device or glasses, as the wavelengths of the light emitted by electronic devices tricks our minds into believing it's daytime and that we should be awake. If you're like most people, having a **cool sleeping environment** with plenty of cozy blankets will help deepen your sleep. Turn off the television, the music and the podcasts, but if you must, **consider what your mind is consuming while you sleep** and consider tuning in to something either calming (like a sleep story, meditation, or crystal bowls) or educational (like a David Attenborough documentary). If you find yourself not sleeping deeply or not waking refreshed, *consider that your wearable device may be interfering with your body's ability to get into a deep sleep;* experiment sleeping without it. Additionally, check your blood oxygen levels, and if you're waking up gasping for air or snoring, see a sleep doctor for an at-home sleep study to check for sleep apnea. Low blood oxygen levels can increase feelings of anxiety (or generate anxious feelings entirely on their own), as well as physical health complications such as heart attack and stroke.

Social Engagement

Make a list of people you trust and are closest to; set up some time to hang out in person, call, Facetime, text, or email. Social support is essential for well-being. **Develop a close connection** with at least one person you can confide in. **Find a social activity** or engagement of some sort that's compatible with your preferences and your introvert/extrovert/ambivert status and personality type – not every type of social activity is going to be enjoyable for everyone, and that's okay. **Do what feels fulfilling for you,** and know that sometimes the quality of the social interaction is more important than the quantity or frequency of interaction. **Consider mentoring** (if you have a skill set you'd like to share), **or being a mentee** (if there's a skill you'd like to learn). **Volunteer** for causes that are important to you – it's been shown that giving back to others helps us get outside of our own heads, and as a result, we tend to feel better about ourselves and our life circumstances.

Intrapersonal Integrity

Intrapersonal integrity is about **the relationship you have with yourself.** Regarding things you promise or say you're going to do, mean what you say, and say what you mean. Know that sometimes the "right thing" for you and your overall goals and direction in life won't always be something you actually want to do in the moment, and it certainly won't always be easy. Sometimes you'll need to have a degree of self-discipline to keep those commitments to yourself...and in doing so, you'll gain the ability to look yourself in the mirror and be proud while also having a strong sense of **self-efficacy, self-respect, and self-trust** – because you've proven to yourself that you can do the "hard thing" before, so certainly you can have the courage and confidence to do it again.

Tolerance of Discomfort

To reiterate, being human is hard. Set yourself up for success by **learning ways to soothe yourself through challenging moments** throughout life and on the way toward reaching your goals (and even after). Working toward your goals won't always be easy, but you must learn to weather the inevitable storms if you're going to achieve what you want in life. Some tips: **make a collage** (on paper or on the computer) **of motivational quotes; make a motivational playlist of music, podcasts, documentaries or TEDTalks; make a list of your favorite books;** as mentioned above, **make a list of your favorite people and reach out to them** when you're feeling low; **make a list of your favorite places,** and try to visit when possible; and/or **keep a gratitude journal.** Take **bubble baths, light some candles;** try cozying up with a **weighted blanket** (they increase serotonin, one of our "feel good" neurotransmitters); **go for a walk** or get some other form of exercise; **spend time with your favorite pet** or visit a zoo/animal sanctuary; **get out into nature and experience awe;** try a **coloring page or book for grown-ups;** squish out your feelings into a lump of **clay or a painting.**

Avoid Judgment and Cultivate Self-Compassion

Of self and others... Judgment is a double-edged sword; we can't judge others without also being a harsh critic of ourselves. Know that you and everyone else is doing the best they can with whatever they've got to work with and despite whatever they've been through. Did I mention being human is hard? Harshly judging yourself only ends up scaring off potential insight and opportunities for improvement. Instead of being harshly critical or judgmental of yourself, **consider a more neutral response,** such as, *"I did the best I could,"* or *"That didn't work out quite as planned."* In regard to others, consider a more empathic, equally neutral perspective, such as, *"That looks painful,"* or drop into gratitude: *"I'm thankful I'm not experiencing that right now."*

Know Your Values and Priorities

And live them each day, without attachment to the outcome. What's *"attachment to the outcome?"* you say? It's **when you're engaging in a certain behavior with the intention of creating a specific effect in the world or on someone else.** Instead, **engage in your values-driven behavior for the intrinsic factor** of it all – because it's simply who you are. When you identify your top five values and live them each day, you're automatically headed in the right direction (even if you feel directionless on the whole); you're living your life with integrity, and you can feel good about yourself. When you're living your values, you attract other people and opportunities into your life that also reflect those values, and life in general begins to feel more congruent. What's *"congruent"?* **A feeling that you're in the right place doing the right thing for yourself at the right time** – a feeling of **wholeness and fulfillment** – even while other goals, hopes and dreams are still in progress or even not yet known. Your priorities are like a **ranking of your values,** and when you find your values temporarily competing with one another (as situations might bring on from time to time), it allows you a clear path forward and makes decision-making and living intentionally crystal clear.

Know Your Non-Negotiables

In addition to your values and priorities, **non-negotiables are the backstop against which you can gauge whether something is right for you, or is likely to be to your detriment.** Get familiar with yourself to the point where you can know what definitely will not work for you in regard to family interactions, friendships, romantic relationships, career, and life in general. Furthermore, develop an understanding of why those are your non-negotiables, so you're in a good position to avoid making compromises you might regret later.

Consider Journaling

...To learn more about yourself. The **consistency** of the journaling practice is what produces the results, as your able to see changes and develop insights over time. **Try setting a timer for five minutes and write without stopping** – it doesn't even matter what you write – *just keep going*. Don't stop to read it, don't think too much or judge what's coming up. If this feels like a bit much to start with, try journaling **prompts**, or **gratitude journaling**. Overall, you're aiming for developing an awareness of your experience – the emotional content, in particular – not a recounting of your to-do list for the day.

Avoid Regret

This one is related to "Intrapersonal Integrity," "Know Your Values and Priorities" as well as "Tolerance of Discomfort." **Know what's important to you, why it's important to you, and do it.** Know that just because it's important to you, and you know why it's important to you, doesn't mean you'll always *want* to do it in that moment...but sometimes the circumstances are such that you're unlikely to get another chance, so **do it while you can**. Your future self will thank you for it, because whatever it was, it was aligned with your values and priorities (See? This is part of why being human is hard – you won't always *want* to do the thing you want to do...)

Limit Social Media Consumption

...Or at least **be intentional about it** with your mental health in mind, and **be mindful of the algorithm you cultivate**. If you can't be intentional, **set a timer or some sort of internal control on your device(s)**. "Following the rabbit hole" of just about anything can be unhealthy or at least unhelpful, and encourages ruminative thought processes. If something really grabs your attention, get off social media and **do your own research** with varied, diverse and reputable sources. If you find yourself going into a doom spiral, get off the social media channel, stop reading the comments, and **get back out into the physical world** with one of the above tips.

Set Boundaries

While no one likes to be on the receiving end of boundaries and you may certainly encounter some pushback when setting them, they're **essential for healthy relationships and self-respect**. A person who truly cares about you for who you are (as opposed to what you can do for them) will respect your boundaries (simply because they're your boundaries) even if they don't like or agree with them; they'll **respect your right to personal autonomy** and the **ability to choose what's right for your own life**. Unhealthy relationships will disregard your boundaries and try to take advantage of you for their own gain or comfort, whether that's conscious or otherwise. **If you've set a boundary and it's not being respected, reiterate the boundary** by using the "Broken Record" technique (simply continue re-stating the same thing you've already said); eventually they'll get the picture that you're not going to budge.

Professional Life

Consider what provides you with a sense of **engagement**, adequate **challenge** and **growth** along with advancement opportunities or another benefit that allows you to pursue greater balance in all areas of your life. If you're not in your ideal career yet, don't worry! Keep searching for what gives you that **sense of personal agency** and **self-efficacy**; having something to strive for can keep you going when you otherwise feel lost or unhappy where you're at. **Develop and maintain healthy boundaries around work**. Work hard, and **know when to stop**.

Incorporate the Use of “I” Statements in Disagreements and Misunderstandings

Although “I” statements are great when communicating in general, they’re of particular use during disagreements and misunderstandings. What’s an “I” statement, you ask? *“I feel lonely and abandoned when you don’t make a point of checking in on me before you hang out with your friends for the weekend.”* It’s something that conveys what you’re feeling and gets to the heart of the matter, as opposed to sounding accusatory (as in “you” statements, like *“You don’t care about me because you just go hang out with your friends all the time.”*), which inevitably inflames any existing hard feelings or disagreements.

Check In With Loved Ones Before Getting Your Feelings Hurt

If they’re a trusted loved one and they’ve been there for you previously through thick and thin *and* they still manage to say something that doesn’t sit quite right with you, *do both of yourselves a favor* and ask what they meant by it *before* jumping to conclusions and getting your feelings hurt. Give them the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise. This also goes for less close relationships too, where there might be ambiguity in communications and yet still a need to continue the relationship. There are any number of reasons why we, ourselves, might be inclined to take something the wrong way – the surefire way to know for sure if someone was intentionally being hurtful (or not, as is most often the case) is to ask the other person very neutrally, **“Hey, what’d you mean by that?”**

Know That Mistakes Are Learning Opportunities

This goes along with “Avoiding Judgment and Having Self-Compassion.” If you’re not making mistakes, you’re not learning anything new and are likely spending too much time in your comfort zone at the expense of personal and/or professional growth. Viewing mistakes as failures keep one frozen and small. The more you’re able to **embrace the inevitability of mistakes** along the journey of life, **the more life will open up** in unexpected and intriguing ways.

Know That Emotions Are Not “Good” or “Bad,” They’re Simply “Information”

...And they’re trying to tell you something. Angry? Was there a boundary of some sort violated in some way? Anxious? Are you being called to action about something? Sad? Are you feeling as though there’s been a loss of some sort? Happy? Was something especially rewarding to some part of you? **Emotions are simply information about our state of being and what we might either do differently or keep the same.** When we reject or block the right to feel certain emotions, we can become emotionally numb and disconnected from our experience while losing a vital indicator of whether we’re headed in the right direction for us. There’s nothing inherently “bad” about any particular emotion, though there are healthy and unhealthy (as well as helpful and unhelpful) ways to express those emotions.

Don’t Treat Your Paycheck Like a Chuck-E-Cheese Prize Ticket

You work hard for your money; don’t squander it to relieve short-term discomfort or anxiety – use one of the above tips instead. Learn to **invest in your future self and your future goals**, even if you’re not entirely clear on what they are yet. You will thank yourself someday. Consider setting up different accounts for different purposes so you’re also still able to enjoy your earnings and have fun (within reason) without dipping into savings or going into debt.

Create and Follow Structure in Your Life

This is a tried-and-true approach to helping yourself move through anxiety and depression: **create a daily structure** and stick to it. In fact, it’s referred to as “Behavioral Activation.” It almost doesn’t matter **what** you do, just that you’re **structuring your time** and sticking to the routine. It’s the experience of setting small goals (like getting out of bed at a certain time, whether you want to or not) that builds up over time in conjunction with having completed *other* small goals on a regular basis to provide you with a sense of your own ability to “get things done.” Then, having structured your time and stuck with it, you have **a basis for believing you can do other challenging things**. It also gives you a sense of **momentum** in life, which can ameliorate feelings of stuckness.

It’s my sincere hope that you find these tips helpful. If you feel as though you’d benefit from some one-on-one conversation and guidance in developing these foundational habits of mental health, please reach out for a free 15-minute consultation to see how we can work together to turn your life around!
Best wishes, Jennifer