



For better  
mental health

## How to... look after yourself



# How to... look after yourself

“““

*"I didn't realise, at the time, how hard I was working. I was coming up to final exams at college, and I ended up having panic attacks. My counsellor helped, but it still took me months to get back to normal. Now, I can anticipate problems and make sure I get mental and physical rest."*

*"I get into a spiral. It's triggered by working too hard, then I don't eat properly, become overweight, and lose all my self-esteem. This affects my work and my personal life, so that, eventually, I'm frightened of everything; I can't even go to the supermarket. I've had to go to hospital when things got really bad. Things are better now that I get more support at work and from a psychotherapist."*

*"I can't impose my feelings on somebody else. Who would want to hear me moaning on about my problems? But sometimes I just feel that I can't cope anymore. As if I'm going to burst."*

*"Sometimes, all the talking in the world can't help – I just need to cry, stay with it, and wait out my feelings of despair. Eventually, everything passes."*

**This booklet is for people who would like to take better care of themselves. It explains how to counteract the pressures of everyday life, to deal with ill-health and to cope better in a crisis. It aims to help people to gain greater enjoyment from life.**



## **What does it mean to look after yourself?**

Daily routine can be draining and stressful. Whether you're at home, at work, bringing up children or studying, it's essential to take care of your emotional and physical health. In a crisis – when a relationship breaks down or someone's been made redundant, for instance – it's even more important to be physically and mentally ready to deal with uncertainty and disruption. Unless you look after yourself, you may run into difficulty.

To look after yourself means examining your present way of life and assessing how you can make improvements. There are various ways of doing this:

- Work out which situations, people, activities and environments damage or improve your physical and mental health.
- Decide to make some changes by altering or eliminating what you feel is damaging you.
- Concentrate on, and add to, the positive things in your life.
- Take into account and balance the many important parts of your life, so that you don't feel pulled in different directions.

This does not guarantee a problem-free life. However, it may lead you to be more aware when things are beginning to go wrong and how you can best cope with them.

Sometimes 'looking after yourself' can be regarded as a selfish activity. But, unless we take care of our own needs, we can't truly care for others.

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### How can I make a start?

#### Taking stock

Taking stock allows you to see whether you've got the right balance between work, or other daytime occupation, social life and any other pursuits. From there, you can begin to work out what you want to achieve and how you can go about it. This will help to give you a sense of direction and control of your life. The following exercise (which can be done alone, with a friend or partner, or in a group) may be helpful.

First, look at your daily routine. Spend a few minutes thinking about this, then write down up to five sentences describing the high points ('I enjoy cycling to work') and up to five describing the low points ('I am exhausted with caring for my partner'). Now, write down ten words that describe your daily routine (such as, tiring, stimulating, stressful or reassuring). Put them in groups according to whether the adjectives are positive, neutral or negative.

Use the sentences and word lists to help you think about, and plan, changes you would like to make in this routine. Work out which changes you would like to make within the year and which within five years, saying to yourself, for instance, 'In five years' time, I will be working part-time'. Or, 'By next year, I will try to find respite care for my partner'.

Carry out the same exercise focusing on your personal life and personal fulfilment. In each case, try to establish concrete goals. Take care not to overlook any one aspect of your future in the pursuit of another. If you don't feel up to tackling this now, try some of the other recommendations in this booklet. You can come back to this at a later stage, when you feel better able to undertake it.

## How can I improve my ability to cope?

### Expressing emotions

Giving vent to our feelings is an important part of remaining mentally healthy or of making a recovery. We may express ourselves through talking, crying, screaming or laughing. But also through chanting, singing, dancing and painting. Afterwards, we feel relieved – tensions disappear and the body can relax.

Some people are afraid of being overwhelmed by their emotions. They dislike the loss of control, and feel that they are going mad. It's as if some people need permission to feel angry and upset, even when very painful things have happened. And yet, crying, when someone close to us dies, for example, is part of the body's natural way of allowing our feelings of grief to leave us. Rites of passage (such as funerals), confession to a priest or other spiritual support, structured counselling and psychotherapy can all enable people to express their feelings.

## Who can I talk to?

Talking to someone you trust about what upsets you or makes you feel stressed is a useful way to let off steam, and often helps to reduce stress. This can simply mean a supportive chat, over a cup of tea, with a friend or colleague.

There's a temptation to keep our feelings to ourselves for fear of what others might think of us. But, if you trust the person or people concerned, it may well be a chance to give and get mutual support. This is often how support groups come about.



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### Support groups

These give people with similar problems opportunities to meet regularly and talk about the problems that affect them. There are, for instance, groups for people withdrawing from minor tranquillisers, for single parents, or for people with work-related problems. You may find details of local groups through your library, GP's surgery, or local branches of Mind.

### Counselling and psychotherapy

For anyone who finds it difficult to talk to peers, friends, family or colleagues, a more structured form of talking may be the answer. Talking treatments offer people a chance to go over current or past difficulties, problems and emotions. They can provide regular and ongoing emotional support and guidance.

People who are depressed or who have very low self-esteem often find it difficult to make any changes in their lives. This may be because they can't identify what they need or want. They may experience a sense of worthlessness that makes them feel guilty at the thought of looking after themselves. Talking to a counsellor or therapist can help resolve these underlying conflicts. (For more information, see *Useful organisations*, on p. 12, and *Further reading*, on p. 14.)



### How can I look after my physical health?

#### Sleep and rest

Getting enough sleep is vital – although, of course, not everyone needs the same amount. Some people have problems because they suffer from insomnia, others because they sleep fitfully, are unsettled or have nightmares and wake feeling exhausted. There are also times in life when sleep is hard to come by – when you have young children, for instance.

It stands to reason that when you are tired, everything becomes difficult and even the simplest of decisions or tasks can seem impossible to deal with. Regular bedtimes, good diet, enough exercise, less caffeine and techniques for reducing stress and anxiety are all thought to aid good sleep. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

### **A healthy diet**

The expression, 'you are what you eat' makes a lot of sense. If you eat healthily, you will be healthy, if you don't, you won't. Health professionals stress that to eat healthily and sensibly means concentrating on fibre-rich foods (like wholemeal bread or baked potatoes), fresh fruit and vegetables, and lean fish or meat. It means cutting down on sugary and fatty foods. (For more information about how different foods can affect our moods, see *The Mind guide to food and mood*.)

### **Reducing the risks**

Our physical health can be directly harmed by certain outside factors. Some of them are difficult to avoid, such as pollution. With others, such as alcohol and cigarettes, we have more control, in theory. In practise, it can be difficult to tackle these habits successfully, without good support. You may depend on them in coping with everyday life, and you will need to discover more helpful strategies.

NHS Direct provides information on healthy living, including material on stopping smoking. Information about alcohol, including the 'unit' system for measuring alcohol consumption, is available from DrinkLine. Alcohol, taken in moderation, is not thought to be harmful, but women should have no more than two to three units per day, and men not more than three to four units.

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Being overweight is another health risk, which you may want to tackle as a way of improving both your mental and physical wellbeing. (For sources of help, see *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.) Talking to your GP may be a good starting point, if you want to tackle any of these.

Visiting a GP gives you an opportunity to air specific worries. Many GPs offer a general health check when you join a practice, but this can also be available for existing patients. GPs may assess cholesterol levels and blood pressure, for instance, and will also suggest remedies. They are able to refer patients to hospital specialists, counsellors, psychiatric nurses and other relevant services. Spotting problems as early as possible makes good sense.

Ill-health can have a profound effect on people's lives, often affecting our mental state, as well. Whether you have a short-lived illness, an ongoing health problem or a disability, knowing what you need and how to look after yourself becomes extremely important.



### What help can I get?

#### Voluntary groups

There are many voluntary organisations with very detailed knowledge and expertise that back up NHS services. They offer support, information and advice to people who have particular health problems, and their families and carers. These organisations may offer emotional support by giving people the chance to share personal experiences. (See *Useful organisations* on p. 12.)

### Alternative therapies

A practitioner who has a holistic approach to health aims to discover what causes a person's problems or apparent illness by looking at their life as a whole, not just at the individual symptoms. They will take particular account of the way people sleep, eat or relax. Homeopathy, hypnotherapy, acupuncture, herbalism or aromatherapy are just a few of the therapies that people find helpful. (For more information about complementary medicine, see *Further reading* on p. 14.)

Holistic health options are helpful on two levels. They treat the particular health problems, and they also leave you with a sense of wellbeing, because time and attention is paid to you as a unique individual. Spending time on complementary therapies is therefore one way of putting yourself first – in other words, of looking after yourself.

### How can exercise make me feel better?

Exercise may be the last thing you feel like doing when you are tired, depressed or anxious. You may feel you haven't the energy to get out of the armchair, never mind swim ten lengths. However, exercise can make you feel relaxed, stretched and energised. It has beneficial effects on the heart, helps you to reduce anxiety and depression, lose weight and feel fitter.

Vigorous activity stimulates the body into releasing endorphins, the body's natural antidepressants. Aerobic exercise (which raises the pulse rate) is well-praised as a stress antidote. A minimum of ten minutes a day spent walking, swimming, playing racket games, cycling or taking exercise classes is all you need. For maximum benefit to your general health, increase the daily dose to 20 or 30 minutes.



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Exercise doesn't have to be gruelling to be good for you. Build up slowly and don't be over-ambitious to begin with. Choose something you like, or you won't keep it up. It's also wise to consult your doctor before embarking on a new exercise programme. Taking classes can bring a bonus, too. It's a good way of meeting people, as well as keeping fit. (Details of *The Mind guide to physical activity* can be found under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)



## How can I learn to relax?

The body and mind need time to relax and recuperate from the effects of everyday activity and stress. We all have our favourite method. Taking time to soak in a warm bath, listening to music, walking in the park, spending time with your favourite hobby or pastime can all help you to wind down and recover from the day.

Yoga is an excellent way to relax (see *The Mind guide to yoga*, details under *Further reading*, on p. 14). But ordinary relaxation exercises, practised every day, are also very beneficial. Those described below take an average of 20 minutes.

### Relaxation exercise

This can be done at home, at work, on the bus and train, or anywhere you won't be interrupted.

- Find a comfortable position to sit or lie in.
- Close your eyes, if possible, and breathe slowly and deeply in a relaxed and even manner.
- Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles, visualising the tension disappearing from that area. Feel that you are softening the muscles and letting go.

- Consciously relax each part of the body in turn, starting with your feet, slowly working up through the body, until you reach the top of your head.
- As you focus on each part of your body, think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
- Push distracting thoughts to the back of your mind. Thoughts may pop into your head. It can help to feel that you are letting them go, safe in the knowledge that if they are important they will come back to you later.
- After a while (20 minutes, or so) take deep breaths and then open your eyes. Stay sitting or lying still for a few moments before you get up.

### **How can I look after myself in a crisis?**

In the course of a lifetime, people are confronted by events that not only disrupt daily routine, but also have a powerful emotional impact. Crises can result from major changes like moving home, or having children. They may be connected to losses such as a miscarriage, a partner's unfaithfulness, a death or illness. They may involve a mental health crisis, episodes of anxiety, or ongoing and severe depression.



Looking after yourself when you're going through such intense experiences may not be foremost in your mind, nor will it be easy. Yet these are the times when the information in the previous pages will be most useful. Making use of all the recommendations will put you in the best position to ride the storm. Because every person and every situation is different, it's impossible to recommend a general strategy. But it may be helpful to think of any crisis as having two stages. The initial stage is when emotions may feel overwhelming, and the recuperation stage is when recovery may begin.

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During the initial stage of the crisis, you may well feel the need to get away from it all. Although it may not always be wise to follow this instinct, it can be helpful to get away from home and from work for a while. One option is to withdraw to a place where distractions and the pressures of the outside world are minimised. (See *Useful organisations*, opposite.)

During the recuperation stage, it may seem hard to believe that you can come through such a distressing period. Treat yourself kindly and employ all the tried and tested measures. Try to rest, even if you can't sleep. Take care of your physical needs and talk things over with someone, if possible. Use all the help at your disposal. (See *Further reading* and *Useful organisations*.) You are likely to be surprised at your own strength and endurance.

### Useful organisations

#### Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or *Mindinfo*line on 0845 766 0163.

#### Association of Therapeutic Communities

Barns Centre, Church Lane, Toddington, near Cheltenham  
Gloucestershire GL54 5DQ

tel./fax: 01242 620 077

web: [www.therapeuticcommunities.org](http://www.therapeuticcommunities.org)

Produces a directory of therapeutic communities

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG

tel. 0870 443 5252, web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

**Drinkline**

helpline: 0800 917 8282, infoline: 0500 801 802

**The Institute for Complementary Medicine (ICM)**

PO Box 194, London SE16 7QZ

tel. 020 7237 5165, fax: 020 7237 5175

email: [icm@icmedicine.co.uk](mailto:icm@icmedicine.co.uk) web: [www.icmedicine.co.uk](http://www.icmedicine.co.uk)

**International Stress Management Association (ISMA)**

PO Box 348, Waltham Cross EN8 8ZL

tel. 07000 780 430, web: [www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk)

Contact for details of practitioners

**The Keep Fit Association**

Astra House, Suite 1.05, Arklow Road, London SE14 6EB

tel. 020 8692 9566, web: [www.keepfit.org.uk](http://www.keepfit.org.uk)

Website provides details of local exercise classes

**NHS Direct**

tel. 0845 4647

web: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

Information on healthy living and details of support groups

**The Retreat Association**

The Central Hall, 256 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3UJ

tel. 020 7357 7736, web: [www.retreats.org.uk](http://www.retreats.org.uk)

Provides a list of organisations offering spiritual retreats

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## Further reading

- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- Conquering fear* D. Rowe (Mind 2003) £1
- How to accept yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with exam stress* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with bullying at work* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to parent in a crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to survive family life* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to survive mid-life crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to surviving working life* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Overcoming low self-esteem* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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# Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

**autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.**

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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