

10 Tips to Improving Your Mental Health Lesson Guide

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We often focus on taking care of those around us without stopping to think about what we need to do to feel our best. In this session we will take a few minutes to discuss some ways to improve mental health and overall well-being.

Leader asks participants: When you feel overwhelmed or out of sorts, what do you do to feel better?

(Allow a minute or two for discussion. If you have a small group, pay attention to responses. If you have a large group, suggest that they break into smaller groups and report back to the large group. Facilitate listing of responses without going into stories.)

Leader: If you have difficulty thinking of ways to take care of yourself, some of these suggestions may be just what you need.

- 1. Socialize:** Research shows that loneliness is a bigger predictor of health problems in later life than poor diet, smoking, or lack of exercise. Finding ways to interact with others can be a huge boost to your mental health. You're already on the right track by participating in EHC! Civic clubs like this, church or other community gatherings, family visits, coffee or lunch with a friend, or even speaking on the phone or via video chat with someone far away can boost your endorphins and help you feel great.
- 2. Mindfulness/Meditation:** Practicing mindfulness through meditation, deep breathing, or other practice that allows you to focus on presence in the moment can be helpful in reducing stress. As with any positive change, practicing mindfulness requires, you guessed it...PRACTICE! It is important to give yourself the grace to drift and come back to the process because that will happen. Start with shorter periods of mindfulness to train yourself in focus and then gradually increase your time spent in mindful thought or meditation. There are smartphone apps, videos, or how-to guides that can help you get started and offer troubleshooting tips.
- 3. Exercise:** No matter your level of fitness, daily exercise can boost endorphins that help improve mood and overall wellness. Find an exercise that works for your mobility, schedule, and preferences by trying different things. Walk around the block or on a treadmill. Do some exercises in your chair at work or home. Drive to the mall or shopping center with friends and walk together. If you prefer

or need higher intensity exercise, consider joining or starting a local group fitness class (Extension Get Fit, Jazzercise, etc.). Because we often view exercise as a means to an end such as weight loss or looking a certain way, it is easy to overlook the benefits of regular exercise.

4. Healthy diet: Healthy eating is a key to overall health, including mental health. If you have difficulty with mood at some times and not others, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to diet triggers like sugar, alcohol, or caffeine. Sometimes things may be missing from your diet that affect your mood and energy level such as insufficient protein or carbohydrates. If you are managing a health issue like diabetes or high blood pressure, what and when you eat can have an even greater effect on your mood and energy. If you are unsure what to eat, consider speaking to a registered dietician or your doctor about what to do. Write down what you are eating and make notes of how you feel. You may notice a pattern that can lead to changes and improvement.

5. Practice gratitude: Although we are always thankful for what we have, studies show that taking the time to intentionally think about the people, things, places, and experiences in our lives can have real mental health benefits. Using a journal, combining gratitude with meditation, or simply making a mental list can improve relationships, sleep, and overall well-being.

6. Laugh: Although it is a cliché that “laughter is the best medicine,” it can indeed lift your mood to have a good laugh. Laughter releases dopamine which is our brain’s feel good chemical. Talk to a friend. Watch a silly video or favorite comedy film. Even smiling gives a little bump of dopamine and can help us feel better in the moment.

7. Enjoy music: Listening to upbeat music or music that you especially enjoy can boost mood in ways similar to meditation. All music is not equally effective as some can cause or increase stress because of its link to stressful life events or the emotions it invokes (Time, 2018). Singing (especially group singing) can boost mood through the music as well as the act of singing and the comradery of participating in a group with a common goal (Time, 2013). Put on favorite music and dance as you are able. Combining physical activity with music can compound the effects of both. It may even cause some smiling and laughing too!

8. Set boundaries: Boundaries are important tools for healthy relationships. They allow you to connect with those in your life in ways that are comfortable and safe. Although the term implies that you have built a barrier, boundaries can be flexible, change over time to accommodate changing relationships, and offer you ways to take care of yourself by helping you conserve your emotional energy and boost your self-esteem.

(Leader: We have an activity handout to go into more depth about setting boundaries. Let’s take a few minutes to explore this further. HANDOUT: BOUNDARY SETTING WORKSHEET)

9. Engage in positive self-talk: Having negative thoughts about oneself is a very common occurrence; however, how often we have them, what they are, and how we respond can make a huge difference in their impact. It is fairly simple to challenge these thoughts if we make ourselves aware of them and push back against them. There are several ways to do this. Turn the voice in your head into the voice of someone you do not like such as an actor or politician with a distinct voice. If you wouldn’t allow a stranger to speak to you or one of your friends in the way your inner voice is talking,

make it sound like the disliked character and tell it to be quiet and leave you alone. Another trick is to ask questions like: Is this line of thinking fair or logical? Or to restate what you are thinking beginning with the phrase, “The story I’m telling myself is ...” Just like our previous tools, this takes practice, and it won’t be easy every time.

10. Don’t hesitate to seek professional help: Even if some of these tools work for short mood boosts, seeking the counsel of a mental health professional can improve quality of life and reduce symptoms of mental illness. Therapists listen and offer coping strategies from the perspective of a neutral observer. Where you may struggle to identify spots in your life that are causing stress, they may be able to reframe a relationship or experience and help you understand its impact. Especially if you are dealing with trauma, grief, or life changes such as retirement or disability, or think you may be experiencing mental illness, a therapist can be a wonderful partner and resource.

(Leader: I hope these tips give you some new ideas of ways to boost your mood and overall mental health. Which of these do you think you’ll find the most helpful?)

Offer time for discussion or questions.

Sources:

TalkSpace: <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/good-mental-health-12-therapist-approved-tips/>

Yale Scientific Research: <http://www.yalescientific.org/2011/05/can-laughter-be-therapeutic/>

Time Magazine: <https://time.com/5254381/listening-to-music-health-benefits/>

<http://ideas.time.com/2013/08/16/singing-changes-your-brain/>

Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientifically-proven-benefits-gratitude>

Healthline: <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/set-boundaries>

Additional Resources:

Walk Across Arkansas: <https://walk.uaex.edu/>

UAEX Nutrition: <https://www.uaex.edu/health-living/food-nutrition/>

UAEX Money: <https://www.uaex.edu/money>

Psychology Today Therapist Finder: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>

Mindfulness Training: www.mindful.org; www.calm.com or Calm app; the built-in “breath” app on Apple watches.