

Maintaining Emotional and Mental Vitality

Emotional and mental vitality are closely tied to physical vitality—just as your mind has powerful effects on your body, so your physical state affects how you feel and think. Social contact can also make a big difference in how you feel. It's never too early to begin thinking about how we can maintain our emotional and mental vitality as we age.

Replacing a "lost" activity is key to staying active and feeling good about oneself. For instance, if you can no longer run, you might try walking, biking or swimming. And if your favorite activity was dancing, you might try something else that combines social and physical activity, such as joining a water aerobics class. Replacing lost activities can help you keep a positive attitude and sense of well-being over time, even if aging and changes in your health mean you cannot do all the things you used to do.

Physical activity. Protect or improve your emotional and cognitive health with regular physical activity. While exercise produces chemicals in the body that promote emotional well-being, inactivity can worsen depression, anxiety, and stress. For example, one study suggests that women who walk regularly have more mental sharpness as they get older than those who don't. Another study showed that regular exercise three or more times per week delayed the beginning of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Social activity. Protect or improve your emotional health by staying in touch with friends, family and the greater community. Whether physically healthy or ill, people who feel connected to others are more likely to thrive than those who are socially isolated. Volunteering in your community and sharing your wisdom and talents with others is a gratifying and meaningful way to enrich your life. In fact, people who regularly volunteer even a small amount of time generally have a greater sense of well-being than those who don't.

Mental activity. Protect or improve your memory and mental sharpness by:

- Challenging your intellect on a daily basis. Read, learn a new musical instrument or language, do crossword puzzles, play games of strategy with others. Just like an active body, an active brain continues to develop and thrive, while an inactive brain loses its power over time.
- Helping your memory along. Write down dates, names, and other important information that you easily forget. Use routine and repetition—keep daily items such as keys and eyeglasses in a specific place; when you learn a new name, repeat it out loud in conversation or to yourself several times to commit it to memory. (No matter what your age, having too much on your mind can interfere with your memory of new information. And as you age, it is normal to take longer to retrieve new information from your memory banks.)



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- Preventing depression, which is a common yet treatable cause of cognitive decline as we age. In addition to getting regular exercise and social contact, avoid the depressant effect of alcohol and sedative use, eat a healthy diet, and include meaningful activity in your daily life (such as learning, creating, working, volunteering). If depression strikes, seek professional help—antidepressant medication and/or counseling are effective treatments for depression. If you find that a physical condition or disability is making your depressed mood worse, get the medical treatment you need.
- Not smoking. Cigarette smoking may speed mental decline; this connection was recently identified in a large study comparing smokers and nonsmokers age 65 and over.
- Stress reduction and relaxation techniques. Too much life stress can take a toll on your body, your mind, and the people who are closest to you. In addition to getting regular exercise, you can take charge of how stress affects you by taking 20 minutes per day for relaxation time.
- Meditation focuses your attention and helps calm both mind and body. Daily meditation is used for managing a spectrum of physical and emotional conditions, including high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain.
- The body responds to stress with muscle tension, which can cause pain or discomfort. Progressive muscle relaxation reduces muscle tension and general anxiety and may help you get to sleep.
- The way you breathe affects your whole body. Try breathing exercises for relaxation. Full, deep breathing is a good way to reduce tension, feel relaxed and reduce stress.
- Positive thinking. Positive thinking may help you live a longer, happier life. However, even if you tend to be an optimist, there are times when it takes extra effort to frame your life positively. Take the following steps to harness the power of positive thinking in your daily life.
- Create positive expectations of yourself, your health, and life in general. When you catch yourself using negative self-talk or predicting a bad outcome, stop. Reframe your thought into a positive one, and speak it out loud or write it down. This type of thinking can help you best recover from surgery, cancer and other life crises.
- Open yourself to humor, friendship and love. Go out of your way to find reasons to laugh and to spend time with people you enjoy.
- Appeal to a higher power, if it suits you. Whether it be through your faith in a loving, all-powerful God or your connection with nature or a collective unconscious, your sense of spiritual wellness can help you through personal trials and enhance your joy in living.

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