Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Staying the course: maintaining mental health during troubling times

A difficult relationship, a serious illness, an especially heavy workload, financial worries; any of these scenarios can leave even the greatest optimists feeling unable to cope. Maintaining your emotional and mental health in troubled times may be a challenge, but with self-awareness and a concerted effort, staying calm, cool and collected is possible. Start by:



Breathing. As overwhelmed as you may feel, try to remember there are really only two things you absolutely need to do today: breathe in, and breathe out. Countless scientific studies credit relaxed breathing with improvement in some of the most common modern health problems, from chronic pain, to hypertension, to heart disease. Inhale slowly and fully. Exhale slowly and fully. Repeat. Feel yourself in your body, connected to your chair, or the floor under your feet and breathe some more. You might be surprised to discover yourself beginning to feel more connected and grounded. Any time you feel too frazzled to go on, revisit the feeling that comes with a few relaxed breaths.

Enjoying yourself. During more challenging times, you might feel like you don't have the time, or somehow aren't entitled to some fun. Not true: a funny movie, a long bike ride, a nice meal—any healthy distraction—can help lift the cloud of your current circumstances long enough to let in some light and maybe even help you catch a glimpse of a new perspective.

Eating in. Take-out and pre-packaged meals can be lifesavers during a busy week, but, eaten regularly, the salt, sugar and additives in processed foods can be a kill-joy in the mood department. Most registered dieticians agree there is no substitute for meals using fresh ingredients. Sitting down and mapping out meals for the week can make it easier to get simple, interesting, healthy food on the table. Eating at home is not only easier on the blood pressure, it's also easier on the pocket too.

Planning. It's estimated for the average worker on-the-job **distractions eat up over two hours a day.** Given that it can be so hard to focus, a little time spent planning your morning, day, week or month can yield huge rewards at work and at home. Not only is the feeling of "being on top of it" invaluable, but even just a little planning can open up some much-needed time to take care of yourself.

Walking it off. When worldly concerns feel like they might be getting too heavy to bear, head out on foot. As well as strengthening your heart, boosting "good" cholesterol and controlling blood pressure, studies suggest regular physical exercise, especially outdoors, can improve your mood and help ward off depression.

Letting it be. While it's important to muster the courage to act on the things that truly need your attention, it's also equally vital to recognize when things are better left alone. A surprising number of complicated situations will untangle themselves in time, whether you're busy worrying yourself sick over them or not. By all means, take care of your responsibilities, but it might also be wise to consider how you might be contributing to the stress at hand.

Finding a shoulder. Before there were yoga classes and meditation retreats, there were friends. Spending time with someone you trust and whose company you enjoy can help lighten the burden you're carrying, and remind you that you're not alone.

Seeking support. While leaning on loved ones can be helpful, sometimes problems are simply too complex or overwhelming to unload on friends and family. These are times when you should definitely draw on outside support—through a counsellor, your physician or another qualified professional—who can provide you with the resources, insight and experience you need to effectively handle the issue at hand.

The emotional roller coaster of life means for most of us, happy, exciting and optimistic "up" times are usually balanced by moments of stress, anxiety and "down" times. While not impossible, getting through these can be tough. By taking stock, keeping active and eating well, you'll build resilience and become more skilled at finding your way through whatever life throws at you.

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