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

# Creating your best mind and body

Health is not just about being free of illness and injury. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health "is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."



Although a healthy diet and plenty of exercise are important to maintaining our physical health, we can't neglect our mental well-being. We need to adopt a holistic approach – that is, taking care of the entire body and mind at the same time.

While this may sound complicated and time consuming, it doesn't have to be. The journey to healthy living begins with a few small lifestyle changes that, even by themselves, can make a difference to your well-being. Try to:

**Eat well.** Don't diet. Nutritionists suggest following your country's food guide, which recommends eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, lean meats, nuts and whole grains and, as much as possible, staying away from processed and fast foods. Also try to watch the size of your food portions.

**Don't skip breakfast.** When you wake up in the morning, you likely haven't eaten anything for at least eight hours. When you skip breakfast, you're asking your body to do without food for even longer – so your body is forced to slow down its metabolism in order to conserve energy, which is not helpful for weight management *or* your mood.

**Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness is being completely in touch with the present moment. No matter how busy you are, carve out time for yourself each day to relax in a way that suits you. There are many choices, including: meditation, reading, listening to music, or just lying down, closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing.

**Be grateful.** No matter how frantic our day is or how stressed we may feel, there is almost always something for which we can be grateful. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down one or two things they are thankful for every day. Practicing gratitude helps us regain perspective by focussing on the things that really matter in our lives.

**Get moving.** Being active doesn't have to involve hours in the gym or running a 10 kilometer race. Even a short walk to the end of the block and back is a good start. Once that becomes easy, slowly increase distance and speed. Set your own goals and your own pace. Ask a friend, neighbour or family member to join you. It's easier – and more fun – when you have someone by your side. Remember: when exercise isn't about suffering and is more about enjoyment, you're more likely to make it part of your life.

**Sleep.** Without enough good quality sleep, our bodies can't repair or restore themselves and our delicate metabolic balance can be thrown off kilter; we can get tired, cranky and forgetful! Develop a bedtime ritual that tells your mind that it's time to sleep – take a warm bath, meditate, listen to soft music, read – and reduce the amount of light in your home as bedtime nears.

**Build loving relationships.** The World Health Organization cites good social health as a vital component of overall health. Loving relationships with your partner, family and friends prevent you

from feeling lonely- or isolated, and create an important sense of connectivity with others. Friends and family who care about you also have your best interests at heart, and are important supports for facing life's challenges. If you need to cultivate new friendships, try volunteering, signing up for classes to learn a new sport or skill, or joining an online meet-up group.

**Laugh – and cry.** Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into balance than a good laugh. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's feel-good chemicals, which give you a sense of well-being and can even temporarily relieve pain. Laughter also decreases stress hormones and increases blood flow. If you can't laugh, cry. After all, laughing and crying are physiologically related (just think of laughing so hard you cry, or vice-versa). So crying also helps decrease stress hormones while reducing muscle tension and blood pressure.

**Be kind to yourself.** Many of us are not as healthy as we should be because we're overly self-critical or have even given up on ourselves. Tell yourself that you're worth looking after, and indulge yourself occasionally with a 'treat', which could be as simple as a new book or your favourite meal with a friend. The emotional lift these small kindnesses will give you can be a powerful motivator to make more small positive changes to improve your health and well-being – and lift your spirits and self-esteem.

If you're having trouble getting starting, or staying on course, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). They have a wide range of resources and tools that can provide access to fitness, nutritional or psychological counselling. The key is to not give up. Everyone has bad days or even bad weeks. If you wander off track from your goals, try to understand why you slipped up, put it behind you and take action to get right back on track. After all, there is no straight road to any destination.

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