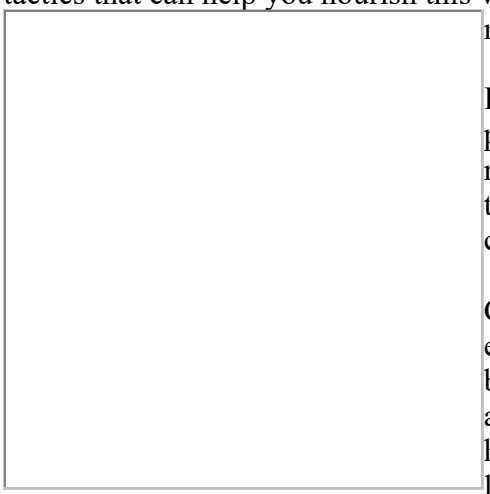
Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Making the connection: tactics for a healthy mind and body

While it's impossible to have total control over your body and mind, there are several techniques and tactics that can help you nourish this vital relationship, maintain its delicate balance and live at your mental and physical best.



Physical activity. Whether you're feeling anxious about the projects piling up at work or down in the dumps after a relationship has ended, exercise is one of the most effective ways to improve your mood, enhance your immune system and of course, keep your body in optimal condition.

Countless studies show that physical activity releases natural endorphins in the brain, not only increasing your physical energy but also boosting your spirits, concentration and memory. Exercise allows you to work off excess stress—which reduces strain on the heart and the immune system—and helps you cope better with life's daily challenges. It also encourages you to keep the lines of mind-body communication open, giving you the chance to not only "clear your mind," but also to "listen" to your body, its strengths, limitations and needs. Harvard's Mind Body Medical Institute recommends a varied exercise plan that incorporates a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity (which can be broken down into three 10-minute blocks) almost every day.

Physical activity doesn't have to be gruelling. Gardening, going for a stroll around the block and housework can all be put towards your daily tally. The added benefits of participating in team and social sporting activities are twofold: they help you stay active and connected with your community—an important ingredient in keeping the mind and body balanced.

Eat supportive foods. Most people know that a well-balanced diet, plenty of water and sufficient rest are important ingredients for good physical health. Fewer realize, however, the significant impact these elements can also have on mental health.

A recent group study and survey conducted by British mental health group MIND found that 88 per cent of participants who were asked to eat a diet that avoided "food stressors" (such as sugar and caffeine) and was rich in "food supporters," (including water, fruits and vegetables) believed that the new eating regime had greatly improved their mental health.

Avoid alcohol. While alcohol, in small amounts, has been shown to have some physical benefits to the heart, using it as a tool to mask physical and/or emotional pain is a dangerous, slippery slope.

In the short term, people who drink heavily may suffer more minor effects including fatigue, headaches and poor concentration.

However, over longer periods of time the physical complications can be much more serious: the risk of liver damage, high blood pressure, certain cancers and stroke all significantly increase in heavy drinkers.

The effects of alcohol overuse on the mind are equally as damaging. Though many people drink to "lift their spirits," or "feel happy," alcohol actually works as a depressant. So while you may "drink to forget" your problems and anxieties, the sober reality is that you're left feeling more down or more anxious the next day. Limit alcohol consumption and, if you're being treated for depression, leave it out entirely.

Stock up on sleep. Sleep can also play a significant role in the mind-body balance. Try to get a minimum of seven hours of sleep every night. If this isn't possible, recharge your body and your mind with a brief afternoon nap (20 minutes is considered ideal). Getting a good night's sleep regularly helps keep moodiness at bay, mental focus in check, and allows the body (and its immune system) to rejuvenate.

Sometimes, you just have to laugh. Building a healthy lifestyle means taking every opportunity to laugh off your stress. Laughter is some of the best and most enjoyable medicine around for maintaining the health of the mind and the body.

When you laugh, it triggers a series of positive physiological responses: your heart rate goes up, blood circulation to the brain and body improves and muscles become more relaxed. It also signals your brain to release more endorphins—chemicals which boost your mood and act as natural painkillers—into your body, helping you feel more positive and calm.

Build a support system. Taking a proactive approach to mind-body health is one of the best ways to ensure you maintain balance. Building and communicating regularly with a trusted network of people—whether a close family member, friend, doctor, counsellor, support group or all of the above—helps you maintain an essential and emotionally "nutritious" social circle.

This group can act as a sounding board during troubled times, provide an objective perspective, and encourage you to remain socially connected—an integral factor of good mental and physical health.

Remember, if you suspect you or a loved one is suffering from a mental illness, it's vital to seek out the advice of a medical doctor and/or counsellor as soon as possible.

Explore spiritual balance. Whether it's attending a traditional place of worship or getting involved at your local food bank; people who connect with a "greater" purpose or a higher meaning in their lives report better physical and mental health than their less spiritual counterparts. You don't have to be religious to explore your spirituality: it's more of a personal journey to clarify your own thoughts, opinions and beliefs and understand how they connect to the world around you.

Tapping into your spiritual side can be as simple as reading poetry, attending a religious service or going for a hike in the woods. Mind-body activities like meditation and yoga are excellent starting points for this journey as they allow you to slow down, breathe and "take the world in."

Meditation. Though Eastern cultures have used meditation as a tool to clear the mind and rid the body of stress since ancient times, modern medicine is just beginning to understand its positive effects on these two spheres. While there are a variety of relaxation and meditation techniques, the most common involves the repetition of a single word or thought, such as "peace" or "balance."

These are just a few among many strategies to help you get on the right track. By simply being aware of this connection and making small changes in your daily routine, you are well on your way to achieving both a healthy lifestyle and mind-body balance.
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