

## **Mental Health**

Mental health concerns with our emotional and psychological well-being. It is about the way we think, feel, and behave, and helps us to lead a happy and healthy life. Over the course of our lives, on occasions when we experience mental health problems, our thinking, mood, and behavior are affected.

Some signs that might indicate you experiencing mental health problems are:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from people and usual activities
- Having low or no energy
- Feeling numb or like 'nothing matters'
- Having unexplained aches and pains
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Excessive smoking, drinking, or drug usage
- Feeling unusually confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared
- Yelling or fighting with family and friends
- Experiencing a severe change in mood
- Having persistent thoughts and memories you can't get out of your head
- Hearing voices or believing things that are not true
- Thinking of harming yourself or others
- Not being able to perform daily tasks like taking care of your kids or going to work or school

If and when you are experiencing any of these signs, some ways to maintain positive mental health are:

- Understanding that you are not weak or wrong in feeling the way that you are. If you had a physical injury or illness you would go to a doctor, and this is no different.
- Reaching out for professional help - If you feel that you need to speak to an expert, don't hesitate to seek help from a Mental Health Professional.
- Connecting with others - Sharing your feelings and problems with people you trust is very helpful.
- Being physically active - Regular exercise (at least 20 minutes a day) helps in de-stressing and keeps you active and fresh. Being out in the open, seeing the sky, the trees, and plants, all help to shift how you are feeling.
- Helping others - This brightens your mood and helps in feeling good.
- Getting enough sleep - Being well rested (7 to 8 hours of sleep per night) maintains your energy levels and keeps your mind and body healthy.

## **Five core principles for mental strength and well-being**

- Food
- Sleep
- Routine
- Exercise
- Mindfulness

**Food:**

Our brain is always “on”, it attends to our thoughts, body movements, breathing, heartbeat - it works 24/7, including when we are asleep. To carry out these activities, the brain needs fuel, and this fuel comes from the food we eat. This means what we eat directly affects our mood. A healthy diet benefits our well-being in many ways. It helps in keeping the blood sugar and energy levels in check, which promotes positive moods and clear thinking. Eating breakfast provides a good start to our day. Additionally, eating smaller meals regularly throughout the day maintains the metabolic rate and prevents overeating. In order to stay hydrated, it is recommended that we drink 6-8 glasses of water a day. Furthermore, a healthy diet includes lots of fruits and vegetables. These are a great source of vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants which strengthen bones, manage blood pressure and improve metabolism and cognitive function.

**Sleep:**

Sleep is as important to our health as eating, drinking, and breathing. Getting enough sleep at night nourishes the body and the brain. Our brain is bombarded with new information throughout the day. At night, sleep gives the brain some ‘downtime’ to process all of this information and store it properly. In other words, during sleep, the brain, the mind, and the body can get rid of the mental and physical ‘junk’ that builds up as a result of daily stresses. Having enough sleep improves concentration, creativity, and assists with learning. Further, it is believed that having enough sleep is an essential factor to deal with the difficulties and demands of a busy life. A good night's sleep helps promote both mental and physical well-being. Good "sleep hygiene" term is often used to include tips like maintaining a regular sleep-and-wake schedule, using the bedroom only for sleeping, and keeping the bedroom dark and free of distractions like the computer or television.

**Routine:**

A daily routine can help us to feel more in control of everything and have time for all the important things. It can help us to cope with change, to form healthy habits, and to reduce our stress levels. There is comfort in knowing that we will be having our evening tea at 4 pm and bedtime is 10 pm. Further, organising our time allows us to do things that are important to us. It could include things like time to relax, or a regular wake-up. When we have a routine, we don't have to think about everyday tasks like brushing our teeth. It becomes a habit and we feel more in control and less stressed.

**Exercise:**

Exercise makes us feel good because it releases chemicals in the body that improve our mood. Physical exercise pumps blood to the brain and helps us think more clearly. Regular exercise gets us out in the world and helps in reducing any feelings of loneliness and isolation. It also reduces stress and improves sleep. It could be as simple as going out for a walk. Explore ways of exercise that will be fun rather than something that ‘has to be done’.

**Mindfulness:**

Mindfulness is a moment-to-moment non-judgemental awareness that we cultivate by paying attention to our breath. Basically, it is being aware of the present and accepting it. Mindfulness is a practice that is strengthened with time.

Mindfulness reduces stress, tension, pain, and dissatisfaction. On a deeper level, it helps us to befriend our emotions and experiences, in particular the unpleasant and unwanted ones.

Some mindfulness practices which you can easily inculcate in your everyday life are:

- **Mindful Wakeup: Start with a Purpose**
  - When you wake up in the morning, before checking your phone or email,
    - Sit in your bed or a chair in a relaxed posture. Close your eyes and observe the sensations in your body.
    - Keep your spine straight. Take three long, deep, breaths—breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Then let your breath settle into its own rhythm, as you simply follow it in and out, noticing the rise and fall of your chest and belly as you breathe.
    - Next, ask yourself: “What is my intention for today?”
    - Set your intention for the day. For example, “Today, I will be kind to myself; be patient with others; give generously; stay grounded; persevere; have fun; eat well,” or anything else you feel is important.
    - Throughout the day, check in with yourself. Pause, take a breath, and revisit your intention. Notice, as you become more and more conscious of your intentions for each day, how the quality of your communications, relationships, and mood shifts.
- **Mindful Eating: Enjoy Every Mouthful**
  - Breathe before eating.
  - Bring your attention inward by closing your eyes, and begin to breathe slowly in and out of your belly for eight to 10 deep breaths before you start your meal.
  - After breathing, bring your awareness to the physical sensations in your belly and ask yourself “How hungry am I?” Eat according to your hunger.
  - Take your first three bites mindfully, experience the taste, flavors, textures, and how much you are enjoying it.
  - Slow down and continue to breathe deeply as you eat. Make a mindful choice about what to eat based on what you really enjoy.

### **Specific mental health problems with self-care tips and information:**

Here are some tips to help and support you as you work with a mental issue that may be troubling you:

- **Anxiety**
  - What helps:
    - Meditation - Meditating for 20 minutes a day helps to be in the present and calms oneself.
    - Relaxation exercises - Relaxing points of the body using the breath.
    - Time management strategies - like keeping a book/phone calendar to plan and manage your day.

- Writing - Keep a journal or write freely about how you feel every day.
    - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Smoking, drugs, alcohol, and too much caffeine can increase your anxiety.
- **Depression**
  - What helps:
    - Trying to get back into your daily routine - by doing little things like showering, making your bed, and hanging the washing out. Picking one thing to start with helps in getting back into a routine.
    - Practicing gratitude - this can include writing down three things before sleeping that you feel grateful about in the day (for example: 'I really enjoyed spending time with sister/brother/friends today; we had my favourite food at dinner)
    - Learning to relax - doing yoga, meditation, muscle relaxation, or a breathing technique can be helpful practices.
    - Gardening - Getting your hands dirty in the garden and contributing towards nurturing life.
    - Making a note of the things you like to do when you are happy and doing one of them when you are feeling down will improve your mood.
    - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Smoking
    - Major life changes such as moving house or changing jobs until you are feeling better
    - Consuming alcohol and recreational drugs
    - Procrastination - postponing your help or tasks.
- **Sleeplessness**
  - What helps:
    - Keeping TV, computer, tablet or mobile switched off and away when you go to bed.
    - Using a relaxation technique before going to bed (whatever works for you) - it could be reading a book, deep breathing, or saying a prayer.
    - Keeping a regular pattern of going to bed and getting up at the same time every day helps in getting a good night's sleep.
    - When you have had a bad night, resisting the temptation to sleep the next day makes sure you get proper sleep the following night.
    - Keeping a sleep diary for a week can help in looking back and noticing things that help you sleep better.
    - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Watching television, browsing the internet, or checking your email or social media just before going to bed.

- Consuming caffeine (tea, coffee, and some soft drinks) in the evening makes it harder to fall asleep at night.
- Drinking a lot of alcohol makes it more likely that you will wake up during the night.

- **Anger Management**

- What helps:
  - Getting some physical exercise helps in releasing tension.
  - Taking a timeout - it helps to recollect your emotions and identify possible solutions.
  - Sticking with 'I' statements during conflict, rather than blaming the other person; for example, say "I am upset about how you spoke to me", instead of "You were rude to me".
  - Humor can be used to release tension.
  - Slowly counting to 10 or 20 depending upon the intensity of your anger helps in releasing some of the energy.
  - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member or a professional counsellor.
- What doesn't help:
  - Sleeping while you are still angry doesn't help.
  - Driving a vehicle while angry can be dangerous.
  - Drinking alcohol or reaching for food doesn't help.

- **Restlessness**

- What helps:
  - Noticing your feelings - being aware of changes in your moods and thoughts helps to realise things that make you feel good or bad.
  - Taking time for yourself and doing things that you enjoy.
  - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
- What doesn't help:
  - Alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine don't help,
  - Eating a heavy meal close to bedtime.
  - Daytime naps.

- **Low Self-Esteem**

- What helps:
  - Reading a book that interests you, drawing, painting, writing, cooking - being in touch with your creative side.
  - Getting some fresh air - going for a walk, a run, or eating your lunch outside to appreciate nature helps in appreciating yourself.
  - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member or a professional counsellor.
- What doesn't help:
  - Comparing oneself with others
  - Neglecting and ignoring your own needs
  - Spending a lot of time on social media
  - Avoiding and escaping from difficult situations

- **Bereavement**
  - What helps:
    - Social support - speaking to people; family, friends, relatives, and colleagues make you feel lighter.
    - Looking after yourself - having some time to yourself, going for walks, or spending time in the garden.
    - Indulging in your hobbies and interests.
    - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Consuming alcohol, drugs, and caffeine doesn't help.
    - Denying, not crying, and accepting the loss.
  
- **Loneliness**
  - What helps:
    - Writing or keeping a journal about your everyday activities, feelings, and mood.
    - Practicing yoga, meditation, or deep breathing.
    - Organizing or cleaning an area you have been neglecting for some time.
    - Talking to someone you trust - This may be a friend, family member, or a professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Isolating yourself from everything happening around you.
    - Being idle, not having much to do.
    - Overthinking about the past or the future.
  
- **Exam Stress**
  - What helps:
    - Making time to have fun with friends and family. This way we realise our sources of happiness.
    - Setting a doable study timetable with breaks between study sessions.
    - Decide specific goals for each study session.
    - Talking about your problems with someone you trust. This can be a friend, family member, or professional counsellor.
  - What doesn't help:
    - Worrying about the exam and study material you haven't covered yet.
    - Overthinking about what you have done or need to do.
    - Studying all the time without breaks and revision.

**If you would like additional support, Kashmir Lifeline is here for you!**

**Talk with one of our counsellors for free on our helpline**

**18001807020**

or

**visit**

**Kashmir Lifeline and Health Centre**

**M.E.T Lane Rawat Pora, Baghat Chowk, Srinagar, J&K**

## **Breathing techniques**

How we breathe has an immediate impact on how our body reacts to stress.

When we are stressed our breathing becomes shallow and quick. This puts pressure on the body and leads to more stress. When we breathe more slowly and smoothly, the body begins to relax, even after just one breath.

**Grounding:** Feeling the breath as it moves through the body. Feeling the connection with the ground through the feet. Noticing where the weight is in the feet. Moving the weight backward and forwards on the feet. Tracking our attention as we focus on the Body.

**Feeling the breath in the abdomen:** Starting with feeling breath in the belly under the palms of the hands as you take normal breaths. Feel the belly-filling and emptying like a bucket.

- Then take 3 longer, slower inhales and exhales. Guide these breaths with the image of filling the belly with breath as though slowly filling a bucket, a 'belly bucket' during the inhalation. Then empty the 'belly bucket' during the slow, steady exhalation.
- Noticing what thoughts and emotions come up as we do this exercise.
- Using the focus on the breath to let go of negative emotions instead of engaging with them. The focus on the breath allows the thoughts to pass.

## **Tension release exercise:**

Sit in an upright position and bring your hands together in front of your chest.

Keep some space between your hands and chest, keep your arms parallel to the ground, palms together and fingers pointing up.

Feel the tension as they press their hands together using all their strengths.

Identify the tense parts of your body and feel the tension.

Next, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

As you release your breath, notice where you feel the release as your muscles relax and what it feels like.

Repeat it three times.

## **Shoulder Shrugging:**

Relax your back and shoulders.

First, lift one shoulder up while keeping the other one down and relaxed.

Drop the lifted shoulder and lift the other one.

Keep lifting and dropping the shoulders, one at a time, until you have a steady rhythm.

Speed up.

Then begin to slow down.

As you slow down notice the sensations in the neck area and shoulders.

Notice what your breathing is like as you slow down.

## **Tapping:**

Relax your feet on the floor and start tapping them as hard as you can. Now tap your hands on your thighs and notice your breath and heartbeat. Now tap both of your feet and

hands together simultaneously, close your eyes and notice the sensations in your feet, thighs, hands, and palms. Try and feel your heartbeat and notice how fast it is going. You may notice that it is beginning to slow down as you watch.

Raise your arms in the air and shake them fast as you are shaking all the tension away.

**Scan:**

Close your eyes and feel how your breath is now. Notice whether your breaths are slow or fast. Pay attention to your body and how it is feeling. Do you notice any sensations that you had not noticed before—maybe it is the feeling of some muscles having been worked, or maybe you have noticed a pain in your body that you have not noticed before. Perhaps it feels as though your muscles are more relaxed. Just notice whatever it is that you are feeling. Try not to label it, but just feel it.

Now try to recall the moment when we were thinking about a good or happy moment...remember how that made you feel emotionally, and physically. Notice how you feel now and how different the emotions and physical sensations are.

Bring your attention back to your breath. How is it feeling now, and where can you feel it?

Rub your hands together until they feel warm and energized. Now put your hands on your eyes and feel the temperature of your hands on your eyes, take a long inhale and exhale and open your eyes.