



LifeWorks Newsletter

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Do you think often about your mental health?

Talking about mental health is still extremely difficult for many people. But it shouldn't be. **Mental health is something we all have!**



For more information, visit

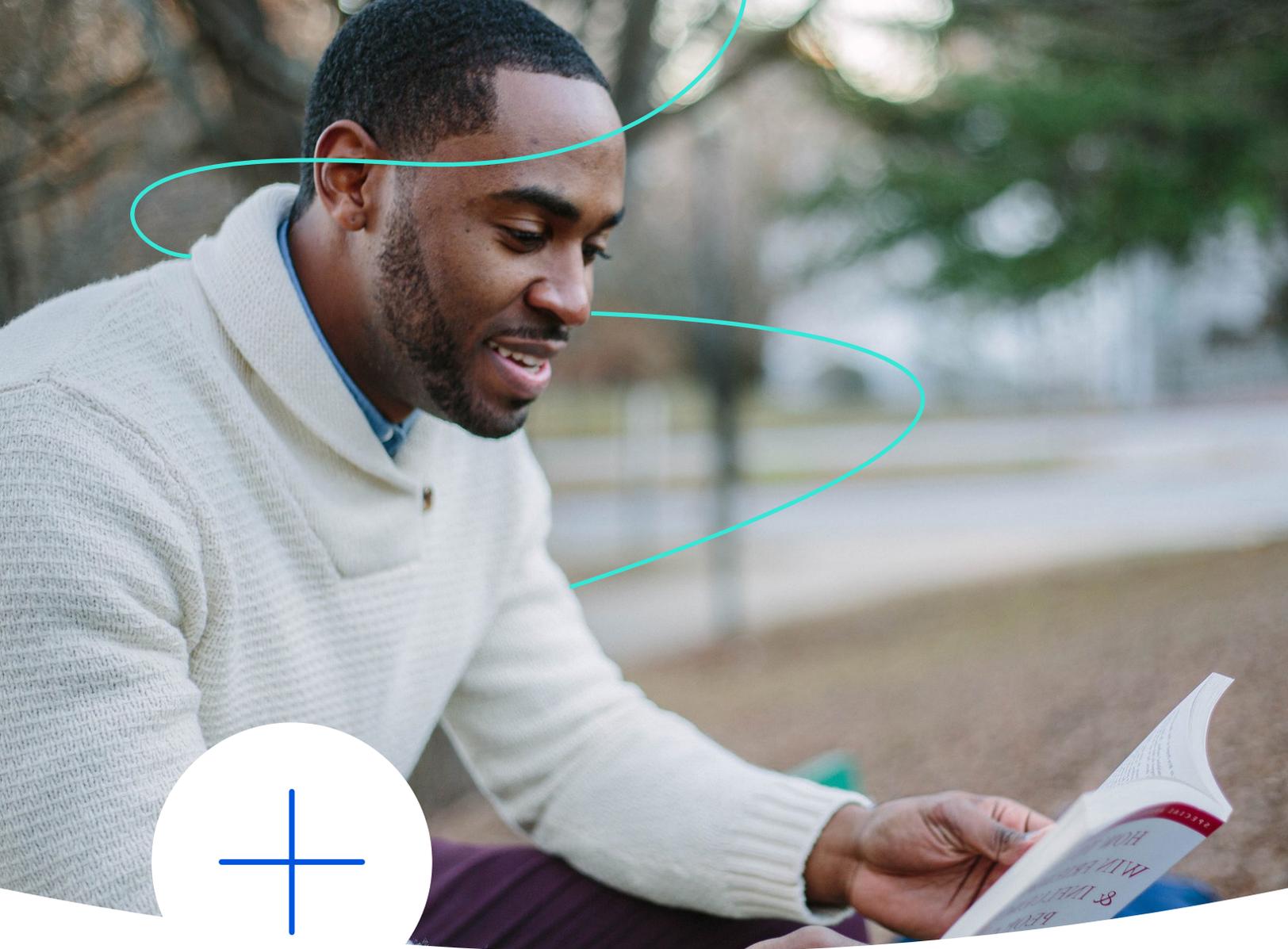
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The Pathway to Positive Mental Health

Our mental health is a key aspect of overall health, and can range from poor to positive and even to excellent, shifting throughout our lives depending on personal experiences and how we manage the stressors we face. In this edition of our quarterly newsletter, we're shining a light on **positive mental health** — something we can all pursue by being proactive and adopting preventative behaviours like self-care, stress management, and a healthy lifestyle!

Prevention: Could it be the key to positive mental health?

Just as prevention works to support physical health, it also helps to protect emotional well-being! Here are 10 ways to put your mental health first:

- 1 Be self-aware.** Pay attention to how you're feeling and thinking, and don't ignore signs or changes that concern you.
- 2 Talk about issues that you find stressful.** Confide in a trusted peer or loved one for support. And share your concerns early on: The act of venting releases stress, and may even help you resolve the problem.
- 3 Keep stress levels in check.** Learn skills to combat stress like relaxation, deep breathing, resilience-building, and positive thinking techniques. A short practice of only a few minutes each day can make a difference. Read [How Stress Affects Thinking and Decision Making](#), and [Managing Stress as a College or University Student](#) for helpful stress management techniques.
- 4 Get moving.** If you're feeling uninspired or unenergetic, the last thing you likely want to do is exercise. But physical activity can help boost your mood and release stress. Get started with our article [Quick Tips for Starting and Sticking with an Exercise Program](#).
- 5 Avoid overload.** Feeling overwhelmed or overscheduled, all the time? Prioritize and pick the commitments that matter to you most, then learn to say "no" to the rest.
- 6 Sleep.** Long-term sleep deficiency causes irritability, lack of focus, accidents, and can even lead to the development of emotional problems like anxiety and depression. Improve your sleep with our [Sleep Health Toolkit](#), and aim for 7 to 9 hours of restful ZZZZZs every night, depending on your personal sleep need.
- 7 Reach out if you're having trouble processing a loss.** Seek out a support group, a grief counselor, or other therapy option if feelings of sadness or grief are overwhelming, and preventing you from performing the activities of your daily life. Whether caused by a trauma, death of a loved one, illness, disability, or any other tough challenge you may face, difficult emotions sometimes demand qualified support for recovery and healing.
- 8 Revel in "me time."** Indulge your hobbies and passions. Recharge and unwind by carving out personal time every day — take a walk, take a bath, take in a movie, or just take five! Fun, personal pursuits can give you a mental break from stress.
- 9 Avoid nicotine, alcohol & illegal drugs.** You may even wish to avoid caffeine! Mood-altering substances don't help your body and your brain function at their best. Drink plenty of water and eat nutritious foods to fuel your body and help keep you strong.
- 10 Always consult your doctor if you're concerned about any aspect of your well-being.** Don't be afraid to ask questions, or to ask for clarification if your healthcare provider tells you something you don't understand. Be honest about the symptoms you're experiencing to help your doctor assess you thoroughly and connect you to the right help. You may even want to write your experiences down in a journal so you don't need to rely on your memory.



Dealing with Persistent Worry

All of us worry from time to time. Worry serves a useful function when it helps us plan ahead and be prepared. But worry is unproductive when it becomes endless fretting about worst-case scenarios that have little chance of happening. While some people find relief by learning coping skills such as relaxation techniques, others may need professional help to learn ways to deal with persistent worry.

Persistent worry is often referred to as **rumination** (a kind of obsessive thinking). People who ruminate have difficulty concentrating, and struggle to focus on the here and now. Instead, their minds stay focused on bad things that have happened or that they think might happen.

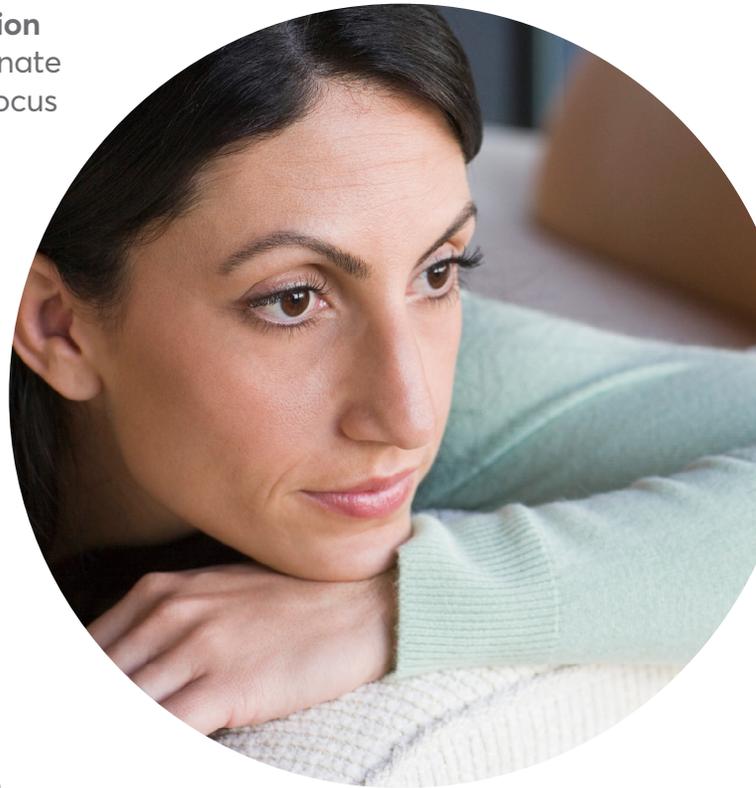
When persistent worry is severe, it can interfere with an individual's ability to work, to enjoy life, and to sleep, and it may be a symptom of an **anxiety disorder**, a mental health condition that goes beyond emotional reactions and becomes something longer lasting.

Signs of a problem

Scientists have not yet determined what causes people to become worriers. Environmental factors, such as parental behavior, appear to have an impact as well as genetics and brain chemistry.

People often don't realize that they have a problem with worry. Instead, they might assume that there is something medically wrong. Worriers typically have several of the following personality traits:

- Discomfort with success or fear of failure
- Lack of self-confidence
- Being overly critical of oneself or others
- Fear of confrontation
- Procrastination
- Preference for isolation
- Perfectionism
- Constant need for reassurance
- Fragile self-esteem
- Physical pain in response to stress
- Inability to make decisions
- Gloomy daydreams
- Pessimism
- Extreme superstition
- High anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Easily embarrassed
- Highly sensitive



Here are some of the forms that persistent worry may take:



Vigilance. With this type of worry, the person is always on edge and high-strung. He feels easily threatened, has trouble relaxing, and often feels angry with himself and others. Everyday activities can cause him to fret. For instance, if he has to catch an early morning train, he might not be able to stop thinking about what will happen if his alarm doesn't go off on time.



Insomnia. About 20% of the population reports that lack of sleep interferes with daily activities. While some people have trouble falling asleep, others have trouble staying asleep, which can lead to a vicious cycle of worry because the insomnia becomes yet another source of worry.



Mental health conditions. An individual may be living with an anxiety disorder, a mental illness, if persistent worry is interfering with his or her ability to work or to enjoy social relationships. If you are experiencing this level of anxiety, you should consult your doctor or other qualified healthcare professional promptly.



Medical problems. Worry can make us physically sick, contributing to high blood pressure, back pain, digestive problems, rashes, and headaches.

Self-help strategies

If you're dealing with worry, these strategies may help you manage your anxiety.



Let your worries in and then let your worries go. If you tend to worry excessively, accept this as a temporary part of yourself. You might be able to relax by setting a limit on how long you allow yourself to worry. For example, you might spend 20 minutes a day letting your mind run free with worries, setting a timer so you know when time is up. Afterward, you can tell yourself that it's OK to now let go of your worries. If the worries return, say, "Stop! I'm done worrying about this."



Take action. After making a realistic assessment of a worry, you might find that taking action puts your mind at ease. For instance, if you worry that you might not be preparing your tax return properly, hire an accountant instead, but start to prepare your papers ahead of time to keep you from worrying about not having done anything at all.



Stay connected. Isolation can cause worrying to spin out of control. Try talking with a supportive person for a few minutes. Confiding in others about your worries can help.



Make lifestyle changes. Exercising for 30 minutes or more on all or most days of the week — whether it's walking, swimming, biking, working out at the gym or along with an exercise video, or even doing vigorous chores at home — can help keep you calm. Studies show that even a brisk 10-minute walk may improve your mood, and this effect may last for several hours. Plus, if you are dealing with insomnia, exercise is likely to make it easier to sleep at night. You might also watch your diet. Too much sugar and caffeine can contribute to anxiety and depression.

- ✓ **Be aware of early clues that you might be going into a worry cycle.** Our bodies let us know when we are upset, sometimes way before we actually become aware of it. Symptoms might include muscle tension, elevated anxiety, and the beginning of intrusive and negative thoughts. Try to relax, focus on something else, call someone, go for a walk, or do something else to break the cycle.
- ✓ **Try meditation or mindfulness.** You might try to carve out a little quiet time for yourself each day. Download the Headspace app (www.headspace.com) for ideas on how to get started. If meditation doesn't appeal to you, you might listen to music. Some people also find prayer useful.
- ✓ **Take up a relaxing new activity.** Look for an easy and enjoyable activity that you can do anywhere, like adult coloring books, crossword puzzles, or knitting. A healthy distraction can break the cycle of worry.
- ✓ **Accept that some things are beyond your control.** Unexpected traumatic events do occur. But worrying about possible disasters isn't going to make you any safer. It is important to realize that your sphere of control is limited. That way, you can take charge of the things you can control and let go of the things you can't.
- ✓ **Stay in the present.** Negatively projecting into the future or constantly returning to the past will increase your anxiety. No one can change the past or foresee the future. When people view things negatively they usually tend to exaggerate the possible outcomes.
- ✓ **Learn to be a problem-solver.** By realistically appraising your situation and focusing on the solution, you have a better chance of interpreting things clearly and more positively. Write down your worry and make a list of actions you can take to resolve it. This is especially helpful when you are in a situation that is beyond your control. You do have control over how you respond, and that is where planning ahead is helpful. This will help you accurately assess what you need to do in order to move from immobility to action.



Remember that everyone has worries throughout life. People who worry realistically think of difficult situations as concerns they need to handle rather than as impediments. They are more likely to have a positive attitude and feel they have the ability to cope with the situation, even if the outcome isn't favorable. And since worry is often a deeply ingrained habit, you can't expect to change it overnight. But you can develop new coping skills that will, over time, help you retrain your brain to greatly reduce the extent of your worrying.

TO READ MORE ABOUT TOPICS RELATED TO ANXIETY AND WORRY, CHECK OUT:

- [Anxiety Disorders](#)
- [Overcoming Anxiety \(podcast\)](#)
- [Panic Disorder](#)
- [Quick Tips for Dealing with Worry](#)
- [Understanding and Managing Perfectionism](#)
- [Worry Not \(podcast\)](#)



5 Ways to Build Resilience with Self-Care

Resilience is the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, such as when you may be experiencing personal or family issues, a serious health concern, work stress, money worries, or other challenges. It's the ability to bounce back from challenges. One of the key ways to build resilience is to focus on self-care. "Taking care of yourself," writes the American Psychological Association, "helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience."

Here are five ways to take care of yourself to help build your resilience, so you can cope with difficult challenges in your life:

- 1 Make meaningful connections.** Strong ties — to family, friends, co-workers, and community groups — can serve as the social and emotional support you need to bounce back from setbacks or disappointments. Make time for your closest relationships. Try to have dinner together as a family as much as possible, and spend time with people you like doing things you like to do. Connect with co-workers — for coffee, lunch, or a restorative walk. Spend extra time with your pet if you have one.

Talk about what you are going through with others. Family, friends, and co-workers can be a lasting source of emotional support as well as “reality checks.” And even when circumstances seem beyond your control, connecting with like-minded others can help form an important bond and generate creative ideas on ways to manage, take action, or cope. Relationships can help you feel less alone. Read our articles, [How to Build a Life of Close Connections](#), and [Finding Strength in Family and Community](#), for helpful relationship tips.
- 2 “Reframe” how you view problems and challenges.** A key element of resilience is your perception of an event, according to the Columbia University psychologist George Bonanno, who has been studying resilience for 25 years. Reframe a difficult experience by changing the way you think or “talk” to yourself about a stressful event. Instead of saying “I will never get through this,” you might try a more positive and realistic thought such as, “I will get through this by using the techniques that have helped when I’ve had difficult experiences in the past, including asking others for help and finding strength in my community.”
- 3 Build your emotional resilience.** Learn from others who are role models of resilience. Think about people you know and admire who are resilient, such as public figures, mentors and colleagues, or people in your personal life. What are some of the strategies they use to deal with and stay strong through adversity? Think about how you could adapt and use some of those strategies in your own life.
- 4 Give yourself a break from media.** When a tragedy or an upsetting world event is dominating the news, avoid over-exposure to media, especially if it is making you feel ineffective, anxious, or unable to have control of your life. Unplug for part of each day from all your sources of media and news.
- 5 Keep your life simple.** Simplify your routines and set limits to protect your time. Plan simple meals, resist signing up for too many activities and over-committing yourself, and don’t be afraid to say “no.” Make time for simple pleasures, such as watching the sunset, playing with your pet, or sitting and drinking a good cup of tea with someone you love. Listen to a podcast featuring therapist and best-selling author Dr. Mary Pipher, [Five Ways to Simplify Your Life](#).

Taking care of yourself means paying attention to your physical and emotional needs. It also means learning ways to cope with feelings of stress so that you’re able to handle whatever challenges come your way with resilience and flexibility. These are all things you can start working on — today.



Why Practice Mindfulness?

Mindfulness — an awareness of the moment — can help you in many areas of life. When you're aware of your experiences on a moment-by-moment basis, you can direct your focus away from negative thoughts like worry and self-doubt and be present in a calmer way.

Many people use the broad term *mindfulness* to refer to specific practices that experts call "mindfulness meditation" or "mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)." Any type of mindfulness that you practice may improve your well-being.

The science behind mindfulness

Over the past several decades, studies have found that mindfulness has a variety of physical and mental health benefits, including helping you sleep better, improving well-being, even helping ease chronic pain.

Recent studies have suggested that regularly practicing mindfulness meditation creates physical changes to the brain. Doctors have long known, for example, that as we get older, we experience shrinkage in a specific region of the *prefrontal cortex*, a part of the brain associated with working memory and certain types of decision-making. That's why it's harder to remember certain things as we get older — we have less "gray matter" there.

But after eight weeks of regular mindfulness meditation, 50-year-olds had the same amount of gray matter as 25-year-olds, according to a study by researchers at Harvard Medical School and elsewhere, published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*. Research has also found that participants in mindfulness programs showed changes in the *amygdala* — a part of the brain that affects fear, stress, and anxiety — which correlated with lower stress levels.

How mindfulness can help you

Even five minutes a day of practicing mindfulness may help you reap some of its benefits. Some studies have shown that people often begin to see benefits after about eight weeks of regular practice. The more you practice mindfulness, the more you may gain from it. Experts generally recommend that you practice it for at least 15 to 20 minutes a day. This will give your mind time to "settle" into being fully present in the moment. Practicing mindfulness consistently may help you:



Have more satisfying relationships.

Several studies have found the ability to be mindful can predict satisfaction in relationships, perhaps because greater self-awareness helps people communicate thoughts or feelings to others more effectively and clearly.



Manage a health condition.

Doctors may recommend mindfulness meditation, along with other treatments, for health concerns including diabetes, chronic pain, eating disorders, and some types of heart disease.



Quit smoking or overcome other addictions.

The craving for cigarettes significantly decreased for people with an average age of 21 who took part in a study of mindfulness meditation published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.



Manage feelings of stress and anxiety.

Therapists sometimes use mindfulness in combination with other treatments to help people cope with unwanted thoughts that interfere with work, relationships, or the ability to enjoy life.

Research has found that mindfulness has helped people manage physical and mental health concerns that range from diabetes to stress to anxiety and depression.

To learn how to practice mindfulness, and to access relaxation recordings to get you started:
[Mindfulness Toolkit](#)



What is "stigma"?

Mental illness conversations often include discussions of the impact of "stigma" — a term that refers to the negative thoughts, opinions, and feelings connected to the topic. Whether caused by fear or lack of information, negative stereotypes about mental health reinforce and strengthen stigma, which in turn, prevents people who may be struggling with poor mental health from speaking out and seeking support.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association: "Mental illness can affect anybody, regardless of age, gender, culture, ethnicity, or social class. But no matter who they are, people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness are all likely to experience stigma. Public attitudes and beliefs, often based on fear and misunderstanding, stereotype individuals with mental illness, exposing them to prejudice and discrimination."

The cure? Talk openly about mental health, learn about mental illnesses, and support your loved ones!

Online Toolkits: Click to connect!

Feeling overloaded or stressed out? Concerned about a loved one's emotional well-being? Our Online Toolkits can help! Whether you connect to our platform by browser or by free, user-friendly mobile app, you'll discover a wealth of toolkits to support you in managing issues you may be facing. These themed collections of resources can help you navigate tough changes and prepare to face challenging life events. Log in to the platform today to view many NEW Online Toolkits, including:

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