

Five Things You Can Do Now to Improve your Mental Health

1. Weekly gratitude practice

[Research](#) shows that keeping a weekly gratitude journal has significant effects on increasing optimism and decreasing reported physical symptoms. But don't overdo it. [Lyubomirsky et al. \(2005\)](#) found that those who practiced gratitude three times per week saw less benefit than those doing it once a week, suggesting that there may be a habituation effect and loss of gains if you do it more than once per week. Consider putting a reminder in your calendar to do this once a week.

2. Breathing exercises & Mindfulness Practice

If you find yourself feeling stressed or anxious, doing a simple breathing exercise can help lower your blood pressure, lower your heart rate, and bring your attention away from distressing thoughts. It is easy to let future-focused or past-focused thoughts get in your way and this can increase depressed or anxious feelings. Be sure to breathe deeply into your lower abdomen, rather than taking shallow breaths just into your upper chest.

Breathing exercises are one component of mindfulness which is the practice of staying focused upon the present moment. There have been [many studies](#) showing the beneficial effects of mindfulness practice on depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, stress, chronic pain, and other ailments. When practicing mindfulness, sit in a comfortable place and start with the breathing. Then focus simply on being in your body. Notice your weight in the chair and the sounds you hear. If worrisome thoughts enter your mind, bring your focus back to your breath. Try to do this for 5 minutes a day and work up to 15 minutes.

You may also consider searching for podcasts that offer relaxation, breathing, and mindfulness exercises.

3. Connect with others

Two of the biggest predictors of happiness are meaningful work and meaningful relationships. There is [much data](#) suggesting that social support and connection increases mental health and feelings of self-worth while simultaneously decreasing stress. If you are feeling isolated, consider joining an activity group, taking a class, or even volunteering somewhere. Finding a spiritual community helps for many people. Look on sites such as [meetup](#) to find people who share your interests. Have a lot of work to do? Try co-working or just go to a cafe to get your work done. Want to exercise? Find a buddy to do it with (see item #4 below).

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If you're finding that depression or social anxiety is preventing you from reaching out to others and doing new activities, then it may be time to talk to a mental health professional to help you get unstuck and move towards an increase in building your social networks.

4. Exercise

There is significant [data](#) indicating that exercise relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety while also helping with insomnia. Consider combining exercise with connecting with others by joining a gym or a boot camp or organizing physical activities such as walks, yoga, or gym dates with friends.

5. Thought-tracking

If you're struggling with anxiety or depression, tracking thoughts and moods can be helpful. [Thought records](#) are a cognitive-behavioral tool that can help you become more conscious of the thoughts and beliefs that are running through your mind and think how they influence your mood and behaviors. You may notice patterns and less useful beliefs that come up in your inner monologue with yourself. Identifying these thought patterns can be a first step in changing them.

What next?

If you found these items useful and you are ready to step it up a notch, it may be time to explore speaking with a mental health professional. I have articles on my site under the Psychotherapy menu that explain my approaches to individual therapy, couples and relationship counseling, and what you can expect when you get started.

I also am always happy to help people to connect to the right provider if I'm unable to work with you, so don't hesitate to give me a call at: 415 -501-9098. I look forward to helping you get on the right path.

Best,

Keely Kolmes