

STARTING TO THINK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health refers to our emotional and social well-being and impacts how we think, feel, and behave. It plays a role in connecting with others, making decisions, handling stress, and many other aspects of daily life. Everyone has mental health, and it deserves your attention just as much as your physical health does.

WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION?

A mental health condition, or mental illness, refers to a set of symptoms that have been identified by the mental health community. Mental health conditions are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), or by people with lived experience.

People with mental health conditions deal with changes in emotions, thinking, and/or behavior. For some, this means extreme and unexpected changes in mood – like feeling much more sad or worried than usual. For others, it means not thinking clearly, pulling away from friends and activities you used to enjoy, or hearing voices that others do not. No matter what kind of mental health condition someone is facing, it's always possible to recover.

IS POOR MENTAL HEALTH THE SAME THING AS HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION?

No. We all have tough days and weeks and struggling with your mental health doesn't automatically mean you have a mental health condition. To be diagnosed, the changes in your thinking and emotions must be seriously hurting your ability to do the things you want to do; and sticking around longer than they should – weeks or months, depending on the condition.

TERMS TO KNOW

SYMPTOMS:

physical or mental features that indicate the potential existence of a concern, condition, or diagnosis

LIVED EXPERIENCE:

first-hand, personal experience dealing with a mental health or substance use challenge

STRESS:

a feeling of emotional or physical tension in response to being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure

TRAUMA:

an emotional response to a disturbing, scary, or shocking experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope

COPING SKILLS:

a strategy to help you deal with difficult situations and lessen unpleasant emotions, thoughts, or behaviors

MENTAL HEALTH SCREEN:

an evaluation of your mental health and wellbeing through scientifically validated assessment tools

CONDITION		FOR DIAGNOSIS SYMPTOMS MUST LAST AT LEAST:
ANXIETY		6 MONTHS
DEPRESSION		2 WEEKS
BIPOLAR	DEPRESSIVE EPISODE AND MANIA OR HYPOMANIA	2 WEEKS 1 WEEK 4 DAYS
SCHIZOPHRENIA		6 MONTHS
PTSD		1 MONTH
OCD		2 WEEKS

You can have times of poor mental health without having a diagnosable condition – just like you can be generally physically unhealthy without having a particular illness.

WHO NEEDS TO LOOK AFTER THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

Everyone! Mental health is important for all of us. Taking care of yourself is critical to prevent your mental health from worsening – factors like nutrition and gut health, stress, sleep, relationships, trauma, and more can contribute to poor mental health. If your mental health is in a good spot, it is a great time to practice coping skills – ways to help you deal with hard feelings – so that you're better able to handle tough times when they happen.



IF YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH OR JUST WANT TO CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF, TAKE A SCREEN AT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://mhascreening.org).

FAST FACTS

21% OF ALL U.S. ADULTS LIVE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION.¹



THE PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS IS HIGHEST AMONG ADULTS REPORTING TWO OR MORE RACES (35.8%).²

46% OF AMERICANS WILL MEET THE CRITERIA FOR A DIAGNOSABLE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION AT SOMETIME IN THEIR LIFE.³

SOURCES

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HHS Publication No. PEP21-07-01-003, NSDUH Series H-56). Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2020-nsduh-annual-national-report>.

² Ibid.

³ Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., et al. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 62(6), 593-602. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593.

WHAT PLAYS A ROLE IN DEVELOPING MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS?

Most mental health conditions don't have a single cause – they have many possible causes, called risk factors. The more risk factors you have, the more likely you are to develop a mental health condition in your lifetime. Mental health conditions can develop slowly, or symptoms can start to appear more suddenly after you've experienced a stressful event or big change.

RISK FACTORS

Risk factors don't just affect who will and won't develop a mental health condition. They also impact the seriousness of symptoms and when those symptoms will show up. There are several risk factors, including:

Social determinants of health (SDOH)

SDOH are the conditions in which people live, learn, work, and play that impact their health and quality of life. There are five main categories – financial stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and living environment, and social and community life.

One example of how SDOH affect mental health is poverty. High poverty neighborhoods can cause stress, weaken healthy social connections, and harm the overall mental health of the people who live there, even when controlling for individual poverty.¹

Trauma

Any experience that was highly stressful, shocking, or dangerous to you can be traumatic. Trauma is different for everyone – what feels normal to someone else might be traumatic to you, and vice versa. A traumatic event can threaten your physical safety (like being in a car accident), or it can be more emotional (like the sudden death of a loved one). Traumatic experiences can be one-time events (like getting in a fight) or ongoing (like bullying or childhood neglect). Situations like loneliness, seeing an accident, natural disasters, poverty, and racism can all cause a trauma response.

Genetics

Your genes are passed down from your parents and ancestors. They act as the blueprint for how your body and brain develop and function. There's no one gene that decides if you'll have a mental health condition. Instead, many genes affect the way your

TERMS TO KNOW

RISK FACTOR:

something that increases the chances of developing a condition

NEUROTRANSMITTERS:

chemicals that carry messages throughout your brain

PROTECTIVE FACTOR:

something that decreases the chances of developing a condition and/or balances out an existing risk factor

brain develops, making you more or less likely to develop a mental health condition later.

Biology and brain chemistry

Some brains are wired differently, have too high or too low levels of certain neurotransmitters, or are damaged after a head injury. Abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex, frontal cortex, and other parts of the brain can also increase your chances of developing a mental health condition.

Habits and lifestyle

It's important to take care of your body and mind. Things like not getting enough high-quality sleep, regularly unhealthy food choices, lack of exercise, and poor stress management can all play a role in developing a mental health condition.

For instance, the occasional night of tossing and turning won't hurt you long-term, but chronic exhaustion can. Sleep problems like insomnia, consistently poor sleep quality, and frequent nightmares are related to mental health concerns and conditions, including a higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors.²

Substance use

Using drugs or alcohol can trigger a mental health condition by affecting mood, sleep, relationships, and physical health. It can also lead to changes in some of the same brain areas involved in other mental health conditions like depression and schizophrenia.³ It's common for individuals already struggling with their mental health to turn to substances as a coping mechanism. This substance use can impact the effectiveness of medications and make it harder to recover from a mental health condition. When someone has a mental health condition that overlaps with a substance use disorder, it is either referred to as dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorders.

AM I DESTINED TO HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION?

It is important to know that experiencing any of these factors doesn't mean that you'll definitely develop a mental health condition. You can take steps to reduce your risk factors or increase your protective factors – like building supportive relationships, taking care of your body, and practicing gratitude. Just like any health condition, knowing the risk factors can help you identify and address symptoms early on and plan a course of action to overall health.



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FAST FACTS



CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE TRAUMA ARE APPROXIMATELY 1.3 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION AS ADULTS THAN CHILDREN WHO DON'T EXPERIENCE TRAUMA.⁴



STUDIES HAVE FOUND CHILDREN OF PARENTS WITH GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD) TO BE 2-6 TIMES AS LIKELY AS OTHER CHILDREN TO RECEIVE A GAD DIAGNOSIS.⁵



THE BRAIN CHEMICAL DOPAMINE, SOMETIMES KNOWN AS "THE FEEL-GOOD NEUROTRANSMITTER," IS WHAT ALLOWS YOU TO FEEL PLEASURE AND MOTIVATION. WHEN THE BRAIN'S DOPAMINE SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING AS IT IS MEANT TO, IT HAS BEEN LINKED TO SCHIZOPHRENIA SYMPTOMS.⁶



INDIVIDUALS WHO FREQUENTLY DRINK ALCOHOL ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DEPRESSED THAN THOSE WHO MODERATE THEIR USE.⁷ DRINKING IN MODERATION IS DEFINED AS ONE DRINK OR LESS IN A DAY FOR WOMEN AND TWO DRINKS OR LESS IN A DAY FOR MEN.⁸

SOURCES

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- 7 Holland, K. (2019). Understanding the link between alcohol use and depression. <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/alcohol-and-depression>
- 8 U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (December 2020). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-online-materials>

MAINTAINING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Whether you realize it or not, mental health plays a big role in your overall well-being. When you're mentally healthy, you are able to enjoy your life and the people in it, feel good about yourself, keep up good relationships, and deal with stress. It's normal for your mental health to shift over time – we all face difficult situations in our lives. Creating positive habits is a great way to support your mental health when you're doing well and helps you build skills to use if you do face symptoms of a mental health condition.

FOOD CHOICES AND NUTRITION

The quality of food you eat can impact your overall physical and mental health. Your gut is often called "the second brain" and communicates with your actual brain – physically through the vagus nerve and chemically through hormones and neurotransmitters (chemical messengers that carry signals between cells). The bacteria, viruses, and fungi that live in the gut are called the "gut microbiome" – eating nutritious foods is the number one thing you can do to keep your gut microbiome healthy and protect your brain.

Important nutrients for mental health:¹

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS:

essential to brain health and reduce inflammation and risk of heart disease

B-GROUP VITAMINS:

help to regulate brain chemicals, immune function, and amino acids (the building blocks of proteins)

VITAMIN D:

important for brain function, including mood and critical thinking

Learn more at mhanational.org/food and mhanational.org/gut-brain.

EXERCISE

Staying active benefits many aspects of health and can prevent physical and mental health symptoms from worsening. Making time for exercise and movement each day improves self-esteem, brain function, and sleep and has been found to lessen social withdrawal and stress.

Getting exercise doesn't have to be intimidating!

You don't have to work out for hours on end – just 15 minutes of intense exercise at a time, ten times a week, will get you the recommended amount of physical activity. Just one hour of exercise per week can help prevent symptoms of depression.²

Choose activities that are easy to work into your life – walk the dog for an extra 20 minutes or do some floor exercises while you're watching a movie or your favorite show.

Learn more at mhanational.org/exercise.

SLEEP

Your health heavily depends on how rested you are. Sleep plays a role in your moods, ability to learn and make memories, organ health, immune system, and other bodily functions like appetite, metabolism, and hormone release.³ It also helps the body re-energize its cells and clear out toxins.⁴

Quality of sleep matters, not just how many hours you get.

Good quality sleep means:⁵

 **BEING ASLEEP FOR 85% OF THE TIME YOU'RE IN BED OR MORE.**

 **FALLING ASLEEP IN UNDER 30 MINUTES.**

 **WAKING UP NO MORE THAN ONCE PER NIGHT FOR NO LONGER THAN 20 MINUTES.**

Learn more at mhanational.org/sleep.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Dealing with stress is a normal part of life – we all experience it during times of too much responsibility, too little sleep, or external worries like money or relationships. In most cases, stress comes and goes fairly quickly, and the body can return to its typical state. However, consistently high stress – because you are unable to relieve your stress or are constantly facing stressful situations (chronic stress) – can negatively impact attention, memory, and how you deal with emotions in the long term.

Learn more at mhanational.org/stress.

IDENTIFY COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are activities or strategies you can use to reduce or tolerate tough feelings. No one thing works for everyone, so it might take a few tries to figure out what helps you. Test out a range of techniques so that you're prepared for those times when your well-being starts to slip.

You may want to keep a running list (on your phone or on paper) of what works for you, like calling a friend or doing an at-home workout. This makes it easier to get started when you're in a tough mental state.

If you're starting from scratch, MHA has resources for "Building Your Coping Toolbox."

Learn more at mhanational.org/coping-toolbox and mhanational.org/manage-emotions.

BUILD A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Having people in your life who you relate to and can lean on goes a long way in improving your mood and general well-being. Humans are social beings, and our brains are wired to seek connection. Having people to support you during times of hardship protects your long-term mental health. Not only can a strong social support system often prevent mental health concerns or symptoms from developing into a diagnosable mental health condition – a strong social support system has also been shown to improve overall outcomes in recovering from a mental health condition.

Find your people:

Connect with people over shared hobbies and interests – it's less intimidating to make new friends when you already have something in common.

Consider community service or volunteering. Giving back is a great way to feel less alone – you'll meet new people and likely learn about local events and resources.

Focus on quality relationships – having one person you really trust will serve you better than many surface-level connections.

Learn more at mhanational.org/social-connections.



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RECOGNIZING WHEN YOU NEED HELP WITH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Think about your physical health. We all have days where we feel a bit sore, have a headache, or are extra tired. That doesn't necessarily mean you're sick. You're sick when something suddenly and significantly changes for the worse or prevents you from functioning properly.

Mental health is similar – the occasional bad day is to be expected, but when things that used to be easy become a lot more difficult, something's going on. Instead of focusing on physical symptoms, you'll want to look at your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN?

A mental health concern is anything that causes a person to believe their mental health may be suffering. You don't need to be diagnosed with a mental health condition to be dealing with a mental health concern.

Common signs of mental health concerns:

ISOLATION:

You used to be really outgoing and positive, but lately, you want to spend most of your time home alone.

LOSING INTEREST:

You aren't as interested in things you used to like – food, music, hobbies, friends, work/school.

TROUBLE FOCUSING:

You can't concentrate enough to follow conversations with friends.

SHORT TEMPER:

You're easily irritated and keep lashing out at people you care about.

Many people struggle with not feeling "sick enough" to seek help early on in their mental health journey. The average delay between symptom onset and treatment is 11 years,¹ meaning a lot of people spend months or years facing mental health challenges before getting a diagnosis. It is never too early to seek treatment – if you want help for your mental health, you deserve to get it.

LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF

It's hard to know when your mental health is slipping if you aren't in touch with yourself or paying attention to your usual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors:

Take some time to think about your daily life.

How is your typical mood? Energy level? Appetite? Sleep routine? Social life? Physical health? When one or more of these things changes significantly, it could be a sign of an underlying mental health concern.

Consider tracking your mood and energy to see if you can find any patterns.

For instance, if you don't have a regular sleep schedule, track the hours you spend asleep each night – you might find that waking up earlier makes for happier days than sleeping in.

Think about other factors that might relate to your mental health.

These could be factors like the weather or spending time with certain people. Maybe you'll realize that rainy days often mean your mood will be a bit lower than usual or that conversations with a certain friend have been draining you lately. Sometimes there's nothing you can do to change your circumstances – but being aware of your triggers can help you manage your expectations and get ahead of taking care of yourself.

LEARN ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

You've taken a great first step by learning how to proactively take care of your mental health. But sometimes, mental health conditions sneak up on you. Some people have mental health conditions and don't realize it – if it's something you've always dealt with, it's easy to assume that's just how it is for everyone. Life can be challenging, but every day shouldn't feel hard or out of your control. If it does, learn more about the symptoms of different mental health conditions to see if something aligns with your experiences.



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