

Healthy Habits

May 2007

Tips for reaching and maintaining your optimum state of health

May is Mental Health Month

What should I eat? How can I fit exercise into my busy schedule? Should I take a vacation? Each day, Americans face hundreds of health choices. Established healthy habits—such as eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly—positively influence how a person feels and how their body functions. Unhealthy choices, on the other hand, can make a person susceptible to a wide range of health problems. Far too many Americans fail to incorporate a principal component into their health choices: mental health.

What is Mental Health?

In layman's terms, mental health can be referred to as your "state of mind," "being content with life" or "feeling good about yourself." Simply put, mental health is the ability to cope with daily life and the challenges it brings. Mental health is a continuum, with good mental health and wellness on one end, and severe, untreated mental illness on the other. When a person has "good" mental health, they deal better with what comes their way. By contrast, "poor" mental health—feeling overwhelmed by stress or suffering with an untreated mental illness—can make even day-to-day life difficult.

How Does Mental Health Affect You?

Poor mental health can significantly harm a person's physical health. For instance, research shows that stress is closely linked to high blood pressure, heart disease and obesity. It also shows that people who feel depressed or chronically stressed may have a greater risk of physical illnesses. This is particularly so for parents, women and people of color, who experience higher levels of stress than many other Americans, as revealed in a recent survey from Mental Health America (www.mentalhealthamerica.net). The good news is that there are many healthy choices individuals can adopt to promote and strengthen mental health—and overall health and well-being. As Americans celebrate Mental Health Month this May, Optima Health offers the following tips to help each American manage everyday stress:

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Not sure where to start? Talk to your employer or Human Resources representative about your behavioral health benefits.

- **Set Manageable Goals**—The more control you have over work, the less stressed you'll feel. Be realistic about your workload and deadlines. Make a "to do" list, taking care of important tasks first and eliminating unessential ones.
- **Live a Healthy Lifestyle**—Taking care of your body makes a difference. Limit intake of caffeine and alcohol, get enough rest and exercise, and balance work with play.
- **Spend Time With Others**—Family and friends are important. Reach out to someone you haven't talked to in a while or call on a friend or relative to join you on errands or everyday activities. It will help raise your spirits and engage others in your life.
- **Take a Time Out**—Taking time to unwind can decrease your stress levels and improve your health and relationships. Try meditating, exercising, indulging a hobby or talking with a friend. Whatever you choose to do, remember this: it's your time, so spend it doing something you enjoy.
- **Ask for Help**—Allow friends and family to assist with housework, child care or any activities you find stressful. If you persistently feel overwhelmed, seek help from a mental health professional. The ability to ask for help may be your greatest asset.

To learn more ways to promote wellness and good mental health in your life, visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net and www.sentarabehavioralhealth.com.

Sources:
www.mentalhealthamerica.net Accessed April 2007