



Health & Wellbeing Bulletin

Looking after your Mental Health

It can be difficult to understand mental health conditions, as they are something you feel and often there aren't any physical signs that you can see. It's all too common to think that they won't affect you. However, more people are affected than you might think. About one in six adults has some kind of mental health problem. Mental health issues range from the worries and stresses we all go through as part of everyday life to serious long-term conditions such as depression, bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia.

Unfortunately, not everyone with a mental health condition receives the help and support they need. This may be because they are too afraid to ask for help because of the stigma attached to mental health problems. There is also a lack of understanding about the benefits of treatment for mental health conditions. There have been huge advances in this field over recent years and many illnesses can now be treated effectively.

Although you may be in peak physical condition, it's all too easy to forget about your mental health. Remember, it's just as important as your physical health. Being in good mental health will help you to live life to the full and take any problems in your stride. Follow the tips below to help keep your mind, as well as your body, healthy.

Exercise. Physical activity can boost chemicals in your brain called endorphins, which can make you feel happier. Take up a team sport, go for a swim or jog around your local park.

Sleep well. Not getting enough sleep can leave you feeling irritable and unable to concentrate or make decisions. Try to go to bed at the same time every night and keep your bedroom dark, cool and quiet.

Chill out. Take some time out for yourself every day to relax. You could try yoga, or a massage, or perhaps just a long hot bubble bath might do the trick.

Socialise. Spend time with your friends and people you love. If your friends or relatives don't live nearby, join a club or simply pop over and say hello to your neighbours.

Accept yourself. Be proud of who you are and of what you have achieved. Try to think of positive things about yourself rather than putting yourself down.

Do things that you love. Whether it's curling up with a good book, catching up with an old friend or a kick-around in the park, make time to do the things you enjoy.

Talk. A problem shared is often a problem halved – talk through your worries with someone you trust and you may be surprised at how much better you feel. If you find it difficult to talk to someone you know, you could see a professional counsellor.

Ask for help. Most importantly, if you think you may have a mental health condition, see your GP. This is the first step towards getting the treatment and care you need.

Seasonal Blues

It is common to feel slightly down and less energetic as winter approaches. Many people experience changes in their sleep patterns, energy levels and mood in the autumn and winter. However, for about one in fifty people this develops into a depressive disorder called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). This is most common between the ages of 20-30 and more

women are affected than men. Mild forms of SAD are often referred to as “winter blues” but some people experience a more severe form of the condition and cannot function in winter without treatment.

Symptoms of seasonal affective disorder

The symptoms of SAD can vary from person to person, and are similar to those that develop in other types of depression. For most sufferers of SAD, symptoms get worse in the autumn and winter when the days are shorter, and clear up again in spring and summer. The most common symptoms include:

- a low mood for most of the day
- lethargy
- a greater need for sleep and sleeping more than usual
- eating more than usual, especially craving carbohydrates
- weight gain
- irritability
- mood swings
- excessive energy in spring and summer – although this is less common than autumn and winter symptoms

What causes seasonal affective disorder?

- Although the exact cause isn't fully understood at present, SAD is thought to be related to changes in the amount of daylight during the autumn and winter. The amount of sunlight affects the levels of certain chemicals and hormones in the brain.

Treatment

A GP is a good first point of contact. He or she will ask about your day-to-day life and symptoms. One

of the “winter blues” doesn't automatically mean you have SAD. But, if you have regular symptoms over at least two consecutive years in autumn/winter which clear in the spring, the diagnosis may be SAD. Your doctor may also want to rule out other forms of depression.

There are a number of steps you can take to lessen the effects of SAD. Wherever possible, you should:

- live and work in light, bright environments
- try to find time each day to walk, run or take a bike ride outside in the daylight hours, especially if it's sunny
- sit near windows when inside
- where possible continue activities that you enjoy in the summer
- take regular, moderate exercise
- eat a healthy balanced diet
- take up a new winter activity that you can then look forward to

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October is world Mental Health Awareness month and aims to raise awareness of what is often seen as a taboo subject.