

Minding the Body:
Integrating physical and mental wellness
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Psychotherapy is a powerful tool for changing patterns in emotion, behavior and relationships. However, it is just one of the levers that we can pull when trying to cultivate mental health. I focus on the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of experience in my work as a therapist, but I hope to support my clients in reaching their broader goals for health. I encourage everyone to consider meaningful changes in their **nutrition, exercise and sleep**, as well as engaging in some form of mindfulness practice.

I hesitate to give these kinds of recommendations due to worry that some people could feel judged or pressured by a list of 'shoulds.' However, I want to provide a gentle reminder that our focus on mental well being too often ignores the important connections between the mind and the body.

Nutrition

There is growing evidence that a diet high in refined carbohydrates and animal fats, but low in fruits, vegetables and healthy proteins and fats is associated with anxiety and depression.^{1 2} Although the exact causal mechanisms are not clear, it appears that unhealthy foods fuel inflammation, distressing our neurological system in similar ways to the cardiovascular system.

There are lots of approaches to eating healthier, and I encourage my clients to use whatever is sustainable for them in the long run (fad diets or over-restricting are harmful). The benefits of the Mediterranean diet as well as other anti-inflammatory diets are supported by research and common sense. Significant reductions (or elimination) of added sugar, regardless of the plan, will likely decrease inflammation, improve metabolic function and allow for more sustained energy and focus.

- Consider a version of the Mediterranean or anti-inflammatory diets³
- If you want to keep it very simple, follow the food writer Michael Pollan's advice: "**Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.**" ("food" here means, non-processed foods, typically with 5 or fewer natural ingredients).
- Some of my clients have achieved healthy weight loss and improved energy with intermittent fasting or time restricted eating (eating only in an 8, 6 hour or less window each day). (This is not recommended for people with a history of eating disorders).

¹ <https://nutrition.org/inflammation-what-is-it-and-how-can-my-diet-and-behavior-affect-it/>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165178117301981>

³<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/mediterranean-diet/art-20047801>;

https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout_ai_diet_patient.pdf

- Reduce or eliminate alcohol: alcohol is a depressant, interferes with the quality of sleep and adds calories without nutritional benefit.
- Consider increasing omega 3 fatty acid intake through foods rich in these nutrients or through supplements.⁴

Exercise

There is lots of evidence that exercise improves mood⁵ and reduces anxiety.⁶ Exercise supports mental health in a number of ways: improving cardiovascular and neurological functioning, regulating hormone levels, improving sleep, and improving immune response. It also helps one feel active and effective, while interrupting worry and rumination. Mental health professionals (therapists and prescribers) too often ignore the importance of exercise for mental health.⁷

- Any increase in exercise is likely to help: start with 20 minutes of walking if you are doing nothing.
- Both **strength training** and **cardiovascular exercise** are beneficial: if you do only one, add the other. There is a clearer benefit from “cardio”, such as walking, running, swimming, biking, so if you do only one, start there.
- Structure and accountability are important for most people; don’t assume will power alone will motivate you: work out with a friend, take a class, find a coach, use online apps (e.g., Strava) to track progress and hold yourself accountable.
- Try high intensity interval training (HIIT) to maximize health benefit in the least amount of time. For example, try shorter bursts of intense exercise 20 seconds all out sprinting on a bike or running with 1-2 minutes of easy movement in between for 3-8 repetitions.
- Combine exercise with mindfulness practice (see below) through yoga, walking, hiking, or other activities

⁴ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/omega-3-fatty-acids-for-mood-disorders-2018080314414>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3674785/#!po=26.4706> ;

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5430071/>;

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/exercise-can-help-treat-mood-disorders-here-s-why-and-how-to-get-started/2018/06/20/c8e6de32-7404-11e8-805c-4b67019fcfe4_story.html;

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression-and-exercise/art-20046495>

⁶ <https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-018-3313-5>:

<https://slate.com/technology/2018/03/exercise-is-as-effective-as-antidepressants-for-many-cases-of-depression.html>:

⁷ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/12/exercise>

Sleep

Sleep regulates cortisol (the stress hormone) and metabolism, and it is closely related to inflammation and immune function.⁸ Even relatively minor limitations and disruptions in sleep can significantly impact physical and mental health. Sleep interacts with stress and depression to create vicious cycles in which each negatively impacts the other.⁹ Sleeping longer and sleeping better can help diminish stress, improve mood and increase activation during the day.

To improve sleep:

- Reduce or eliminate alcohol, caffeine, or other psychoactive substances (alcohol may seem to relax you but has been shown to disrupt sleep quality for most people).
- Reduce bedroom temperature during the night (60-70 degrees F).
- Reduce light interference.
- Reduce time on screens (especially in the time before bed).
- Try a white noise machine
- Decrease time or activity in bed not related to sleep/sex
- If you can't sleep for more than a half hour, get up and engage in a quiet activity out of bed.
- Avoid daytime sleep (if your nighttime sleep is poor or interrupted).
- Try listening to progressive relaxation or meditation guides while falling asleep.
- If you have trouble with snoring, ask your MD about getting a sleep study.

For more information and recommendations on sleep, see Univ. of Wisconsin's Integrative Medicine handout on sleep:

https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout_sleep.pdf

Mindfulness and Attention

There is also strong evidence that mindfulness practices improve mood, anxiety and contribute to overall health. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, who introduced meditation to healthcare contexts, mindfulness is: "The awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally."¹⁰ It can take many forms, but all of them involve re-directing the mind from patterns of rumination, worry, and analytical thought, to focus on what is happening in the present moment.

Formal meditation, where one sits and focuses attention on the breath, is one of the most common forms of mindfulness. However, other practices such as yoga, deep breathing

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4688585/>

⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41577-019-0190-z>

¹⁰ <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-mindfulness/>

exercises, prayer, and progressive relaxation can also cultivate mindfulness. These practices serve to concentrate and calm the mind, reducing the scattered attention of “monkey mind.” Anxiety and depression tend to fuel distraction, rumination and worry, and so mindfulness can be a powerful antidote. This is especially important when digital media consume our attention in increasingly powerful ways.

- **Try taking slower, deeper breaths from your belly for 2-10 minutes per day**, or find more breathing exercises to try.¹¹
- **Try meditation for 10 minutes a day**; use a guided meditation to get started (there are lots of examples online and in apps).¹²
- Take a yoga class (which usually includes a mindfulness component)
- Limit interaction with digital media, especially social media to create more attention for work, relationships, and mindfulness.¹³
- Spend more time in nature (walking, gardening, exercising), which seems to help many people focus on the present moment and let go of worries.
- Read (or listen to) spiritual, religious or philosophical texts that provide meaning or perspective beyond daily routines and stressors
- Practice accepting things that you cannot control through meditation, prayer, reflection. Most worry and rumination involves aspects of our lives that we want to control but cannot.

I would imagine that a lot of the information above is familiar. Rather than taking up an old struggle with diet, exercise or sleep to force change, it is better to start with something you haven't tried before and to begin with subtle shifts in your daily life that feel sustainable. In my experience, a curious and experimental attitude to what works results in the most meaningful change.

¹¹More breathing exercises: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=uz2255>

¹² Most apps have limited free content with options to pay for more: <https://insighttimer.com/>; <https://www.stopbreathethink.com/>; <https://www.calm.com/>.

¹³For more information <https://humanetech.com/resources/take-control/>