

Lifestyle and Mental Health

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Two of the most essential definitions of 'Mental Health' describe it as a good relationship with yourself, good relationship with the others and creativity. The next one describes 'Mental Health as the ability to love, the ability to be loved and the ability to feel that you are worthy' [1]. Similarly, according to Sigmund Freud, "Mental health and full maturity, are characterized by a person's ability to love and to work".

The question is how can one reach this state of 'Mental Health'? What are the factors facilitating this process? And which are some practical ways of everyday life-style that are beneficial to Mental Health?

Lifestyle Factors facilitating Mental Health

Literature refers to several such factors, as vivid light and fresh air; time in nature; avoiding negative thinking; regular, quiet sleep; daily, spiritual exercises; systematic, physical exercise; deep breathing exercises; the positive effect of classical music; health nutrition and diet; healthy relationships; recreation; relaxation and stress management; religious or spiritual involvement; service to others, unconditional love, etc. [2].

Some of the most important lifestyle factors, are further elaborated and presented below

Natural sunlight and clean air

Vivid sunlight increases the production of serotonin in the brain, which fights depression and fatigue. Decreased sun exposure has been associated with a drop in serotonin levels, which can lead to depression, especially some seasons of the year. Also, insufficient exposure to daylight may affect the production of melatonin which helps sleep. In contrast, exposure to artificial light sometime after midnight, hinders melatonin production. Finally, the clean air of the country has negative ions that have been proved to help combat depression, but also prevent it. It has also been shown that air pollution reduces hedonic happiness and increases the rate of de-

pressive symptoms, adding to the association between air quality and happiness/mental health [3].

Systematic physical exercise

It has been found that systematic exercise, in addition to beneficial effects on our health, can soothe the feeling of deep melancholy and depression as effectively as antidepressant drugs (Heath and Wilkerson, 2018). Such exercise can be aerobics, such as walking, jogging, swimming, cycling and it is recommended for at least 3 times per week for 30 minutes each time. Another study has shown that vigorous physical activity was a protective factor for depressive symptoms, while insufficient physical activity was associated with various psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety symptoms and school -dissatisfaction, among adolescents [4,5].

Exercises of deep breathing

Most people do not realize that deep breaths can have spectacular effects on our mental and spiritual health. It is very helpful for example, to breathe deeply 6 times per minute, taking a breath every 10 seconds (Dr Bernard). With deep breaths we increase the oxygen levels in the blood, and we improve our mood, as well as our health (e.g. heart disease resistance). Moreover, holistic therapies use this knowledge in their efforts to balance and harmonize the breath, the body and the mind [6].

Hydrotherapy

For more than 100 years, mental illnesses were treated with hot baths, using natural hot springs, and so on. Also, different types of hydrotherapy were used daily in psychiatric clinics in Europe and in the USA. A hot bath, just before sleep, was found to help not only the improvement of sleep quality, but also reduces tension, anxiety, aggression, confusion and depression [7]. It has also been found that hydrotherapy improves total sleep time and quality of life [8]. Some characteristically say "a hot shower or bath is the best way to get yourself feeling sleepy before bed".

Regular and calm sleep

It has been found that women are about 30% more likely to suffer from insomnia than men and that sleep problems increase as people grow up. According to Dr Peter Hauri and his associates at the Mayo sleep disorder center, good physical fitness facilitates a smooth sleep. People who exercise are easier to sleep, they wake up fewer times during the night and their sleep is more effective than the non-exercising people. Exercise must be done late in the afternoon or early in the evening, but not just before rest because sleep will be blocked. Also, irregular sleeping and waking up hours can cause insomnia to some people.

Healing effect of classical music

Music therapy has been found to improve mood and reduce stress and fatigue. The benefits of music to mental health are well known thousands of years ago (King Saul-David). Not all types of music are beneficial. Classical music is the only kind of music that has been found to improve psychological and mental health. Classical music was found to be the most beneficial even for those who do not know it or don't prefer it [9].

Caring for a Pet

A basic need of people is to feel that someone is in need of them. Pets feel affectionate to people and depend on them. Though the effects of pets on people have produced conflicting results [10] many people saw an improvement in their mood by taking a pet. Even greater benefit is seen in people who are very attached to their pets and have a few trusted friends. In general, a pet can be a great source of comfort, companionship and motivation for their owners, and can help us to live mentally healthier lives. In particular dogs and cats contribute to emotional and social well-being, offer ongoing comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness during adversity or stressful situations [11].

Avoiding negative thoughts

Researchers of the University of Ohio in Columbia found that pessimism was related to stress and to anxiety, as well as the weakening of physical health [12]. Negative thinking can cause depression and anxiety, prolong stressors, chronically stressed states of mind that can affect both the physical and the mental health. On the contrary, positive attitude and thought helps to improve our health and quality of life. Notably, a religious writer wrote: It is our duty to resist melancholy, unpleasant thoughts and feelings, as it is our duty to pray".

Thinking positively

Being positive means worrying less and enjoying more, choosing to see the good aspect of things instead of forcing your mind with gloom and sadness. It means choosing to be happy rather than unhappy. Positive thinking has been found to help in psychological disorders, especially in recovery and relapse in depression and some therapeutic approaches focus on increasing positive thinking and well-being [13]. One of people's primary task is to make sure they feel good in themselves; to take care of themselves and to try to be happy. If you think that the above suggestion is selfish, then look it from another point of view: if you are not happy yourself, you can't make others happy, help them, or succeed in whatever you undertake. How happy are you then? As a proverb says: "You should have oneself, in order to offer it to others". By thinking positively, it's like putting binoculars, when something positive happens in order to see it bigger and keep the binoculars upside down in order to see it smaller, if something negative happens. Besides, optimism is a factor that prevents depression and brings out life satisfaction [14].

How much are we really in danger, then? According to some estimations, more than 90% of what creates us anxiety and worries, never happens. This means that our worries are only 10% likely to be proven right. Finally, is it more realistic to be positive than being negative? Surveys have shown that 75-80% of our thoughts are negative and only 20% of our thoughts are positive [15]. We all know, for example, how a thought (not a fact), changes how we feel, and what we do.

The link between our thoughts, our emotions or feelings, and our behaviors was highlighted by an American psychiatrist Dr Aaron T. Beck. in his clinical practice, (i.e. with individuals with depression, as he noticed that negative thinking was a core aspect of depression).

Diagrammatically we can show this interrelation between thoughts, emotions and behavior in the following figure.

The crucial question is: Can we control our thinking? Although we seem to partly only maintain control over our mental functions and the mind's freewheeling friskiness is only partly under our control [16], it seems that with practice and with exercise we can to some extent -replace negative thoughts into more positive and functional (as in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy).

Figure 1

Training our thinking

Focusing our thoughts on enjoying all the wonderful joys of life and the replacement of worry with different forms of positive thoughts, not only brings us up but also is therapeutic. Examples of such training programs showed increases in overall wellbeing and mental health and decreases in symptoms of depression, anxiety and worry [17,18]. As soon as we realize a conscious negative thought that detracts us, we should replace it with a positive one. That's why it's good to plan some positive thoughts before, so there is no delay in replacing thoughts. The human brain is trainable and positive thinking can become a habit. And let's not forget: "The world is full of people who have gone through the worst life can give and yet they have come out winners"!

Social life

Over the past 30 years studies have shown that social relationships and social support improve physical and psychological well-being, both directly and as stress buffers. More specifically, seven possible mechanisms [i.e. social influence/social comparison, social control, role-based purpose and meaning (mattering), self-esteem, sense of control, belonging and companionship, and perceived support availability] are found to be related to physical and mental health [19]. It is essential for the individual to maintain as much as possible social contacts and his/her key interests and activities, so as to avoid self-marginalization. People prefer relaxed, happy people, and this apparent by the way others will face us. Whatever we send to others returns to us as a boomerang. It is only a matter of time before you reap what you sow. It applies in all aspects of our life, both private and professional. Be really interested in others, be open hearted and friendly. A wise person once said:

"The person who is interested, is interesting". Social support is a key for mental health and an amazing social coping resource; it consists of emotional, informational, or practical assistance with stressors from significant others, such as family or friends [20]. Studies, also, seem to confirm the 'buffer hypothesis', that social support protects against the development of mental disorders (especially depression) when the individual (mainly 'externals' than 'internals') is exposed to stressors, like negative life events [21].

Join groups

A study by the University of Michigan has also shown that joining groups, the sense of belonging somewhere and the establishment of close relationships-not necessarily the intense social life and the existence of many known-helps mental health and the fight against depression. Such groups can be the integration into community or church activities that are relevant to our interests. It has been also found that even online support groups do foster well-being, a sense of control, self-confidence, feelings of more independence, social interactions, and improved feelings - all highly important psychological factors- that foster personal empowerment and help handling specific conditions of distress [12].

Daily spiritual exercises

According to several studies, an internal religious and spiritual experience helps mental health, fights depression and helps in faster recovery from illnesses [22]. Spirituality brings a sense of meaning to a chaotic world and helps people coping better with stress, having gratitude for life's enjoyable events and to more gracefully process challenging ones; it also helps one feeling supported by a higher power and identify with life as purposeful, rather than random and meaningless.

Spirituality reassures an order to things, and generally encourages optimism and the pursuit of a joyful life. It helps people to identify their values and appreciate the same values in others. Spiritual people are more altruistic, compassionate, and forgiving of others, because they identify with what connects—rather than what separates—them. Many spiritual traditions encourage belonging to a community, which promote relationships—one of the highest indicators of a happy life. In fact, positive psychology studies show that spiritual people have more positive relationships in general with their spouses, children, and friends [23].

Moreover, the deeper spirituality/religiosity and the level of internal health have been found to help in the most direct improvement of health. For example, studies have shown that religious faith does not only help to deal with depression but also prevents it [24].

Such spiritual exercises include prayer, study, spiritual thought and concentration [25].

It seems there is a valid basis in the suggestion: 'Feeling Good by Doing Good'. And as someone characteristically said (in Figure 2).

(<https://drrogerwalsh.com/>)

Figure 2

Love, offer and touch

People say that "a calm consciousness is the best pillow". To do the right thing, to care for others and to help them, without revolving around themselves, can reduce the intensity of their own problems. In addition, scientific discovery shows that the touch has consequences on our lives and on our health. At the UCLA Medical Center (Los Angeles), Dr Bressler writes instead of prescriptions "four hugs daily". The touch removes depression, allows the body's immune system to activate and fills our emotional vessel. Others emphasize the pain-relieving effects of love and Orbuch adds the ability of positive touch to reduce stress and release positive hormones and Boynes-Shuck suggests that "If nothing else, loving others and being loved helps on a mental, emotional and spiritual level when living with illness" [26]. Psychiatrist Peter Breggin [27] suggests rather than dangerous drugs and treatments, people to be patiently listened to, understood, helped and be loved. And some also add that "Love is the best psychiatric drug".

Happiness and mental health

Happiness is a choice, it is not given to us: It is up to us to see a glass up to the middle, half-empty or half-full. And according to the well-known proverb by Kipling: "Better to look at the stars above, then to the mud down". In order to maintain both good mental health and happiness we need to meet our basic needs for safety, love, power, fun and freedom responsibly and respectfully every day [28]. Actually, mental health and happiness seem to be interrelated concepts as it has been also found that eliminating mental

health issues such as depression and anxiety would increase happiness [28,29].

Love for god and for our fellow-humans

A spiritual man, father St. Dorotheus of Gaza once said, we are as points along the perimeter of a circle and God is at the very center. As we draw closer to Him, we draw closer to one another, and as we come closer to one another, so we approach God. We can present this relationship diagrammatically in the following figure 3.

Figure 3

Christian Religious tradition focuses on the two Great Commandments: Loving the Lord and Our Fellow Men. Within this tradition, people find, first of all, social support and sense of identity provided by belonging to a group (e.g. church) within a "fellowship of kindred spirits," who share one another's burdens, reach out to those in need, and offer friendship and companionship, friends and acquaintances on whom they can and do rely. Second, a person's relationship with God can clearly be a source of comfort in troubled times, as well as a foundation for self-esteem, feeling unconditionally valued, loved, and cared for – feelings that offer a sense of security, peace and calm. Third, a sense that God has a purpose in everything helps religious people find meaning in ordinary life events, as well as in traumatic ones (e.g. a health crisis or a death in the family – especially one that is unexpected or premature). Religion and faith can help people understand that the event is part of a broader divine plan or that it offers an opportunity for spiritual growth or the feeling that they have the ability to handle things. The sense of meaning that people derive from their religion can provide hope, a satisfying explanation via a broader, benign purpose, and, of course, solace. Last but not least, religion and spirituality undoubtedly help people find meaning in life. Most

people need to feel that they matter, that their suffering and hard work aren't futile, and that their lives have a purpose. They need to feel a sense of control over their fates (e.g. being able to justify and defend their actions – why they should forgive, what they have to be grateful for, why they should turn the other cheek, and so on). They need a reason to focus beyond just themselves. For all the reasons described above, a loving relationship with God and fellow-humans seem to offer a social and emotional support from other members, an affirmation of their identities, values, and lifestyle; a reinforcement of their meaning in life; a comfort in the face of hard times; a distraction from stresses and hassles; a compassion for those less fortunate; an inspiration, awe, and hope; a sense of control and strength to cope with challenges and much more, contributing to a person's satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and therefore to the promotion of their mental health [30-38].

And at the top of the pyramid, it might not be an exaggeration to end with a final note emphasizing the importance of a loving relationship - a proverb saying: "Happiness is to know that a life, -just a single one- breathes better because you existed, or you exist".

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