

Common SENSE for Adult Mental Health Julie K. Hersh

Mental illness, like many diseases, is a prime example of “what comes first?” Do genetics cause mental illness or does the environment breed it? The answer is both. How we react to our environment determines our mental health, oftentimes more than the environment itself. We’ve all seen one person devastated by failure or disappointment, while another person uses that same situation as motivation. As Charles Darwin said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is that one that is the most adaptable to change.” Mental health can be regained and maintained by using Common SENSE.

Common SENSE

Sleep—Sleep helps ensure mental health. Many adults skimp or have excessive sleep, setting off illness. Know your normal level of sleep and protect it.

Exercise—Studies show that even a small amount of exercise (150 minutes per week) can reduce or sometimes eliminate depression.

Nutrition—Making healthy choices, taking the proper medication, drinking enough water and getting appropriate sunlight all contribute to a healthier mind.

Stress Management—Alone time, meditation, journaling and setting realistic expectations for yourself are great ways to manage the stress.

External Support—Talk it out. Laughter heals. Close friends, family and/or a therapist can help put life in perspective and make hardships easier.

1. **Sleep** Most depressed people report problems with sleep. Depression, insomnia and anxiety combined are danger signals that, unchecked, can be precursors to suicidal behavior. I need about 7 hours of sleep a night. If I find myself sleeping less, closer to 5 or less a night, this is usually an indication that stress is interfering with my sleep. I cut back on caffeine and don’t read electronics close to bedtime. If this does not work, I consult with my psychiatrist and use medication to ensure sleep.
2. **Exercise** Due to an injury, in all three of my depressive episodes I was unable to run. Now, I find an alternate exercise if injured. 150 minutes of brisk walking per week can reduce—and sometimes eliminate—depression according to research done by Dr. Madhukar Trivedi of UT Southwestern. For more information on exercise and brain function read [Spark](#) by John Ratey.
3. **Nutrition**
 - a. **Food:** Inflammation is often cited as contributor to depression. For certain people, certain types of food may cause inflammation. Be wary of gluten (wheat) and sugar. The [Mediterranean Diet](#) and common sense moderation stands the test of time. My biggest indicator of a depressive episode is rapid, unintentional weight loss. A rapid weight loss or gain can be a symptom of depression.
 - b. **Medication:** Many people stop their medication as soon as their brains stabilize, only to see their depression reemerge. Medication (combined with the other actions on this list) can create a preventative buffer against a deadly level of depression. The right medication at the right time helped me in certain parts of my life. My recovery was also hindered by the wrong medication at other times. Unfortunately, today adequate tools to determine the correct type of medication don’t exist. Today, I don’t use medication. In the future, medication may be necessary manage my mental health.
 - c. **Liquid:** Not everyone needs medication for mental health, but everyone needs to understand the impact of alcohol and drugs on brain function. Alcohol is a depressant and impacts the brain hormone

dopamine. Dopamine controls our ability to experience pleasure. When drinking, alcohol increases dopamine, hence the reason we feel good after a few drinks. Once drinking stops, dopamine levels drop at an escalated rate, leaving a person in a dopamine-deprived state. If you tend to be depressed, alcohol or illegal drugs only compound the impact of depression.

- d. **Light:** Seasonal Affect Disorder - SAD (caused by lack of sunlight and a Vitamin D deficiency) played a part in my depression. Three of my depressive episodes began in January and peaked in the spring. I try to get 15 minutes of unprotected sunlight every day. SAD lamps and visors can be purchased for gray environments. Supplements can help with Vitamin D, but make sure to check with your physician to make sure you have a deficiency. Excess vitamins can sometimes lead to other unanticipated problems.

4. **Stress Management**

- a. **Alone time.** Call this prayer, journaling, meditation, or chill time. Spend some time by yourself, offline, where you breathe and acknowledge that you are part of a world that extends beyond your own body and needs.
- b. **Positive focus.** *Gratitude list:* Every day list 5 specific positive things that have happened in the past 24 hours. Research indicates that listing specific things (e.g. hearing a favorite song) vs general things (e.g., I have a good friend) have more impact. Rick Hansen's Buddha's Brain explains this concept of brain retraining to overcome negative thinking. *Get Happy Playlist:* Find music that brings you up, create a playlist. Use this list when you are feeling down, scared or angry. *Get Happy Album:* Create an album on your phone of people who reinforce you and/or have photos of scenes from nature or art that relax you and reinforce a positive mood.
- c. **Feed your brain.** A happy brain is a more productive brain. I try to have a day a month where I feed my brain with something I love that is not related to work. I love theater, art, and museums. I dismissed these things as unessential in the past. Today, I see them as critical for my thinking and creativity.
- d. **Love yourself.** High achievers tend to feel like a failure unless they are constantly productive. That's just not realistic. Often the moments that seem the worst in our lives become the turning point to a better path we never imagined. Unfortunately, we often only see the path in retrospect. In the gray period of uncertainty, try to remember that you have value just in being. Surround yourself with people who help you laugh at yourself and life's trials.

5. **External Support**

- a. **Friends and Family as a Barometer for Health.** My family and friends are often the best people to help keep me honest with regard to my mental health. If they see me not sleeping, committing to too many tasks (more than usual) or withdrawing from social settings, they tell me. Remember, depression is a brain disease. Trying to solve depression with the very organ in your body that is broken is a difficult task.
- b. **Avoid the Age Escalation Trap.** Often, at least in the US, people of the same age group tend to socialize and work together, magnifying the problems of that age group. A simple question such as "Where will my child go to college?" or "How can I find a job?" becomes amped with anxiety, fueled by other people agonizing over the same thing. Someone out of the same age group - 10 years or more - older (or younger) can act as a sounding board to keep problems in perspective. An older person often has the insight from weathering the same experiences we face. One of my most valued friends today is a man in his 90s who helps me keep my nearly 60-year-old worries in check. He helps me maintain my sense of humor and perspective.
- c. **Plan Proactively for a Health Crisis and Know the Signs of Depression.** These days I proactively call my psychologist when I am about to approach a major transition point in my life. I know my warning signs of depression (insomnia, lack of appetite, isolation) and together we are watchful during the transition period. If you need help regarding depression, in North Texas the Grant Halliburton Navigation Line can help: 972-525-8181 Monday-Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Nationally, this is a 24-hour number for support if someone is experiencing suicidal thoughts: 1-800-273-TALK.

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