



Top Ten for Brain Protection for Adults

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? I always answer “both” to this question. 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 for future success. 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.”

This list works for me, created from experience and research I’ve done. Use this list as inspiration for your own list. The first three items are brain/body basics; things that impact most brains, of which many people are unaware. Items 4-7 are stress management techniques and finally 8- 10 are social support (which also reduces stress). The key is to make your own list. Realize your list will change as you change. Don’t worry if you don’t follow your list perfectly every day. Use the list as a reminder to return to the habits that preserve your health.

Brain/Body Basics:

1. **Sleep. Get the Right Amount.** 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.** I define nutrition as all things taken into the body: food, medication, liquid and light.
 - a. **Food:** I try to eat a balanced diet with lots of green leafy vegetables and fruits and lean protein. 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:** I take an antidepressant on a daily basis. Many people stop their medication as soon as their brains stabilize, only to see their depression reemerge. I did this in 2005. I relapsed and learned the hard way that a small bit of prevention ensures health. Medication (combined with the other actions on this list) creates a preventative buffer against a potentially deadly level of depression.
 - 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 have a tendency to be depressed, alcohol or illegal drugs only compounds 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 actually have a deficiency. Excess vitamins can sometimes lead to other unanticipated problems.

Stress Management Techniques

4. **Meditation.** I meditate on a daily basis, about 8-20 minutes using the Insight Timer app. For me, meditation is a combination of meditation/prayer, although meditation has a different quality. Prayer is about asking, meditation is about listening and acceptance. While my prayer life has been sporadic and crisis-driven throughout my life, meditation has allowed for a deepening and consistency in both practices. Meditation often surfaces ideas and sources of comfort that I had not been able to obtain in the other areas of my action-packed life. Research shows consistency is most important in meditation and as little as 8 minutes a day can show improvements in one's mood and attitude.
5. **Gratitude List:** Every day I try to list 5 specific positive things that have happened in the past 24 hours. This practice trains my brain to focus on the positive. Research indicates that listing specific things (e.g. the blossoms on the Bradford Pear outside my front door) vs general things (e.g. I have a good husband) have more impact. Rick Hansen's [Buddha's Brain](#) provides great information on this concept of conscious of brain retraining to overcome negative thinking.
6. **Brain Engagement.** 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.
7. **Remember that Your Value Is More than What You Do.** High achievers have a tendency to feel like a failure unless they are constantly productive. That's just not realistic. Oftentimes, the moments we believe to be 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. This is perhaps the hardest point for me to remember, but when I do, I laugh a lot more. This lesson humbles us, yet frees us to pursue our passions in the same instant.

Social Support

8. **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.
9. **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 58 year-old worries in check. He helps me maintain my sense of humor and perspective.
10. **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 are unsure what might be a sign of depression, check out this list from the Grant Halliburton Foundation: <http://www.granthalliburton.org/knowthesigns.html>. Here is a 24-hour number for support: 1-800-873-TALK.

Most of my life I have not been depressed. I use this list to keep my depression in check, so I can maximize the positive moments in my life. For more information about me, Julie K Hersh, check out my website:

www.struckbyliving.com.