

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 College SENSE.

College SENSE

Sleep—Sleep helps ensure mental health. Many college students 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

During sleep, the more abstract, primitive portion of the brain is more highly engaged than when awake. Without sleep, a person may be tossing aside a natural power tool for solving emotional and complex problems. Ironically, an all-nighter to cram for a test makes the brain less flexible to handle that unique twist in an exam that most college professors use to assess knowledge. 90% of people with Major Depressive Disorder report sleep issues. Chronic insomnia is common among those who have attempted suicide. In *A Lifelong Journey*, Sarah Russell identified habits of people who had successfully managed bipolar disease for over three years. First on the list for healthy behavior: sleep. [Click here for CDC Hints for better sleep.](#)

2. Exercise

Studies show that even a small amount of exercise (150 minutes per week) can reduce or sometimes eliminate depression. Exercise also increases the effectiveness of antidepressants and those who maintain an exercise program relapse at half the rate of those who do not exercise. *Spark*, by John Ratey, provides more information on exercise and brain function.

3. Nutrition

a. **Food:** Try to eat a balanced diet with lots of green leafy vegetables, fruits and lean protein. Rapid weight loss or gain can be a symptom of depression. Be wary of sugar and foods with low nutritional value. Inflammation has been correlated with depression; for some people gluten (products with wheat) causes inflammation. Look at your diet as a key to unlocking your mental health.

- 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:** Are you hydrated? Look at your urine on a daily basis – it should be clear or straw in color. If it's not, drink more water. Note that caffeine and alcohol dehydrate.
- d. **Light:** Seasonal Affect Disorder - SAD (caused by lack of sunlight and a Vitamin D) sometimes causes depression. 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 check with your physician to make sure you actually 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. Take courses that excite you. Some courses are difficult and necessary for a specific degree, but try to balance those courses with ones that inspire. My GPA bounced from 2.2 back to Dean's List with a few elective courses. Electives in areas that ignited my interest (e.g., Poetry Writing, Mysticism). The courses that excited my brain unlocked my overall brain function.
- d. **Love yourself.** Remember your value is more than what you do. High achieving students don't typically plan for failure. Some of us compound failure by extending the reach of an incident often 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, remember that you have value in being.

5. **External Support**

- a. **Optimize inclusive, positive friendships.** In college, I always had a boyfriend. A boyfriend provided security and protection, until the relationship ended. I adopted my boyfriend's friends. When we broke up, I lost my social network. If I had a do-over, I would spend more time on platonic friendships, especially with people who make me laugh.
- b. **Get a mentor.** Someone 10 years older (or more) can act as a sounding board when problems are small and easily solved. In college, everyone is about the same age, causing the problems of that age group to escalate out of proportion. An older person could have helped me maintain a sense of humor about the problems I faced.
- c. **Plan proactively.** Know the signs of depression. Store the number for the student counseling center in your phone. Drop by the counseling center when you are well, just so you know where it is. If you wait until you are depressed to find out where you can get help, oftentimes you won't have the energy to find help. Know the signs of depression so you can recognize them in yourself or others. Here is a 24-hour number for support: 1-800-873-TALK.