

Look after your mental health



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Our mental health is just as important as our physical health. It affects how we think, feel and behave. It also affects how we manage stress, our relationships and our ability to make decisions.

Like physical health, our mental health changes over time. It may change because of situations we're in, things we're doing and things beyond our control, including other people, our physical health, our finances and even the weather.

Looking after our mental health and being aware of signs of any problems with it is important.

Common mental health problems

Common mental health problems such as anxiety, stress or low mood and depression can affect anyone. While these feelings can be a natural response to life's challenges, they can become more serious if you don't do something to help improve your mental health. It's important to know the signs of poor mental health, what you can do to improve it and how to get help if you need it.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, fear or worry, especially around things which are about to happen or we believe may happen in the future. Feeling anxious at times is a normal response to certain situations, such as exams or job interviews.

Signs of anxiety

Anxiety can cause physical and behaviour changes, which can result in symptoms such as:

- nausea (feeling sick);
- strong, fast or irregular heartbeat;

- headaches and muscle tension;
- feeling dizzy or lightheaded;
- irritability;
- difficulty sleeping and/or tiredness;
- feeling restless or having difficulty concentrating;
- feeling like your mind is really busy with thoughts;
- feeling constantly unsettled or having a sense of dread;
- dwelling on negative experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again.

Some people find it hard to control their anxiety and this can affect their daily life.

Stress

Stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure. Many things in life can cause stress, including work, relationships, money issues and much more.

Signs of stress

Stress causes an increase in hormones in your body, which can help deal with pressures or threats. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response. Once the pressure or threat has passed, stress hormones will usually return to normal.

If you're constantly under stress, these hormones will stay in your body, which can lead to symptoms such as:

- tiredness;
- headaches and/or muscle tension;
- feeling irritable or short tempered;
- sleeping problems;
- loss of appetite;
- difficulty concentrating and/or racing thoughts;
- feeling anxious, nervous or afraid;
- low self-esteem;



- feeling unable to enjoy things;
- drinking more alcohol or using drugs;
- eating more or eating less;
- issues with the digestive system;
- sexual problems;
- changes to menstrual cycle.

Stress can affect your overall health if it isn't addressed.

Low mood and depression

Everyone feels low or down from time to time. It is common to feel low after distressing events or big life changes. For most people a low mood will pass after a short time. If it doesn't pass and is being experienced every day, you could be depressed.

Signs of depression

Depression can cause changes to how someone feels, thinks and behaves, which can cause symptoms such as:

- feeling sad or tearful;
- feeling hopeless;
- feeling worthless or experiencing self-guilt;
- feeling nothing, empty or numb;
- losing interest in things you usually enjoy;
- no self-esteem or confidence;
- avoiding events and activities you usually enjoy;
- losing appetite or eating too much;
- finding it difficult to think or speak clearly;
- aches and pains with no cause;
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, but still feeling tired all the time.

It is also common for people with depression to have symptoms of anxiety.

Self-help

There are simple things you can do to look after and improve your mental health and wellbeing.

- Talk to someone about how you are feeling.
- Identify your triggers and create a plan for coping with them.
- Try breathing exercises.
- Try and accept the things you cannot change.
- Reassure yourself that the feelings you are having will pass.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Develop a healthy routine, such as looking after your sleep, hygiene and eating a healthy balanced diet.
- Build the 'Take 5 steps to wellbeing' into your daily routine.

Take 5 steps to wellbeing



Connect with the people around you – family, friends or neighbours.



Don't be afraid to try something new. Rediscover an old hobby or interest, or simply set a challenge you will enjoy.



Exercising makes you feel good, so discover a physical activity you enjoy, like going for a walk, dancing or gardening.



Take a moment to be aware of the world around you and what you're feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.



Do something nice for a friend or stranger. Smile, volunteer your time or consider joining a community group.

These actions will help you feel more positive and get more out of life.

For more information on how to improve your mental health and wellbeing, visit www.mindingyourhead.info

Get help

If your mental health problems are affecting your day to day life, relationships and physical health, it's important to get help. If you are concerned about your mental health, speaking to your GP is a good place to start.

It is important to remember that people can and do recover from mental health problems. Recovery means living a good life, with or without symptoms of a mental health condition.

There are many services in Northern Ireland that can provide support to help you protect and improve your mental health. To look for a service that meets your needs, visit www.mindingyourhead.info/finding-help

A selection of mental health and wellbeing apps can be found on the HSC apps library offering self-help information and advice for adults seeking mental health support. The apps include topics such as anxiety, depression, stress, sleep and meditation. Visit <https://apps4healthcareni.hscni.net/en-GB/adult-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

If you or someone you know is in distress or crisis, you can call Lifeline for free on 0808 808 8000. Trained counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For more information, visit www.lifelinehelpline.info

If you or someone else is in immediate danger of suicide or you require urgent medical attention, call 999.