

life **lines**

information for your life

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TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Taking care of your mental health is as important as taking care of your physical health. As the World Health Organization (WHO) puts it, "Mental health is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health."

Here are some key ways to take care of your mental health so you have the resilience to cope with life's ups and downs, adapt to change, and maintain healthy relationships.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH.

The human mind and body are connected. When you take care of your body—your physical health—you also take care of your mental health:

- **Be physically active.** Exercise can lift your mood and your energy level, reduce stress, and help with the symptoms of depression and anxiety. When you engage in regular physical activity, you sleep better, think more clearly, and regulate your emotions more effectively. Find ways to be active that you enjoy and build them into your daily and weekly routine.
- **Eat a variety of healthy foods.** What you eat can have a direct effect on your mood and energy level. Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables plus lean

protein and whole grains. Avoid processed foods as well as foods with added sugar and salt and limit your consumption of alcohol. Find a mix of foods you enjoy that sustain your energy while giving you the nutrients and vitamins you need to thrive.

- **Sleep well.** You need adequate sleep to think clearly, stay focused, and regulate your emotions. Adopt healthy sleep habits by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day; winding down in the hour before bedtime in low light without electronic devices; and avoiding large meals, caffeine, and alcohol late in the day.

ACCEPT YOURSELF.

Every person is different, and no one is perfect. Accept yourself for who you are and take pride in your unique strengths and quirks. When you find yourself being self-critical, pause and reflect on what's good about you—why your friends love and appreciate you and all of the things you do well. If negative self-talk (the critical voice inside your head) is holding you back and making you unhappy, consider talking with a professional counselor to learn new skills for weakening that negative voice and strengthening your positive self-image.

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TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

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STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTIONS.

Social connections—your friends and family, the people you spend time with and talk to—are a key element in your mental health. Make time for the people you care about, especially the people with whom you're able to discuss your emotions. Pay attention to who in your social network lifts your mood when you're feeling down and who is open and honest with you when you're seeing things in an unrealistic way. Cultivate these connections and strengthen them by providing the same emotional support in return.

CALM YOURSELF.

When you're dealing with a stressful situation or feel your body growing tense, take time out to calm yourself. Learn stress-reducing techniques like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness, and use the ones that work for you to relax your body and your mind. Physical activity, healthy sleep habits, and time with friends can all help to reduce your stress.

PRACTICE HEALTHY THINKING.

Build your emotional resilience by adopting positive habits of thought. Practicing gratitude is one way to do this. Take time every day to think about what you are grateful for and write it down. Positive reframing is another way. When you have a negative reaction to something, step back and reconsider things in a positive light, looking for the opportunity in the situation or the good in the other person and yourself. Work to solve problems, one step at a time.

TALK ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL.

When you're sad, worried, or upset, talk about what you're going through with someone you trust. When you hold those feelings inside yourself, they can build, becoming more intense and uncomfortable. When you talk about them, you begin to process your emotions, understand

what lies behind them, and find ways to solve the problems you're facing. A phone call or a cup of coffee with a friend may be all it takes. For deeper or longer-lasting emotional challenges, it may help to talk with a professional counselor.

DO SOMETHING THAT ABSORBS YOUR MIND.

If there's an activity you enjoy or a skill you'd like to learn, make time for it. Focus on something that absorbs your full attention. That might be making something, playing music, singing, writing, cooking, or gardening. It might be restoring an old car, making an improvement to your home, or playing a sport. The best activity is one you can get lost in, that brings you into a state called flow, where you are fully engaged and forget about worries and negative thoughts.

FIND PURPOSE AND MEANING IN LIFE.

Everyone finds purpose and meaning in life in different ways. It can be through spirituality or religious practice, caring relationships with others, helping people in need, or doing work that in some way makes the world a better place. If you don't find purpose and meaning in your job or your daily life, look for other ways to find this satisfaction. Consider volunteering, paying more attention to the relationships in your life, exploring your spirituality, or simply looking for new ways to be kind.

ASK FOR HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT.

When you're suffering emotionally and nothing seems to help, reach out for support. Your doctor or your employee assistance program (EAP) can direct you to a professional counselor who can help you cope with the challenges you're facing. The earlier you get help, the better. Don't put it off until you're in crisis.

Morgan, H. (2021, August 25). Take care of your mental health (B. Schuette & C. Meeker, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS: YOUR NEW ROLE



If you're helping your family member or friend through an illness or disability, you are a caregiver. This may mean helping with daily activities such as going to the doctor or making meals. It could also mean coordinating services and care, or it may be giving emotional and spiritual support. The tips below are for most caregivers.

COPING WITH BEING A CAREGIVER

Giving care and support during this time can be a challenge. Many caregivers put their own needs and feelings aside to focus on the person they care for. This can be hard to maintain for a long time, and it's not good for your health. The stress can have both physical and psychological effects. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to take care of others. It's important for everyone that you give care to you.

CHANGING ROLES

Whether you're younger or older, you may find yourself in a new role as a caregiver. You may have been an active part of someone's life before, but perhaps now the way you support them is different. It may be in a way in which you haven't had much experience, or in a way that feels more intense than before.

Even though caregiving may feel new to you now, many caregivers say that they learn more as they go through their loved one's experience. Here are some common situations that they describe:

- Patients may only feel comfortable with a spouse or partner taking care of them.
- Caregivers with children struggle to take care of a parent too.
- Parents may have a hard time accepting help from their adult children.
- Caregivers find it hard to balance taking care of a loved one with job responsibilities.
- Adult children with an illness or disability may not want to rely on their parents for care.
- Caregivers may have health problems themselves, making it physically and emotionally hard to take care of someone else.

Whatever your roles are now, it's very common to feel confused and stressed at this time. If you can, try to share your feelings with others or join a support group, or you may choose to seek help from a counselor.

ASK FOR HELP.

Many caregivers say that, looking back, they took too much on themselves, or they wish they had asked for help from friends or family sooner. Take an honest look at what you can and can't do. What things do you need or want to do yourself? What tasks can you turn over or share with people? Be willing to let go of things that others can help you do.

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Some examples may be

- Helping with chores, such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, or yard work
- Taking care of the kids or picking them up from school or activities
- Driving your loved one to appointments or picking up medicines
- Being the contact person to keep others updated

Accepting help from others isn't always easy. Remember that getting help for yourself can also help your loved one—you may stay healthier, your loved one may feel less guilty about all the things that you're doing, some of your helpers may offer useful skills and have extra time to give you.

Websites such as SignUpGenius

(<https://www.signupgenius.com>) or Lotsa Helping Hands (<https://lotsahelpinghands.com>) can help you organize requests and tasks.

BE PREPARED FOR SOME PEOPLE NOT TO HELP.

When someone has a serious illness such as cancer, friends and family often reach out to help. Sometimes people you don't know very well also want to give you a hand. But it's important to realize that there are others who may not be able to help you. You might wonder why someone wouldn't offer to help you or your family when you're dealing with so much. Here are some common reasons:

- Some people may be coping with their own problems.
- Some may not have the time.

- They are afraid of cancer or may have already had a bad experience with cancer. They don't want to get involved and feel pain all over again.
- Some people believe it's best to keep a distance when people are struggling.
- Sometimes people don't realize how hard things really are for you, or they don't understand that you need help unless you ask them for it directly.
- Some people feel awkward because they don't know how to show they care.

If someone isn't giving you the help you need, you may want to talk to them and explain your needs. Or you can just let it go. However, if the relationship is important, you may want to tell the person how you feel. This can help prevent resentment or stress from building up. These feelings could hurt your relationship in the long run.

U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Cancer Institute (NCI). (Updated 2020, August 6). *Support for caregivers of cancer patients*. Retrieved September 15, 2021, from <https://www.cancer.gov>

Unplugging from Social Media to Recharge Your Battery



With over six billion people worldwide currently using smartphones, social media has an almost universal reach.¹ Keeping connected with loved ones around the globe, kick-starting social movements, and providing space for marginalized voices and an outlet for self-expression, social media apps and websites have many positive attributes. But is the time you spend scrolling having a negative impact on your life?

BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Digital communication goes far back. The *Washington Post* even describes Samuel Morse as "the true inventor of social media" with morse code.² However, excessive use of social networking websites and applications is more recent.

Beginning as a desktop experience, social media websites were a way for people to connect digitally with family and friends, colleagues, and other like-minded people. The invention of smartphones, introduction of quality in-phone cameras, and high-speed wireless internet connections meant a vast increase in social media consumption and time spent scrolling.

Today, how many people subconsciously pick up their devices as soon as they have some spare time or feel like a part of them is missing when they don't have their devices within arm's reach?

THE RESEARCH—SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

Social media addiction is described as a psychological addiction that compels someone to be overly engaged in social media, devoting so much time to social media that it impacts other aspects of their lives.³

Researchers at Harvard University found that posting on social media activates the same part of the brain that ignites when taking an addictive substance. Positive social stimuli, in the form of "likes," "comments," and messages, can also result in a release of dopamine. When a person posts a picture and receives positive social feedback, this stimulates the brain to release dopamine, which rewards the behavior of posting and perpetuates the social media habit.⁴

Nomophobia (an abbreviation for "no-mobile-phone-phobia") is the fear of being without your mobile phone.⁵ Professor Alter of New York University found that 46 percent of young adults said they'd rather have a broken bone than a broken phone.⁶ In addition, a report

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conducted by Bank of America found that 71 percent of people sleep with their mobile phones beside them,⁷ with some people even falling asleep with them in their hands!

BENEFITS OF LESS "SCROLLING TIME"

The average person spends just under seven hours every day looking at a screen,⁸ with a global average of 4.8 hours spent visiting mobile social media apps.⁹ Reducing time spent consuming social media could have amazing benefits, such as the following:

- **Improved relationships and reduced feelings of loneliness**—With the accessibility of connecting with many people all at once via social media, on the surface you may feel like you are surrounded by social connections—but are those connections real and meaningful? Reducing your social media intake could help you to nurture your perhaps-neglected offline relationships.
- **Improved self-esteem**—Social media can cause people to draw comparisons between themselves and others, comparing things such as appearance, achievements, or financial or marital status.
- **More Zzz's and an increase in quality sleep**—Not only would you probably manage to go to bed a little earlier if you were less attached to your phone, but less blue-light exposure would mean reduced disruption to your body's production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for helping you to sleep.¹⁰
- **Enhanced productivity at work**—Less social media interruption could increase your focus and attention and help you to overcome creative blocks.

You don't need to quit social media fully to experience these benefits. In fact, quitting social media suddenly could heighten anxiety and feelings of FOMO (fear of missing out) in the short term. Reducing your app time to 30 minutes per day or unplugging from social media for a week can really boost your overall wellbeing and give you a chance to reset.^{11,12}

SO, HOW DO I UNPLUG AND RECHARGE?

- Gradually reduce your screentime weekly.
- Make plans to spend time away from the screen.
- Turn off notifications for social media apps.
- Stop scrolling and start strolling! Increase your physical activity and connectedness with nature.
- Commit to a digital detox.
- Have technology-free hours in your day or technology-free zones in your home.

ARE YOU FEELING UP FOR A CHALLENGE?

A month away from your favorite social media apps could help to promote healthier social media habits in the long term and provide noticeable improvements to your physical and mental health. Perhaps you could pledge to be scroll free for 30 days with the upcoming "Scroll-Free September" initiative.

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IS SELF-CARE RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

The term self-care is sometimes used to describe children of upper elementary and middle-school age who are responsible for their own safety and well-being when outside of the school or other direct, adult supervision. This can also include children who are in the care of another child under the age of 14 years. The impact of self-care on a child varies from child to child. Age, maturity, attitude, safety of the home and neighborhood, and the structure of self-care all influence the effects on your child.

First, be sure the child welfare guidelines of your state or county allow self-care by contacting your local Child Protective Services agency. You will find that most counties recommend time limits for leaving children of specific ages home alone.

You, as a parent, play a major role in making it a success by your attitude and how well you communicate with your child.

Do you

- Have a positive attitude about going to work?
- Have a positive relationship between you and your child?
- Have open lines of communication?
- Have a psychologically close and trusting relationship?

AM I READY FOR SELF-CARE?

Making the conscious decision to use self-care rather than "letting" it happen or being talked into it by your child will help set the groundwork for a more successful experience. Both you and your child must first be ready for self-care. Keep in mind that your child will respond to your emotions about self-care, whether you are confident or fearful. First ask yourself, "Am I comfortable leaving my child alone?" If the answer is *no*, do you have

- Concerns about safety?
- Concerns about the readiness of your child?
- Concerns about being overprotective?

Before choosing self-care, consider all other possibilities. Be creative when considering other solutions. Possible options may include

- Staying with another member of the family
- Using part-time child care
- Participating in summer programs
- Hiring a college student to care for your child
- Trading care with friends and neighbors

You know your environment and your child best. Trust your instincts. Only you can decide what is best for your child.

IS MY CHILD READY FOR SELF-CARE?

There is no magic age at which a child is ready for self-care. There are signs of readiness that you need to consider. The first question a parent needs to ask is, "At what age is it safe for me to leave my child home alone?" Consult your county social service agency or local police department for information on your community's local guidelines.

Age alone is not the best indicator. Look at your child's ability for self-care through the following several factors:

1. PHYSICAL MATURITY

- Can your child care for a pet if needed?
- Can your child get ready for school without supervision?

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IS SELF-CARE RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY? (Contd.,)

2. COGNITIVE MATURITY

Children may not be able to think logically in an unexpected situation. Problem-solving may be difficult for them. Consider the following questions:

- Can your child answer the phone in a way that does not indicate that they are home alone?
- Does your child know to look before answering the front door? Under what circumstances is it safe to open the door?
- Can your child understand your written directions and follow them accordingly?
- Does your child have an accurate concept of time to schedule activities throughout the day?
- Does your child use safe judgment when faced with a problem-solving situation?
- Can your child understand an emergency and when help is needed?

3. EMOTIONAL MATURITY

Your child may be "big" enough physically and "bright" enough cognitively but may not be able to emotionally handle being alone. Some questions to ask include the following:

- Is your child confident?
- Does your child have a lot of fears?
- Is your child stressed in uncomfortable or new situations?
- Is your child capable of solving problems that might arise during the day?
- Is your child able to remain calm and handle fear, loneliness, and boredom?

4. SOCIAL MATURITY

The final item to consider is how well your child handles social situations. Some questions to ask include the following:

- Does your child solve sibling conflicts with little help from adults?
- Does your child talk easily to you about events and feelings?
- Is your child confident in contacting an adult if there is a problem?
- Does your child choose friends that influence positive behaviors?

No matter what your child's age or ability, it is important for everyone to feel confident with the self-care decision. You may want to test your child's skills in the above areas by asking questions and doing roll play with your family. Have an adult friend that your child won't recognize call or stop by the house. Observe the reaction from your child. What information does your child give out? Does your child make it obvious that he or she is home alone? Talking about the appropriate responses is the best way for your child to learn what will be expected of him or her.

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