Staying Well & Minding your Mental Health: A Resource

Developed jointly by the Occupational Therapy & Psychology Departments









Introduction

Wellness is not a static state. It is an individual, multifactorial, dynamic state that each human must work on daily to achieve and sustain.

Our wellness is influenced by our own individual activities and the environment (physical, social and cultural) that we live within.

When we feel well, we feel calm, capable and content. We feel able to cope and function in the world and with its everyday stressors. When we are well we feel connected to our sense of purpose and are satisfied with our life.

There are times in life where our wellbeing can be challenged by factors outside of our control. It is important to remember in these times that there is still a lot that is within your control and that you can do all you can to try to maintain your wellbeing.

This handbook aims to provide you with tips for maintaining your wellbeing in general and minding your mental health, especially when life becomes overwhelming. All of the advice within this handbook is relevant at any time in our lives but is especially important in times of increased demands and stress. It contains advice on:

- Routine
- What I need to do to stay well: Daily Maintenance Planning
- Social connection and addressing loneliness
- Gratitude
- Moving and exercise
- Knowing how to relax
- Managing your mental health
- Supporting someone with a mental health difficulty
- Online resources

• Putting it all together: Healthy Habits Planner



Routine, Routine, Routine

If your usual routine is not accessible to you, it is important to establish a new one that meets your core needs.

The following are the key components of a routine:

- ✓ Get up and get dressed at a similar time each day even if you are not leaving the house or expecting visitors. These everyday activities can do a lot to help your mental wellbeing
- ✓ Exercise/Move regularly
- ✓ Getting fresh air/sunlight. Open the curtains, go for a walk, sit in the garden, sit by an open window – whatever options are available to you, ensure you get fresh air and sunlight regularly
- ✓ Regular sleep routine
- ✓ Healthy diet
- ✓ Avoid excess alcohol and tobacco
- ✓ Check in with how you are feeling
- ✓ Make time for enjoyable activities



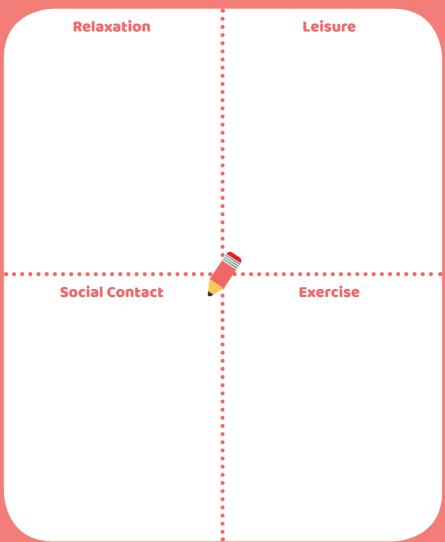
Every time you achieve an element of the plan you have made for yourself your confidence in your ability will increase. With consistency these activities will become habit and take less cognitive effort - giving you more headspace and energy to focus on other aspects of your life.

Write your plan down. Research has shown that goals that are written have a greater chance of being achieved. Writing your goals down allows you to visualise your goal and plan to achieve it. It allows you to see clearly how these plans fit into your daily life and any potential pitfalls along the way.

The four core elements of routine

Brainstorm possible activities you could do under each of these four headings:

(Include activities you value and enjoy, activities you need to do to stay well, activities that help you feel better, activities that distract and suggested activities that you hope to engage with in the future.)



My Daily Maintenance Plan

Making a list of things you do **every day** to stay as well as possible and reminding yourself to do these can be an important step towards wellness.

It is a way to set priorities. It helps to take care of the things you need to do each day to stay well, and, at the same time, it prevents you from becoming overwhelmed by trying to do too much.

The list should be short enough so that on most days it can be accomplished. As time goes by, you can add to the list.

SAMPLE LIST - Every Day:

- Eat three meals including breakfast
- Talk to a loved one
- Get some fresh air
- Get 20-30 minutes of exercise daily
- Take 30 minutes for relaxation
- Have a shower
- Get up at 8am

Make a list of things you need to do sometimes to stay feeling well.

These are the things you don't need to do every day but if you need to do them and don't, it might cause you extra stress or discomfort.

SAMPLE LIST - Sometimes:

- Paying the bills
- Getting the groceries
- Cleaning the house

Make a list of things you need to do **sometimes** to stay feeling well.

It may be helpful to put a copy of your list somewhere where you will see it each day, for example, your fridge door or bedside locker.





Daily List	Sometimes List

Staying connected with people

Social Connection

Social connection is our feeling of belonging. It is our feeling that we are valued, loved and linked to the world outside ourselves.



Social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of emotional, physical and social wellbeing. There are many benefits to feeling socially connected:

- Improved quality of life and life satisfaction.
- Protects cognitive functioning.
- Improves feelings of wellbeing.
- Improves mental health.

Loneliness

Loneliness is described as an unwelcome, painful and/or unpleasant feeling that occurs when there is a mismatch between the social connections we have, and those we would like.

- Social loneliness occurs when someone is missing a wider social network.
- Emotional loneliness is caused when you miss a close relationship.

Loneliness is distinct from social isolation.

Social isolation is an absence of social interactions, support structures and engagement with the broader community.



Loneliness is a fluid experience. It can come and go over a short time or persist in the longer term. It can be associated with life events for example: the birth of a child, changing job, empty nesting, becoming a carer for a loved one, loss of a spouse or retirement.

Loneliness alone isn't a mental health problem but the two are strongly linked. Loneliness increases our risk of experiencing mental ill health.

If you are currently feeling lonely, please be mindful to look after your wellbeing.

Consider:

- Pace yourself: Prioritise where you would like to start e.g. meeting a
 friend for coffee or returning to going to mass. Build your confidence one
 step at a time.
- (re)Establishing social connections: Reconnect with clubs/classes/ groups/social outlets you may have been involved with in the past.
 Consider joining new social groups. Organise to meet a friend face-toface. There are many options available to establish or reconnect socially
 consider initiating engagement with these for yourself.
- Opening up: You may already have social connections but do not feel you
 can open up to them. Consider confiding in a trusted person that you are
 lonely. Telling someone how you are feeling can often help alleviate the
 discomfort of loneliness.
- Be mindful of looking after your health: Ask yourself if you are doing the daily activities you need to look after your health. Are there activities you can do to help you feel better?

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ALONE does not always mean LONELY

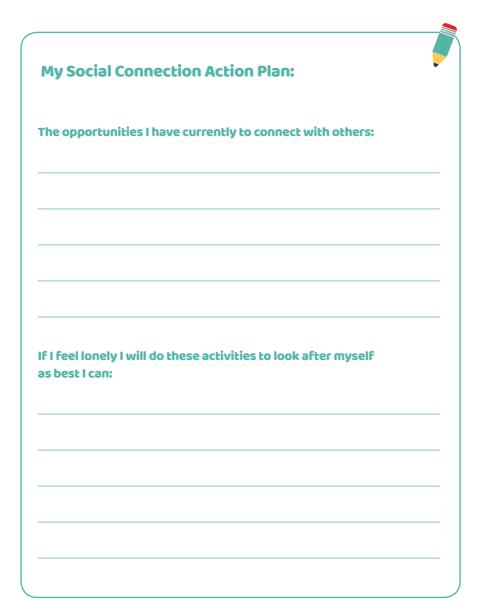
Yes, being alone for long periods can increase your risk of becoming lonely but it is also good for our wellbeing to be comfortable with our own company and find periods of the day where you can recharge on your own.

Solitude or time on our own affords us the opportunity to connect with ourselves.

Also, if you are more of a 'social wallflower' or feel you have limited access to groups/clubs etc., consider social spaces where you can go on your own and be surrounded by people. You may even find yourself starting a conversation! Below are some suggestions:

- Going for a coffee in a coffee shop and watch the world go by.
- Reading a book in the library.
- Walking your dog in the local park.





Philosopher Paul Tillich said:

"Language created the word 'loneliness' to express pain of being alone — and it created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone".

Gratitude

Simply put, it is taking time to think about the good things in your life.

Research has shown that practicing gratitude helps deal with adversity, helps people feel happier, counteracts depression and anxiety, improves sleep, improves physical and psychological health and builds stronger connections with others.

Start small, pause once a day and think about one thing you are grateful for that day (the suggestions on the next page may help).



Things I am thankful for:						
						_
						_
						_
						_
						_



Below are some prompts for things/people/experiences you may be thankful for:

# About your body.	#2 What you find beautiful.		#4 An accomplishment of yours.	#5 A friend.
#6 A smell you love.	#7 Something that makes you smile.	#8 A happy memory.	#9 Something you like about where you live.	#10 A person in your family.
# A food you love.	#12 An ability of yours.	# 3 A person.	# 4 You're looking forward to.	#15 A life lesson.
# 6 A person you look up to.	# 7 A personality trait of yours.	M. V. T. V.		#20 A holiday you love.
#21 A technology.	#22 Something made you laugh.	#23 Something nice.	#24 A book, magazine or podcast.	#25 Another person.
#26 Something in nature.	Something A gift		#29 A compliment you have received.	#30 Something you're passionate about.

Moving & Exercising

Prolonged periods of sitting are detrimental to our health and our quality of life. Studies have shown that we all need to stand up (if possible) and move every 20-30 minutes. This can be for day-to-day activities like going to make a cup of tea or to exercise.

There are many benefits to moving our body - both for our mental and physical health. Movement gives us what we need, it's a balancer. It can boost our mood, lower anxiety, help us deal with distressing thoughts, improve energy, reduce feelings of agitation and restlessness.

Ideally try to get your exercise outdoors. If this option is not available to you, consider what you can do within your home and garden.

Work within your abilities, any physical movement is better than none.

ACTIVATION PRECEDES MOTIVATION



Knowing How to Relax

Activities that help you unwind, calm, relax, stay present or distract are a crucial part of your daily routine.

Make a list of activities that help you to relax. It is your personal list, what one person may find relaxing may not work for another.

It is important to have a variety of activities including those that distract, relax and sustain your wellbeing so you can access them no matter how you are feeling.

For example:

A woman with anxiety found it too challenging to engage with reading at times of acute distress but going for a brisk walk first and doing some deep breathing exercises enabled her to reduce her distress to a level where she felt able to read a magazine. In time her distress reduced enough to allow her to concentrate enough to read a book.

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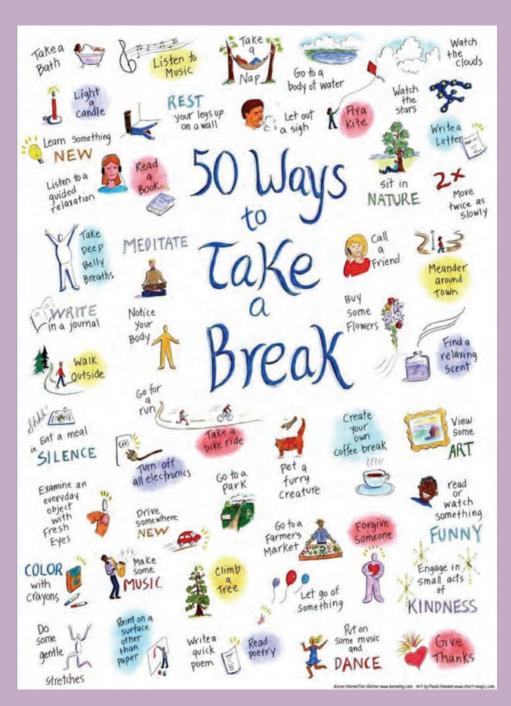
Knowing How to Relax (continued)

There are many options available to you with technology.

- YouTube videos on yoga, breathing practices and mindfulness.
- Apps with mindfulness practices, relaxation practices and calming music, e.g. Calm, Headspace, Insight Timer, Ten Percent Happier Meditation, Simple Habit: Wellness & Sleep and many more. Check your smartphone's App Store.
- Relaxation practices and meditations on the Saint John of God Hospital website (www.stjohnofgodhospital.ie/resources).

Write down any activities that you find relaxing/help you unwind:

	Activities I find relaxing:	
-		
-		
		_
-		_
-		_



Managing your Mental Health



It is important to check in regularly with how you are feeling and to take action to deal with any negative feelings you may be experiencing. Heightened anxiety and low mood are increasingly common emotional responses to the pressures and stresses of today's busy world. Thus it is important that we look after our own mental health to allow us engage and flourish in our lives.

What can we do when we feel like things are getting on top of us and we feel overwhelmed?

• Recognise threat emotions – these are intense emotions that take control of our mind and make us act (fight, flight, avoid, freeze, collapse).

There are 3 intense threat emotions, these are:

- 1. Anger & Frustration: all kinds of sources of anger: anger at the situation, anger at not having the right supports. It is important that we are able to articulate our anger and frustration and normalise and empathise with the sense of frustration and anger that we might have when we are in these high stress situations.
- 2. Threat & Anxiety: worry about the future, mistakes etc. How are you going to manage? How long will this last? Will I be able to cope? What happens if I become unwell?
- **3. Grief & Sense of Sadness:** the pain and distress we experience from various losses in our life.

It is important that we are able to recognise and name these emotions when they occur.

Manage those difficult threat emotions

Cultivate slowing, calming and settling – what is it that gives you a sense of feeling grounded and how can you do these things? For example:



Breathing exercises

There are many different breathing exercises; all aim to cultivate the same thing - slower, deeper, more rhythmic breathing. Here are a few different ways of doing that:

Breathe in for 5 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, breathe out for 5 seconds.
Breathe smoothly and deeply, full breath in and full breath out. Ensure
if you are sitting that you sit upright with shoulders back and open your
chest. Focus on a theme in your mind that connects you to what your
breath is doing – bring your attention to something you find peaceful
and calming, picture it.

For example, a still lake, a gently lapping sea, a tree with no breeze – whatever image works for you. Strengthen the image by tapping into as many senses as you can (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) and slowly repeat the mantra (in a calm and soft tone voice) "my mind is slowing down", "my mind is slowing down".

- Mindfulness Meditation 3 Minute Breathing Space www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8
- Breathe app or The Breathing Zone app (see Online Resources Section for details)

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Triangle Breathing

Start at the bottom left of the triangle.

Breathe in for three counts as you trace the first side of the triangle.

Hold your breath for three counts as you trace the second side of the triangle.

Breathe out for three counts as you trace the final side of the triangle. You have just completed one deep breath.



5 Finger Breathing

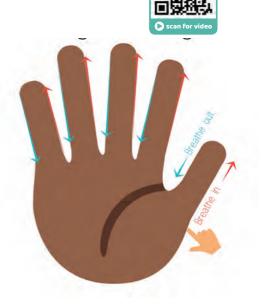
Stretch one hand out so that you have space between your fingers.

Hold up your pointer finger from the other hand

Start at the bottom of your thumb. Use your pointer finger to trace up your thumb as you slowly breathe in through your nose.

When you get to the top of your thumb slowly breathe out your mouth as you trace down the other side.

Repeat for all fingers until you have traced your whole hand.



Square breathing

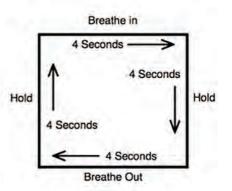
Tracing a square on the palm of your hand:

Breathe in through your nose for 4

Hold for 4

Breathe out through your mouth for 4

Hold for 4



Grounding exercises

Be aware not to be pulled away too much by your rumination (thoughts) – feel grounded.

Grounding is a technique that helps keep someone in the present. It helps re-orient a person to the 'here and now' and to reality. Grounding skills can be helpful in managing overwhelming feelings or intense anxiety. They help someone to regain their mental focus from an often intensely emotional state.

Grounding skills occur within two specific approaches: Sensory Awareness and Cognitive Awareness.



Grounding Exercise 1: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Grounding



Here's the 54321 "game":

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you
- Name 4 things you can feel ("chair on my back" or "feet on floor")
- Name 3 things you can hear right now ("fingers tapping on keyboard" or "television")
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

Grounding Exercise 2: 5 Senses Grounding

Begin by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and label each finger as one of the five senses. Then take each finger and identify something special and safe representing each of those five senses. For example: Thumb represents sight and a label for sight might be butterflies or my middle finger represents the smell sense and it could be represented by lilacs.

After writing and drawing all this on paper, post it on your refrigerator or other safe places in the home where it could be easily seen and memorise it.



Whenever you get triggered, breathe deeply and slowly, and put your hand in front of your face where you can really see it – stare at your hand and then look at each finger and try to do the five senses exercise from memory.



Other Sensory Grounding Activities

Other Sensory Grounding Activities

- Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details.
- Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a ball.
- Place a cool cloth on your face, splash cold water on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of soda.
- Listen to soothing music
- Put your feet firmly on the ground
- Focus on someone's voice or a neutral conversation.



Cognitive Awareness Grounding Exercise

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

- 1. Where am I?
- 2. What is today?
- 3. What is the date?
- 4. What is the month?
- 5. What is the year?
- 6. How old am I?
- 7. What season is it?



Control the Controllable

Often when we become overwhelmed with stress and anxiety we can get distracted by things that are outside of our control. We need to learn to focus our energy on the things we can control – Control the Controllable.



THINGS I CAN CONTROL

- My behaviour
- My response to other people and situations.
- The beliefs I attach to my thoughts.
- Self-care
- What I commit to
- The things I consume (food, fluid, media & news)
 - Reaching out for support and to help others

Knowing that
I am doing
everything I can
and being at
peace with that

- The world situations
- What other people say, do, think, or feel
- How others respond
 - My genetics
- My automatic thoughts
- Events from the past

THINGS I CAN'T CONTROL

Mindset shift when feeling overwhelmed





I can't cope

This is a very difficult situation and I am doing the best I can and that is good enough.

There is too much uncertainty

While I can't control the situation around me, I CAN control my actions.

at this

I'm just not good • - - - - I can always improve

I give up • - - - - I'll keep trying



I'm never going to get this



I need to figure out what I did wrong and get some help

Accept 'good enough'

You cannot change the facts of life, so don't take on responsibility that isn't yours. This can lead to an overwhelming sense of sadness – stay separate and empathise.

- Learn to tolerate and accept one's limitations
- Accept "Good Enough".
- Watch out for attacking self-criticism, it is not helpful. Replace with compassionate self-correction – be encouraging and supportive to yourself.
 If you find this hard to do for yourself imagine it is a friend/family member or child that you are talking to.
- High levels of self-criticism can lead to depression.
- Notice and be aware of the difference between compassionate selfcorrection (which is inspiring, supportive and promotes learning) and attacking self-criticism (which will undermine you). Notice attacking selfcriticism and switch into your compassionate self.

Developing the Compassionate-Self

• Cultivating a compassionate mind – what you focus on has a big impact in your brain.

Example: If you are hungry and you see a delicious meal, smell a delicious meal or think (fantasise) about a delicious meal, it will stimulate your hypothalamus and you will start to

salivate. Your imagination has a powerful impact on

your body.

 A compassionate mind will change your brain and body, and triggers helpful internal systems.

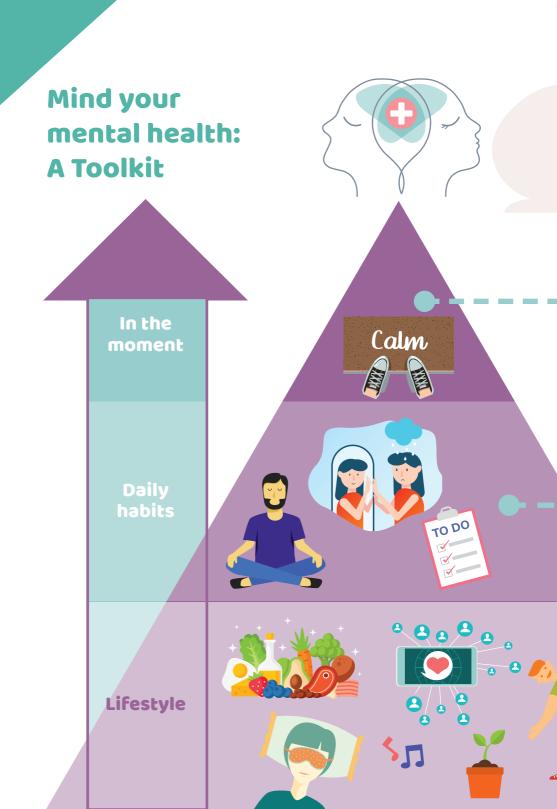


How to develop a Compassionate Mind

- Use your body to support your mind
 - o Breathing exercises
 - o Posture
- Close your eyes and ask yourself "what would I be like if I was at my most compassionate best?" Compassion is about being courageous and wise.
 - What does your 'compassionate best' look like? If you are at your courageous best and at your wisest, what would you be like? What qualities would you have?
 - Imagine a time you were at your compassionate best, a time when you were courageous and wise notice what emotions you are feeling and where in your body you are feeling them. You probably feel kind, tolerant, strong and capable. Where in your body are you feeling this? Intensify these feelings.
 - Tell yourself "I have the courage to engage with suffering" and "I have the wisdom to know what to do."
- Sometimes the beginning of wisdom is to recognise "I don't know what to do?", "I need to find out", "I need support", or "I need to ask for help".
- Think about the qualities you would have if you were your most compassionate self. Bring to mind all these qualities and practice them.
 With practice, you will be able to switch your mind into a compassionate state of mind.
 - Your threat system is automatic but your compassionate mind is learned, it is a skill and requires practice.

In summary, you need to train for compassion because your threat system will always take priority in a stressful situation, through no fault of your own. So,

- 1. Learn to notice.
- 2. Breathe and slow down.
- 3. Focus on posture.
- 4. Focus on your compassionate state of mind.
- 5. Create the conditions so you can perform at your best.
- 6. Notice the good the brain is orientated for threat and noticing bad things balance this by deliberately bringing to mind the things that have gone well. Internalise the good.



Stay grounded

- Notice your **breath**/your feet on the ground
- Remember this will pass
- Pay attention to the present what can I do right now?

Manage distress

- Visit www.stjohnofgod hospital.ie/audio-files
- Relaxation
- Breathing

Control the controllable

- Short to-do list
- Small goals
- Remember your values

Self-compassion

• Being kind, not critical to ourselves.

Lifestyle

- Eat well
- Sleep routine
- Exercise
- Stay socially connected
- Create something/use humor to take a mental time-out from the situation
- Manage your media diet



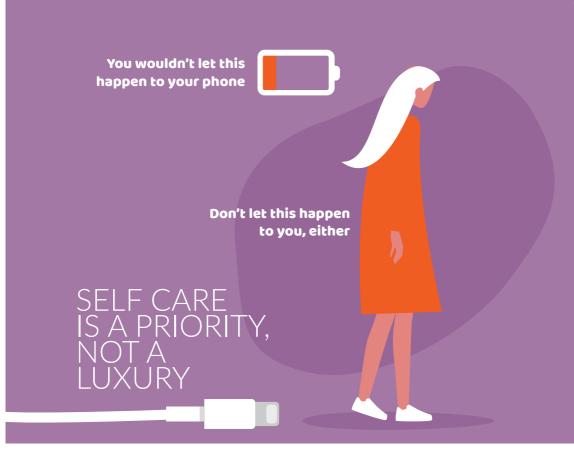
Tips for Family & Friends:

Supporting someone with a mental health difficulty

Someone who is feeling depressed or anxious will often find the following helpful:



- Talking about their feelings: If someone is feeling depressed or anxious, or something very upsetting or traumatic has happened to them, they may find it helpful to talk to someone close to them about it. (Listening with patience and understanding will be more helpful than trying to problemsolve or get the person to 'cheer up'). Open communication when we are all experiencing heightened levels of anxiety is very important.
- Help them maintain routine in their day: Rising at the same time daily, showering and dressing, having breakfast and getting out for a walk and planning some activities will help reduce anxiety and give purpose and structure to the day.
- Support them in maintaining social contact with other people: Social
 withdrawal is a common symptom of many mental health difficulties. Often
 this is fuelled by negative thoughts and a general lack of self-confidence.
 Supporting someone in maintaining social contact will help them feel less
 alone and help rebuild self-confidence.
- Persevering with treatment: Forgetfulness is a common symptom of many mental health difficulties which can lead to a heightened risk of forgetting to take prescribed medications. Those close to the person should encourage them to keep taking their medication (maybe set reminders on phones) or to continue to engage with their therapist. Consistency with treatment is extremely important. Liaise with your local pharmacist to ensure regular prescriptions can be filled and collected in a timely manner.
- **Keeping active:** Physical exercise is good for relieving feelings of anxiety and depression, and can also help people with sleep problems and apathy. However, lack of energy and loss of motivation are common symptoms of many mental health difficulties. Supporting the person to do activities that they enjoy will help. Activation precedes motivation!



- Eating a healthy diet: Mental health difficulties can cause changes to appetite and motivation to plan meals, cook and eat. A poor diet can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression, as can alcohol and caffeine. This can also disrupt sleep, which is essential to our mental health. Helping those with mental health difficulties to plan meals and eat healthily is important. You can even plan meals together and spend time in the kitchen making new recipes to help add structure and a sense of achievement to the day.
- Helping those with memory difficulties: Using visual reminders, such as a
 white board or a sign, in key locations around the home can be helpful in
 aiding remembering.
- Mind Yourself: This is very important, especially when we are caring for others. Self-care is a priority, not a luxury. You cannot offer care and support to others if you are drained.

If you are offering care or support to someone else with mental health difficulties, now re-read this booklet with YOU in mind.

Online Resources

- 60 second Anxiety Hack https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=7hA0VvB9qak
- A technique to reduce very intense emotion https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=ZVHtjDgc XU
- Meditation to calm the anxious mind https://soundcloud.com/user-157823577/calming-the-anxious-mind
- The ACT Approach to Handling Anxiety Like a Human Being: Dr Rob Archer: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/act-approach-handling-anxiety-like-human-being-dr-rob-archer

Developing Resilience through Self-Compassion and Mindfulness Meditation:

- Discover the Power of Self-Compassion 3 free video sessions https://product.soundstrue.com/power-of-selfcompassion/free-video-series/?_ke=eyJrbF9lbWFpbCl6lCJ vbGl2aWEucmFtc2F5QGhvdG1haWwuY28 udWsiLCAia2xfY29tcGFueV9pZ Cl6lCJKTURnYXEifQ%3D%3D
- Free half day 'at home' mindfulness retreat with Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach https://product.soundstrue.com/power-of-awareness/free-retreat/

Mindfulness & Breathing Apps:

- Mindfulness Meditation 3 Minute Breathing Space https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOne1P0TKL8
- Insight Timer https://insighttimer.com/
- Smiling Mind https://www.smilingmind.com.au/
- Stop, Breathe & Think https://www.stopbreathethink.com/
- Headspace https://www.headspace.com/

- Calm https://www.calm.com/
- The Breathing Zone https://apps.apple.com/us/app/breathing-zone/id369838631
- Breathe+ https://apps.apple.com/us/app/breathe-simple-breath-trainer/id1106998959
- Brightmind Meditation https://apps.apple.com/us/app/brightmind-meditation/id1303790148

Music to Uplift our Souls from the Rotterdam Orchestra:

• From Us, to You - https://youtu.be/3eXT60rbBVk



Healthy Habits planner

Be specific! Write exactly what activity are you going to do.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Key Activity What iny top priority for today?							
Relaxation What can I do to relax today?							
Leisure What can I do for enjoyment today?							
Social Contact Who can I connect with today & how I will do it?							
Exercise: What can I do to move today?							

 \checkmark Tick what you have completed at the end of each day to keep track of your efforts

Notes



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