



MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Mental Wellness in a Post-Pandemic World

Living in the post-pandemic world can at times feel overwhelming. Rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders have all increased since the onset of the pandemic. Negative mental health and substance use outcomes have disproportionately affected some populations, particularly communities of color and youth.

How to Strengthen Your Mental Wellness and Resiliency

There are many ways to support mental wellness, and you are likely already doing a lot to support good mental health for you and your family, e.g. taking care of your physical wellness, working to reduce stress in your life, and nurturing your relationship with friends and family.

Your surroundings also contribute in significant ways to your mental health. Where you live, work, play and gather can contribute to a sense of safety and wellbeing. Research shows that environments can increase or reduce our stress. What you are seeing, hearing, experiencing at any moment is changing not only your mood, but how your nervous, endocrine, and immune systems are working. The stress of an unpleasant environment can cause you to feel anxious, sad, or helpless. A pleasant environment helps to reverse that.

You can take steps to change your space and create a nurturing, safe, and positive environment.

Your home. Having a safe, stable, and healthy home conditions set the foundation for achieving and maintaining good mental health.

As Spring slowly emerges in Vermont, and before those who are non-winter sport enthusiasts get outdoors more, we can start “spring cleaning” our indoor spaces. In addition to the usual de-cluttering, you may consider looking into feng shui, the Chinese practice of arranging living spaces to create balance with the natural world. The words “feng,” meaning wind, and “shui,” meaning water comes from an ancient poem that talks about human life being connected to and flowing with the environment around it. <https://www.thespruce.com/what-is-feng-shui-1275060>

Wherever you call ‘home’, it should give you feelings of comfort, support and calmness. Aim to create a cozy, happy indoor space.

Hygge (pronounced: hyoo-guh) is a Danish and Norwegian word that describes a mood of coziness, comfort and wellbeing. It is about taking time to relax and enjoy life's quieter pleasures, often with family or close friends, in a cozy and informal setting. Hygge is a lifestyle concept that emphasizes enjoying the good things within one's control. The word hygge dates back to around 1800, but similar definitions can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Hygge is a core part of Danish culture and is associated with feelings of wellness and contentment.

The outdoors: nature heals, soothes, and restores.

Spending time in nature is linked to many positive mental health outcomes. Being in nature, or even viewing scenes of nature, reduces anger, fear, and stress, and increases pleasant feelings. In one study, 95% of participants said their mood improved after spending time outside, changing from depressed, stressed, and anxious to more calm and balanced.

Access to outdoor spaces varies depending on where you live, your mobility, etc. Being around nature doesn't have to mean hiking in a forest. It can be walking in a park or sitting in your backyard. Research has shown that even a simple plant in a room can have a significant impact on stress and anxiety.

Consider working in a garden. Avid gardeners will tell you that the garden is their 'happy space' and the physical act of gardening is a stress reducer and mood lifter. And did you know that soil contains antidepressant microbes? The bacterium is found in soil and may stimulate serotonin production, which makes you relaxed and happier. Read more at Gardening Know How: Antidepressant Microbes In Soil: How Dirt Makes You Happy <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/garden-how-to/soil-fertilizers/antidepressant-microbes-soil.htm>

The Japanese practice of 'forest bathing' is a research-based practice for supporting healing and wellness through immersion in forests and other natural environments.

If you've ever been in a forest, listened to the birds and watched the sunshine filtering through the leaves, you've already participated in one of the best things you can do for your physical and mental well-being. Japanese doctors promote forest bathing as a relaxing break from hectic urban life.

Studies have shown a wide array of health benefits including stabilizing and improving mood and cognitions.

For more information, go to <https://natureconnectionguide.com/>



Forest bathing makes you happier

Your community. A strong sense of community protects mental health through shared supports, resources, and joy. While many community changes can be out of your control, being an advocate for change and making healthy community connections can bring hope.

What can you do?

- Get to know your community and neighbors and support each other.
- Connect with a group in your area where community members share and exchange services. For example, Front Porch Forum is a free community-building service in Vermont and parts of New York. Your local forum is only open to the people who live there. It's all about helping neighbors connect. <https://frontporchforum.com>
- Consider serving on a school board or attend town meetings.

Get help when you need it.

Please seek help if needed. No matter what you are going through, you're not alone. Don't feel like you have to be strong and push through your issues on your own.

As well as reaching out to mental health professionals, consider talking with a trusted friend or relative. Reach out to your religious leader, if you have one. Look for a mental health support group that meets in your area or online. Use a mental health app for free or low-cost guidance and tools (e.g. Healthy Minds).

Here is a short guide from the National Institute of Mental Health describing symptoms that indicate that you ought to seek professional help.

My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?

First, determine how much your symptoms interfere with your daily life.



Do I have mild symptoms that have lasted for less than 2 weeks?

- Feeling a little down
- Feeling down, but still able to do job, schoolwork, or housework
- Some trouble sleeping
- Feeling down, but still able to take care of yourself or take care of others



If so, here are some self-care activities that can help:

- Exercising (e.g., aerobics, yoga)
- Engaging in social contact (virtual or in person)
- Getting adequate sleep on a regular schedule
- Eating healthy
- Talking to a trusted friend or family member
- Practicing meditation, relaxation, and mindfulness

If the symptoms above do not improve or seem to be worsening despite self-care efforts, talk to your health care provider.



Do I have severe symptoms that have lasted 2 weeks or more?

- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite changes that result in unwanted weight changes
- Struggling to get out of bed in the morning because of mood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable
- Unable to perform usual daily functions and responsibilities
- Thoughts of death or self-harm



Seek professional help:

- Psychotherapy (talk therapy)—virtual or in person; individual, group, or family
- Medications
- Brain stimulation therapies
- You can also talk to your primary care doctor or another health professional about your mental health problems and ask them to connect you with the right services.

If you are in crisis or thinking of harming yourself, you should seek immediate help. Call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org, or text the Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741).

Your local community mental health center has a 24/7 support and crisis line. Click on this link to find the center closest to you. <https://vermontcarepartners.org/intake-and-crisis-lines/>