YOUR 4-WEEK PLAN FOR BETTER MENTAL WELLNESS

These small moves can make a big difference in how you feel.

BY ERICA SWEENEY
YOUR MENTAL HEALTH affects everything about how you think, behave, and feel. It drives your reactions to stress, how you interact with others, and how you get through your day. Mental health is also closely tied to your physical health.

Just about everyone struggles with their mental well-being at some point. About one in five Americans experience mental illness each year, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. When you’re diagnosed with a mental health condition, it’s important to get appropriate treatment from a mental health provider.

But there are also things everyone can do every day to better your mental well-being.

To help, use this 30-day plan. Each week, you’ll focus on one area where you can make small changes that can reduce stress and anxiety and help you feel more mentally fit and resilient. Here’s how it works:

- Each day during the workweek, you’ll make one small change or try something new.

- On the weekends, take those two days to keep those changes going before heading into next week’s challenge.

By the end of the month, you’ll have some tools to work with that can help you feel a little better mentally. Here’s exactly what to do.

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Day 1  **Pause for a Minute**

It’s so easy to get caught up in your hectic day-to-day, worrying about the future and the past, and not paying attention to the present. Former monk Jay Shetty recommends taking a pause and attaching yourself to the present by noticing these things: 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

Day 2  **Focus on Your Breath**

You’re always breathing, of course. But, sometimes, your breaths become shallow or rapid, which heightens anxiety. Learning to **focus on your breath** can help your mind and body relax—it also lowers your heart rate and blood pressure. Psychiatrist and *MH* advisor Gregory Scott Brown, M.D., is a fan of 4-7-8 breathing.

**HOW TO DO IT:** Inhale through your nose and silently count to 4, hold your breath and count to 7, and then exhale for 8 counts. Repeat the exercise a few times. Focusing on a longer exhale helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the network that relaxes your body during periods of stress. Aim to do at least two rounds of box breathing today.

Day 3  **Let Your Mind Wander**

Today, aim to give yourself a break from thinking about stressors like work deadlines, family obligations and your long to-do list. Take a moment and just sit there. Research has found that people who were asked to sit and wait in a quiet room without doing anything enjoyed it much more than they thought they would. They even chose doing it again over checking news on the internet. A key is not ruminating while you’re sitting there. Thinking of things that are positive and meaningful to you can relieve stress, improve your mood, and boost your creativity and problem-solving skills.
Day 4 Embrace JOMO

Our phones are necessary for work, connecting with people, and keeping up with the news. But the constant scrolling and staring at your screen isn’t always great for your mental state. You don’t always need to know what’s going on in the world or what your best friend had for dinner last night. Embrace the “joy of missing out,” or JOMO, as author Svend Brinkemann calls it, by limiting your social media use and putting your phone down from time to time. If FOMO, as one behavioral scientist puts it, is a problem of self-control, then JOMO helps bring your agency back. Put the phone down and indulge in the joy of doing and thinking about whatever you choose, not what the web directs you to.

Day 5 Get Some Rest

Your go-go lifestyle can get the better of you. It’s crucial to take a breather and get some rest. The OG of rest is actual sleep—being tired all the time can make you moody, make unhealthy lifestyle choices, and just feel stressed (not to mention mess with your physical health). Do one thing today that helps you stack the deck to get more sleep. Set a timer to let you know when it’s 20 minutes to bedtime, keep your room cool, stop looking at screens before bed (some experts recommend staying off them two hours before bed).

WEEK 2

Ask a Question a Day

Positive self-talk has been shown to help regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, especially in stressful times. It can help you self-soothe and quash feelings of anxiety. These questions can help you understand your self-talk better and shift it to be more helpful.

Day 1 What’s Going Well?

Most of your attention probably gets diverted to solving problems and putting out fires in your life. Instead of dwelling on that, pause and ask yourself, “What’s working out well in my life?” recommends Dr. Brown. This gratitude exercise sets a positive tone for your day, boosts your sense of joy, promotes well-being, and helps you feel happier.
**Day 2 How Will This Decision Affect Me?**

Every day, you make decisions. It may be a small one, like what have for dinner, but often, it’s something bigger, like “should I change jobs?” If making decisions causes you anxiety, Suzy Welch, author of *10-10-10*, suggests asking yourself what the consequences of the decision will be in the next 10 minutes, 10 months, and 10 years. This strategy will help clarify your priorities and prevent your emotions from taking over.

**Day 3 How Am I Feeling Right Now, Really?**

“I’m fine.” That’s probably your standard response to questions about how you’re doing. Or, you might pick a broad label, like happy, sad, or tired. Digging deeper to identify how you’re truly feeling in a given moment will help you really understand what’s up and understand what problems to address, recommends Susan David, Ph.D., a Harvard Medical School lecturer and the author of *Emotional Agility*. Once you ID how you’re feeling, don’t label it as good or bad. Just think about what that emotion is telling you. Feeling bored or frustrated at work? It might mean that you value learning and growing, but you don’t have enough of it in your life right now.

**Day 4 What’s Possible Today?**

No day is going to be perfect. When things start heading south—the report’s not going to get done, your partner got sick and you can’t leave for vacation today, you’re in a 10K race and starting to go slower and slower—ask yourself “What *IS* possible today?” says mental performance coach Vanessa Faye Foerster. “This question keeps us in a more empowered place to make better decisions. You don’t need a perfect day to have a good day,” she says. Maybe you can get an extension on the report and respect your integrity in not cutting corners on it. Or you can do something meaningful at home that gives you a sense of agency or novelty like vacation does. Or you can ask yourself in a race how you can turn your focus away from unhelpful thoughts (“I should have trained more”) and onto more helpful ones (“focus on your exhales”).

**Day 5 What Can I Let Go Of?**

Think about what might be interfering with your mental well-being. It might be something big, like resigning from the job you hate or distancing yourself from a toxic relationship. It can also be letting go of unhelpful internal self-talk that you seem to deal with all the time—such as constantly comparing yourself to others, fearing failure, or holding grudges. Spend today noting what it is that’s getting in your way. Eventually, you can work on letting things go, one by one.

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WEEK 3

Fuel Your Mood with Food

What you eat and drink influences your mental health. The relationship is so powerful that there are now mental health providers who specialize in nutritional psychiatry. In recent years, there has been a significant body of research linking mental wellness to a healthy diet. In some cases, a healthy diet may even relieve the symptoms of depression and anxiety, according to MH advisor Drew Ramsey, M.D., who wrote a whole book—Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety—on the topic. Try making these changes.

Day 1  Eat a Day’s Worth of Greens in One Meal
Leafy green vegetables, like spinach, kale, and chard, are full of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, which are as good for your brain as they are the rest of your body. You should aim to get about two cups of chopped greens every day. If you’re not into tossing salads or whizzing up green smoothies, try using a wok. Dump a hefty bunch of greens into a wok coated with olive oil and toss over high heat for about five minutes. You’ll get a whole day’s worth of leafy greens in 14 minutes.

Day 2  Sample the Rainbow
Filling your plate with fruits and vegetables of all colors benefits your brain. “Eating the rainbow” as Dr. Ramsey calls it, has many benefits. Among them, it has been shown to make you feel more optimistic and self-sufficient, reduce stress, and protect against depressive symptoms. Different colors of produce bring specific benefits. For instance, purple produce, including eggplants and blueberries, have anti-inflammatory properties, while orange varieties contain vitamin A. Aim for at least a half cup of produce at each meal.

Day 3  Dive Into Seafood
Fish and seafood contain omega-3 fatty acids that your brain needs to enhance nerve growth and quell inflammation. Fatty fish, like salmon, are also sources of vitamin D, which research
Day 1 Embrace Uncertainty
You can’t control everything, no matter how hard you try. Surrendering to uncertainty and all the things that are beyond your control helps you let go of stress and anxiety, and enables you to accept your circumstances. Acceptance—of what’s going on around you and how it’s making you feel—signals to your brain that you’re not under threat. Try saying to yourself,

Day 4 Shift Your Snacks
Instead of your usual snack, grab a handful of nuts. Dr. Ramsey explains that even small amounts of almonds, walnuts, or cashews can help feed your brain the nutrients it needs—including protein, fiber, zinc, and iron. These, in association with a healthy diet, also help your body make the biomolecule BDNF. Important, since some studies have found that people with major depressive disorder and anxiety disorder have low levels of BDNF.

Day 5 Add Friends
What you eat is important to your mental wellness, but so is who you eat it with, says Dr. Ramsey. When we think of and treat food as a set of nutrients, we lose a lot. “We lose a way to connect to friends, family, and the world around us. We lose our ability to connect with ourselves,” he says. Make a plan to share food with friends.

WEEK 4

Use These Mind Hacks
Sometimes, reframing what you’re experiencing or stopping to let a moment of awe sink in can change your mental wellness. This week, see how these small tweaks can change your mind and your health.

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“I surrender resistance to this circumstance.” When you can clearly see what’s happening, you’ll stop wasting energy on it and can move on.

**Day 2 Plan for Hurdles**
This isn’t about worrying about the adversity you’ll face in a day. It’s about identifying it and preparing for it. When you think ahead on how you’ll handle the hurdles that come up, problems are less likely to throw you off balance, says Emily Balcetis, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at New York University and author of *Clearer, Closer, Better: How Successful People See the World*. Athletes do this all the time. For instance, Michael Phelps famously practiced with water in his goggles in case it happened in a race. It did, and he won, anyway.

**Day 3 Change Your Language**
Knowing what you’re really feeling helps you understand it and move through it, if you need to. One thing that can de-couple you from emotions that aren’t helping you is to take away the “I am” language, says Susan David, the psychologist behind the concept of emotional agility. So, instead of “I am nervous,” try noting to yourself, “I notice I’m feeling nervous.” This reframe ensures that the emotion doesn’t define you, but that it’s something you’re dealing with and working through.

**Day 4 Balance Your Negativity with Positivity**
It’s good to let yourself truly feel worry, anxiety, and other emotions. Being biased toward negative things is hardwired in humans—it helped keep us out of danger. But you can help boost your mental well-being by also allowing some positive to trickle in, suggest Roy Baumeister, Ph.D. and John Tierney, co-authors of *The Power of Bad*. One way to do it, says Baumeister, is to have **four times as many positive thoughts** as you do negative ones. So, for instance, for every negative comment you feel compelled to make, make four positive ones.

**Day 5 Be Amazed**
Noticing all the amazing things around you **inspires awe**, which can lower stress, trigger your creativity, and boost your mood. You can get that mind-blowing feeling of awe visually, from things like noticing the ocean or the Milky Way, or even the way a puddle is reflecting the sky. You can also get it the “cerebral” way, with experiences like great talks, music, and art. Take as many moments as you can to look around and let yourself experience the health-boosting powers of awe.