

Tools You Can Use

The good news about living with a mental health and/or addiction challenge is that you can move forward and be well again. The challenging thing about living with a mental health (MH) and/or addiction (A) challenge is that you have to be active in your own self-care. While medication and talk therapy are extremely important and do help, you also have to work at becoming well.

Here are some easy things you can do to work at becoming and staying well:

1. **Use a gratitude journal.** Focusing on small things you are grateful for has been shown to help people increase their happiness even in the face of clinical depression and addiction cravings. Use a simple notebook and write down five things every day.
2. **Use yoga breathing and/or meditation.** When you find yourself anxious or upset, slowly breathing in on the count of five and out on the count of five helps. It helps too when breathing in, if you think of positive calming things and when breathing out you think of negative thoughts. Going a bit further and doing simple meditation exercises can decrease your anxiety and your negative thoughts even more.
3. **Create strategies.** Make a list of a dozen of simple things you can do if you feel your symptoms (MH) or cravings (A) building. Go to the list and use each one to help you get through that craving (A) or those symptoms (MH). Examples of things that can be found on other people's lists: pet my dog, walk up and down the stairs, go to the park, play a computer game, do math problems, read a book, play music, work on my motorcycle, clean my house, research vacation ideas, eat an apple, make sure I have had enough water.
4. **Be kind.** Focusing on someone else's needs and making their life easier has been shown to help. If you do not want to be around people, walk a dog at the local animal shelter, volunteer to organize clothes at a clothes closet, write a positive note to a neighbor.
5. **Identify your triggers.** Triggers are predictable situations that can increase your stress or sadness (MH) or increase your cravings (A.) Going to a bar is a trigger to drink too much. A family gathering can be a trigger for depression or anxiety. Identify your triggers and then plan coping strategies for each trigger you have identified.
6. **Track your symptoms (MH) or usage (A).** Tracking symptoms (MH) can help you be more aware and communicate more effectively with your doctor. You both may see patterns that help you make decisions about medication and other treatment strategies. Tracking usage (A) can help you begin to cut back and identify triggers and challenges you are facing and then work with your treatment team to strategize solutions.
7. **Exercise.** Exercise can lift sad feelings, calm anxiety and help deal with cravings. Moderate walking helps, going up and down stairs helps. Adding as little as 15 minutes a day can make a difference.

- 8. Watch your water intake.** Not drinking enough water can increase symptoms. Some medications can make people very thirsty. There is also a danger to drinking too much water. So ensure you are drinking about 8-10 glasses of water but be cautious about drinking more than that.
- 9. Be smart.** Some over the counter cold medications can trigger mania in some individuals; some contain alcohol or other sedatives. Mouthwash can contain alcohol. Grapefruit juice can interfere with some medications. Be smart and read the labels of anything you put in your mouth. Talk to your doctor about any herbal remedies or vitamins you might be taking. Some of these can interfere with medications.
- 10. Create a goal.** It can be a tiny goal like “be able to play with my kids for 15 minutes a day”, but make it really meaningful to you. Link your treatment to your goal. You are not trying to get well for you; you are trying to get well to play with your kids for 15 minutes a day. Linking your treatment to your meaningful personal goals can help when you hit rough patches.
- 11. Don’t stop.** These illnesses are not like the flu or the chicken pox. Most are lifelong illnesses like diabetes or heart disease that you will have to manage for the rest of your life. You can and will feel better. You will be well. But do not throw away your medication or stop your sobriety plan because you feel better. That’s not how these illnesses work. Talk with your doctor if you want to stop taking medication or cut down on your medication and work out a plan together.
- 12. Reach out.** These are illnesses where people often stay isolated. But being with people actually helps you feel better and helps you cope. So reach out. Take a walk with a friend. Go for coffee with a family member. Join a support group or twelve step-like group such as NAMI, DBSA, (MH) AA, Al-anon (A) among many others. We can help you find a group near you.
- 13.** Call the national suicide hotline for help 24 hours day 1-800-273-8255.

We believe in you. Millions of people living with a mental health or addiction challenge move to wellness every year. You can too.

