

Why is it important to take care of our mental health as we age?

Mental health is important at every stage of life. As people age, certain life changes that impact their mental health, such as coping with a serious illness, losing a loved one, or a stressful event. Although many people will adjust to these life changes, some may experience feelings of grief, isolation, or loneliness. When these feelings persist, they can lead to mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety.

Mental health problems can have a high impact on an older person's ability to carry out basic daily living activities, reducing their independency, autonomy, and quality of life. The first step is self-care to assist with our mental health.

Here are some self-care tips:

- **Regular exercise.** 30 minutes of walking every day can boost your mood and improve your health. Small amounts of exercise add up, don't be discouraged if you can't do 30 minutes at one time.
- **Eat healthy, regular meals and stay hydrated.** A balanced diet with plenty of water can improve your energy and focus throughout the day. Include plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains have been associated with positive affect on your mood and well-being. For some, decreasing caffeine and alcohol consumption can be helpful too.
- **Make sleep a priority.** Stick to a schedule, and make sure you're getting enough sleep. Reduce blue light exposure from your phone or computer before bedtime as they make it harder to fall asleep. Aim for 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night.
- **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore relaxation or wellness programs or apps, which may incorporate meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises. Add other healthy activities you enjoy, such as listening to music, reading, spending time in nature, and hobbies.
- **Set goals and priorities.** Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you start to feel like you're taking on too much. Appreciate what you have accomplished at the end of the day.
- **Practice gratitude.** Remind yourself daily of things you are grateful for. Be specific. Write them down or replay them in your mind.
- **Focus on positivity.** Identify and challenge your negative and unhelpful thoughts.
- **Stay connected.** Reach out to friends or family who can provide emotional support and practical help.

Self-care looks different for everyone, and it is important to find what you need and enjoy. It may take trial and error to discover what works best for you.

Effective treatment options are available to help older adults manage their mental health and improve overall quality of life. Recognizing the signs and seeing a health care provider are the first steps to getting treatment.

When should I seek professional help?

Seek professional help if you are experiencing severe or distressing symptoms that have lasted 2 weeks or more, such as:

- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Changes in appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning because of mood.
- Difficulty concentrating, ongoing headaches.
- Loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable.
- Inability to complete usual tasks and activities.
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, restlessness, anxiety, aggressiveness

Written by Laurie Zirilli, MA RD CDN, contract RD for Oneida County Office for the Aging (OFA). OFA provides nutrition counseling and education for seniors. Questions about services and programs for older adults and caregivers, including Senior Nutrition Program, call Oneida County Office for the Aging at 315-798-5456.

Reference: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/older-adults-and-mental-health>

<https://www.heart.org/en/news/2022/03/30/how-to-boost-your-mood-through-food>

If you are in crisis, call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or chat 988lifeline.org, or text the Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741). Locally call MCAT with the Neighborhood Center (315)732-6228.

Caprese Grilled Cheese

- 2 pieces whole grain bread of choice
- 2 slices fresh mozzarella, about ¼ inch thick (can buy pre-packaged mozzarella ball in cheese section of most grocery stores)
- 2 slices tomato, about ¼ inch thick
- 2 teaspoons basil pesto or fresh basil leaves or dried basil
- Spreadable butter

Directions:

1. Heat skillet to medium heat. Cover one side of each slice of bread with a thin layer of butter.
3. Place one piece of bread, butter-side down, in pan.
4. Layer the two mozzarella slices; two tomato slice and basil of choice on top of bread.
6. Top with remaining piece of bread.

7. Cook sandwich for 2-3 minutes on each side or until bread is golden brown and cheese is melted.

Optional: drizzle sandwich with balsamic vinegar or use for dipping.