

10 tips for better mental health in 2023

Simple habits such as staying active and disconnecting from screens can help, say experts



It is okay to reach out to a loved one or health professional for help. Speaking to others about one's problems can help put things in perspective. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



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In 2022, entrepreneur Viano Spruyt began taking 10- to 30-minute walks in the sun every day. The 25-year-old founder of mental health platform Huddlehumans says: "This change in lifestyle has improved my mental health significantly, as moving my body and exercising in the sun do help reduce my stress levels."

In 2023, he plans to disconnect from his electronic devices at least an hour before bedtime in his quest for better sleep. He usually gets three to four hours of sleep a night, though he aims for at least seven.

Simple habits such as staying active and disconnecting from screens can help improve one's

mental well-being, say psychologists and health experts The Straits Times spoke with. Here are their top tips for better mental health.

1. GET ACTIVE

Walk, swim, dance or take up a new sport. Ms Leah Tan, senior clinical psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), says engaging in physical activity for 20 minutes a day can help improve one's mood and overall well-being.

Ms Jane Goh, senior assistant director of creative and youth services at the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH), adds: "Consider choosing something you enjoy to make it a consistent habit."

Exercise does not need to be high intensity or high impact to help, says Dr Evelyn Boon, head of psychology at Singapore General Hospital (SGH). If you do not like running, a daily walk can help you decompress and release tension. She adds: "Don't be glued to your phone when you walk. Look around."

2. DISCONNECT FROM SCREENS

Take a break after every 30 to 45 minutes of looking at an electronic screen, suggests Ms Tan from IMH, as "excessive screen time is linked to an increase in sleep problems and obesity".

Experts also suggest unplugging from screens at least 30 minutes before bedtime to help you wind down.

Taking screen breaks can help establish boundaries between work and home life, says clinical psychologist Samven Kang, founder of private practice Psych Connect. "In today's digital world, it's easy to feel pressure to be available 24 hours a day. Establish some work-life boundaries for yourself. That might mean making a rule not to check e-mail from home in the evening, or not answering the phone during dinner."

3. CONNECT WITH PEOPLE

A spokesman for the Health Promotion Board (HPB) says it is im-

portant to maintain close relationships. "No matter how independent you are, human beings are social creatures and it's always reassuring to know someone is there for you."

HPB's It's Okay To Reach Out campaigns in 2021 and 2022 aimed to raise awareness of mental health and encourage people to seek support. "Reaching out is necessary and important because it could help us to put things in perspective," says the spokesman. "Speaking to someone can sometimes offer us new insights or help us view things from a different perspective. Sometimes, it is through others that we realise things may not be as bad as they appear to be."

Dr Kang, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology, says that after a traumatic event, people often want to withdraw from others, but isolation only makes things worse.

"Connecting to others face to face will help you heal, so make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone," she says. You do not have to

talk about the trauma, but feeling engaged and accepted by others can bring comfort.

4. MAKE TIME FOR REST AND SLEEP

Recent surveys show that Singapore residents are overworked and time-starved, with little room for self-care or rest.

According to consultancy firm Mercer's 2022 Global Talent Trends Study, 85 per cent of Singapore-based employees said they were at risk of burnout. According to Philips' 2022 Healthy Living in Asia survey, which polled 4,000 people in the region, 50 per cent of those in Singapore said lack of time due to work and family commitments prevents them from taking care of their health.

But experts point out that people must prioritise rest - breaks from work and other responsibilities such as caregiving - and sleep to maintain physical and mental health.

This is not easy. Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist from Gleneagles Medical Centre, says self-care requires determination and discipline, and changing your mindset.

"Self-care and personal time are important for us to rejuvenate, recharge and be more effective in what we do. These are not acts of selfishness or laziness, but are important for us to be able to sustain our work in the long term."

Mr Tan Kwang Cheuk, chief executive of the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), notes that caregivers are especially vulnerable to developing depression and anxiety because of the relentless nature of caregiving, but support is available.

An integrated community mental health network developed by AIC and its partners supports people with mental health conditions and their caregivers, and helps connect them to the appropriate interventions. There are also community support groups and financial grants.

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Track stressors, laugh more and play



Adults need time to play too. Having fun can help boost your mental well-being. PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO

FROM C1

5 STAY PRESENT, PRACTISE ACCEPTANCE

In an uncertain world where climate change, the risk of Covid-19 reinfection and inflation are making daily life harder, Singaporeans can benefit from focusing on the present moment and not worrying about what they cannot control.

Ms Tan from IMH suggests taking a mindful walk, focusing on your breathing to help bring the mind back to the present. While people can dwell on worst-case scenarios during periods of uncertainty, she says it is healthier to focus on what is within your control, such as staying active or spending time with loved ones.

Dr Calista Chong, family physician at Redwood @ TPI Clinic and Surgery, counsels patients who are worried about the risk of Covid-19 reinfections by reminding them that vaccinations and antiviral medications are available. She also reminds them to eat well and exercise regularly to boost their immune system.

Talking to a loved one or mental health professional may also help you cope with uncertainty, say experts. Mr Parandaman T., principal forensic psychologist and trauma programme lead at Psych Connect, says: "It is important to recalibrate ourselves through redefining the meaning of the life that we are



leading, having a person to talk to, connecting with support groups, being aware of our vulnerabilities and seeking psychological help."

6 CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF REGULARLY

A spokesman for HPB says: "All of us experience varying emotions, ranging from happiness to sadness to anger and more. On some days, we may feel energised, while on other days, we may feel stressed. It is normal to feel all kinds of emotions because mental well-being is

about accepting and embracing all these emotions."

When troubled, HPB suggests taking a pause to observe your emotions and think about the underlying cause. Physical health can affect mental well-being, for example. Hunger and tiredness can trigger negative emotions.

7 TRACK STRESSORS

Dr Kang of Psych Connect says keeping a journal for a couple of weeks can help you identify what

Track your stressors in a journal and learn to develop healthy responses to stress triggers.

tension rise. Exercise is a great stressbuster. Yoga can be an excellent choice, but any form of physical activity is beneficial."

9 LAUGH MORE

Develop a sense of humour and learn to see the lighter side of life, say experts. Dr Bora from SGH says: "It is important to be able to not take everything so seriously and be able to laugh at things and at ourselves."

10 GET CREATIVE

Ms Goh of SAMH says that play is just as important for adults as it is for children. "Among its many benefits, adult play can boost creativity and help one to cope better with stress."

Play can mean having fun with friends, cycling outdoors and playing board games. She suggests avoiding the sensory overload of gaming on electronic devices. "More importantly, do give yourself permission to awaken and reconnect with your inner child," she adds.

8 DEVELOP HEALTHY RESPONSES TO STRESS

Does stress lead you to snack unhealthily or become irritable? Dr Kang says: "Instead of attempting to fight stress with fast food or alcohol, do your best to make healthy choices when you feel the

HELPLINES

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours) /1-767 (24 hours)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Community Health Assessment Team: 6493-6500/1

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 1800-353-5800

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- stayprepared.sg/mentalhealth
- ec2.sg
- www.tinklefriend.sg
- www.chatmentalhealth.sg

SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS

Caregivers in need of assistance can call the AIC Hotline at 1800-650-6360, walk in to AIC Links located at public and community hospitals, or go to www.aic.sg for more information on services, financial grants, self-help tips and resources such as A Caregiver's Guide To Avoid Burnout (strag/xyfjw) for those looking to join a support group, details are available at strag/xyfjw

OTHER RESOURCES

HPB's MindSG (MindSG.gov.sg) has tools and resources to help users check in on their mental health and learn when to reach out.

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* This is the second of a two-part series. For 15 things to do for a healthier 2023, go to str.sg/healthier2023