

Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Families During Difficult Times

Promoting a Family's Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being

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The purpose of this fact sheet is to help families understand how they can be healthy while going through a very stressful time in their lives. It will introduce information on your mental, physical, and spiritual health and well-being, as well as offer strategies for staying healthy while dealing with a disaster. Living a healthy lifestyle by taking care of your mental, physical and spiritual health is critical to protecting yourself from physical and emotional stress during any disaster. A healthy body copes better when confronted with stressful conditions.

Mental Health and Well-Being

What is mental health? How can you stay mentally healthy when confronted with a natural disaster such as drought, earthquakes, tornado, or a human-made disaster? In a recent study by the American Psychiatric Association, it was recognized that mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. The study identified characteristics that make up mental health called “positive psychology” (Holmes, 2003). Some of the qualities of positive mental health are as follows:

The Ability to Enjoy Life

The ability to enjoy life is essential to good mental health. Focus on the positive things in your life and take time to enjoy each day. Plan activities that involve your family and children. Enjoy your life and be grateful for good health and the wealth of your friendships. Each day, think of the gifts you do have in your life. Think positive!

Resilience

The ability to bounce back from adversity has been referred to as “resilience.” It has long been known that some people handle stress better than others. Those individuals who cope well with stress share the characteristic of “resilience”. You can build your personal resiliency by developing your stress management skills, exercising regularly, consuming a healthy diet, and having a strong sense of spirituality.

Balance

A balance in life seems to result in greater mental health. We all need to balance time spent socially with time spent alone. Extreme social isolation may even result in losing touch with what is really happening in our lives. Those who ignore the need for some solitary time also risk losing focus on reality. Balancing social time and solitude seem to be the key. Other areas where balance is important are between work and play, sleep and wakefulness, rest and exercise, and time spent indoors and outdoors.

Flexibility

Working on making our expectations more flexible can improve our mental health. Emotional flexibility (being able to experience both happiness and sadness) may be just as important as cognitive flexibility (being able to change your mind from day to day). Mentally healthy people experience a range of emotions and allow themselves to express these feelings. People who are firm and rigid about their opinions and refuse to change their views can develop mental health problems.

Self-Actualization

Celebrate the gifts of your life and your personal potential. Recognize the gifts, talents, knowledge, and skills that you have. This is the process of recognition of self and self-actualization. In times of crisis it is important to focus on the personal self and continue to develop those things you have control over and let go of the crisis that you cannot change. You can always work on yourself, which is in your control (Holmes, 2003).

Physical Health and Well-Being

People of all ages can improve their health and well-being by being active on a regular basis. Regular physical activity can reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression. It will help reduce high blood pressure and promotes psychological well being. In fact, regular physical activity is a must, especially during times of stress and crisis. Healthy levels of physical activity keep a person feeling better, looking better, and more able to cope with stress. If you lead a sedentary lifestyle, try to exercise at least three times a week for at least 30 minutes per session. Don't overdo it, however. Take one or two days off each week to allow the body to recuperate. Find an exercise activity (yoga, pilates, walking, deep breathing) that fits into your schedule and is comfortable for you. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health professional to determine what kind of exercise is right for you. Visit the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion website for more specific information at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp>.

Nutritional Health and Well-Being

What you eat is important! Follow the Food Guide Pyramid to guide good eating habits. According to Andrew Weil, a University of Arizona professor and author of *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*, we should "get rid of all hydrogenated fats." Read food labels and select foods with fats that are mono-unsaturated and poly-unsaturated. Try to avoid saturated fats and trans fats. Select good quality meat and fish. Consume fresh fruits & vegetables. Eat legumes (beans), and select natural carbohydrates. It is also important to know what a serving size is. Many Americans consume too many calories per day because they are not aware of the amount they consume. Visit the USDA website for specific nutrition information at <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/>.

Spiritual Health and Well-Being

What is spirituality?

“Spirituality is an awareness of the divine or sacred core that underlies everyday life,” says pediatrician Sandra Hassisnk, MD. Doctor Hassisnk views spirituality as “an ongoing search for meaning, which may involve an appreciation for creation and the natural world as well as traditional spiritual pathways.” This search can be conducted on your own or as a part of a larger group or a religious community, friends, or your own family.

Doctors and scientists once avoided the study of spirituality in connection to medicine, but within the past ten years, some experts have made significant findings. Studies show that spirituality and faith can help to promote good health and to fight disease by the following:

- offering additional social supports, such as faith-based and spiritual groups
- improving coping skills through prayer and a philosophy that all things have a purpose

Spiritual Belief

Spiritual beliefs are an important part of how many people deal with life’s joys and hardships. Spirituality can provide people with a sense of purpose and guidelines for living. Also consider doing the following:

- Meditate: try yoga
- Breathe strongly – it influences mind, body, and moods (Andrew Weil)
- Start an art project
- Join a faith-based community group
- Volunteer to help others in need

How Spirituality Can Effect Your Health

Kathy Hogan-Bruen, a clinical psychologist and senior director of prevention for the National Mental Health Association, says that “there is evidence to suggest that faith can be helpful. We do find that people with an active faith life report fewer mental health problems. Meditation can also help a lot of people.”

Resources

National Institute of Mental Health Information Center: NIMH offers a variety of publications, available at no cost, to help people with mental disorders, the general public, mental health and health care practitioners, and researchers gain a better understanding of mental illnesses and the research programs of the NIMH. <http://infocenter.nimh.nih.gov/index.cfm>
OR call (301) 443-4513

United States Department of Agriculture: This site is the gateway to many federally sponsored resources related to nutrition. <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/>

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: Sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this site includes information regarding the prevention and control of such chronic diseases as diabetes and heart disease through healthy behaviors. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp>

National Mental Health Association: The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) is the country's oldest and largest nonprofit organization addressing all aspects of mental health and mental illness. With more than 340 affiliates nationwide. NMHA works to improve the mental health of all Americans, through advocacy, education, research and service.

<http://www.nmha.org>

National Institute of Mental Health: This site offers information from NIMH about the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illnesses. Included are brochures and information sheets, reports, press releases, fact sheets, and other educational materials.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm>

Staying Healthy in stressful times: Information on taking care of your body with proper nutrition and exercise. <http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/stayinghealthy.pdf>

Farm Stress Management Plan: Pamphlet that includes nine steps on how farm families can eliminate stress if they plan ahead. <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/pubs/PDF/CHFD-E-36.pdf>

Time Management—Making the Most of a Limited Resource: Information on time management processes, includes a matrix of important/urgent tasks, a “to do list”, and daily planning exercises. <http://www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/PDFs/FS671.pdf>

Transitions and Changes: Practical Strategies Fact Sheet: Fact sheet on transitions and changes, includes examples of transitions and changes, suggests practical strategies for successful transitions. <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10214.html>

Transitions and Changes: Who Copes Well Fact Sheet: Fact sheet that is an overview of research on who copes well with transitions and changes and why.

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10215.html>

Supporting Families Following a Disaster: Fact sheets covering special needs of families during difficult times. http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

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