MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

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Coping With Stress

April is Stress Awareness Month, a time dedicated to acknowledging the commonality of stress and empowering individuals to manage it effectively. Stress is the body's natural response to an external cause. Common stressors may be financial, social, occupational or related to life changes. However, recognizing the signs of stress and practicing coping strategies can help one better navigate life's challenges.

Stress is not considered a mental health condition, but it can cause other mental health challenges. It can present itself in emotional and cognitive symptoms, such as anxiety, irritability, mood swings, feeling overwhelmed and difficulty concentrating. Stress can also manifest as physical symptoms like headaches, fatigue, and changes in appetite or sleep patterns. Stress may even cause behavior changes, such as withdrawal from social activities, increased substance use, procrastination or neglecting responsibilities.

Remember, stress is a natural response to everyday pressures or demands. Some stress is expected and OK, but prolonged stress that is not addressed can become a serious health concern. While it's impossible to eliminate stress entirely, you are in control of how you respond. Here are coping strategies to try when you're feeling stressed:

- Plan and prioritize your most important responsibilities.
- Limit interruptions so you don't have to refocus each time you're distracted.
- Take breaks away from your workstation to regroup mentally.
- Listen to music or do a relaxing activity (e.g., reading) to help you calm down.
- Limit caffeine intake, as this stimulant can exacerbate stress.
- Exercise to work off your stress.
- Get at least seven hours of quality sleep each night.

Coping strategies will depend on your stressor, so adjust accordingly. If you're experiencing symptoms of chronic stress, contact your health care provider or employee assistance program for guidance and support.

6 Tips to Reduce Overthinking

If you have ever found yourself in a cycle of negative thoughts that do not seem to end, which led you to second-guess your decisions or imagine worst-case scenarios to the point of exhaustion, the chances are that you were overthinking.

Persistent overthinking can cause significant distress and make it difficult to enjoy your life. To alleviate this negative thinking, consider the following six strategies:

1. **Take deep breaths.** Studies show that even two minutes of deep breathing can help turn off the body's stress response, calming the overthinking behavior.

2. **Meditate.** Regular meditation helps clear your mind and reduce stress. Find a quiet area and practice meditation for at least five minutes daily to avoid falling deeply into your worries.

3. **Distract yourself.** Highly engaging activities can help you break the cycle of overthinking. Pick an activity you enjoy, such as working out, reading or playing a video game. These healthy distractions may make you less likely to overthink.

4. **Spend time outdoors.** Immersion in nature can calm the mind and combat anxiety and depression. Try to spend at least 120 minutes per week in natural environments.

5. **Practice self-compassion.** Forgiving yourself for past mistakes and accepting things you cannot change are acts of self-compassion. Be kind to yourself, and remember that you are a work in progress, just like everyone else.

6. **Do a reality check.** Remember that thoughts are not necessarily facts. Just because you're thinking something doesn't mean it's accurate or realistic. Talking to a trusted individual can challenge negative thoughts and help you realize whether what you're overthinking reflects reality or not.

Contact a mental health professional for further guidance.

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