

## Try Physical Activity to Improve Mental Health

Mental health is essential to everyone's overall health and well-being, and mental illnesses are common and treatable. So much of what we do physically impacts us mentally – it's important to pay attention to both our physical health and our mental health, which can help us achieve overall wellness.

This May, during Mental Health Month and National Physical Fitness and Sports Month, South Heartland District Health Department is raising awareness about the connection between physical health and mental health. A healthy lifestyle can help to prevent the onset or worsening of mental health conditions, as well as chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. A healthy lifestyle can also help people recover from these conditions.

For those dealing with a chronic health condition and the people who care for them, it can be especially important to focus on mental health. According to Mental Health America, "often mental illnesses and other chronic conditions co-occur. People with cancer often have depression; people with schizophrenia often have diabetes; and people with chronic pain often have both physical and behavioral health challenges."

Getting more active can boost your mood, sharpen your focus, reduce your stress, and improve your sleep. How much activity does it take? Try setting a goal to meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's physical activity recommendations. For youth, this means 60 minutes of moderate physical activity each day. For adults it means 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week plus muscle-strengthening activity on two days each week.

What can you do to help yourself and others to be more physically active and improve your mental state? Find a reason to laugh, go for a walk with a friend, meditate, play with a pet, listen to music, or work from home once a week. Making small changes can go a long toward improving your physical and mental health.

Being motivated and finding the time to be physically active might seem like a challenge, but try following these easy steps:

1. Find a motivating partner, such as a pet or a good friend
2. Park further away from your destination
3. Take the stairs
4. Do active yard work, such as push mowing
5. Clean your house (it counts!)
6. Make a few extra laps around the grocery store

It all adds up, when you move your way! And whether you go to the gym, church, meditate daily, or simply find time to enjoy that cup of tea each morning, it is important to check in and connect with yourself.

Mental health conditions should be addressed long before they reach the most critical points in the disease process and understanding yourself is step one. Mental illnesses are not only common, they are treatable. Experiencing symptoms such as loss of sleep, feeling tired for no reason, feeling low, feeling anxious, or hearing voices, shouldn't be ignored or brushed aside in the hopes that they go away. Like other diseases, we need to address these symptoms early, identify the underlying disease, and plan an appropriate course of action on a path towards overall health.

One key setting where mental health and physical activity can be addressed early is in our local schools. Schools across the South Heartland Health District are working to address these issues by forming wellness teams and looking at the school environment as a whole, not just focusing on one element. Schools are concerned with the mental health of their students and they are working to promote physical activity time for their students and staff. Schools know that increased physical activity means better sleep, better mood and better grades.

For example, some schools are incorporating more "move" time during the school day to get everyone out of their seats, moving and refocused. Other local schools participate in the *Girls on the Run* program, which has a mission to "inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident using a fun, experience-based curriculum which creatively integrates running." This program incorporates physical activity to achieve individual empowerment and mental wellness.

Mental illnesses are real, and recovery is always the goal. Living a healthy lifestyle may not be easy but it can be achieved by gradually making small changes and building on those successes. Try to find a balance between work and play, strive to navigate the ups and downs of life, and take a path that focuses on both mind and body. Take a step down this path that leads toward better physical and mental health!

You can learn more by contacting South Heartland District Health Department at 877-238-7595 or by following these links for Mental Health America [www.mentalhealthamerica.net/](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/) and the Move Your Way Campaign <https://health.gov/paguidelines/moveyourway/>.

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