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Mind/Body Connection

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Mind/Body Connection: How Your Emotions Affect Your Health

What is good emotional health?

People with good emotional health are aware of their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They have learned healthy ways to cope with the stress and problems that are a normal part of life. They feel good about themselves and have healthy relationships.

However, many things that happen in your life can disrupt your emotional health and lead to strong feelings of sadness, stress or anxiety. These things include:

- Being laid off from your job
- Having a child leave or return home
- Dealing with the death of a loved one
- Getting divorced or married
- Suffering an illness or an injury
- Getting a job promotion
- Experiencing money problems
- Moving to a new home or having a baby.

“Good” changes can be just as stressful as “bad” changes.

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How can my emotions affect my health?

Your body responds to the way you think, feel and act. This is often called the “mind/body connection.” When you are stressed, anxious or upset, your body tries to tell you that something isn’t right. For

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example, high blood pressure or a stomach ulcer might develop after a particularly stressful event, such as the death of a loved one. The following may be physical signs that your emotional health is out of balance:

- Back pain
- Change in appetite
- Chest pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Extreme tiredness
- General aches and pains
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia (trouble sleeping)
- Lightheadedness
- Palpitations (the feeling that your heart is racing)
- Sexual problems
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck
- Sweating
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

Poor emotional health can weaken your body's immune system, making you more likely to get colds and other infections during emotionally difficult times. Also, when you are feeling stressed, anxious or upset, you may not take care of your health as well as you should. You may not feel like exercising, eating nutritious foods or taking medicine that your doctor prescribes. Abuse of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs may also be a sign of poor emotional health.

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Why does my doctor need to know about my emotions?

You may not be used to talking to your doctor about your feelings or problems in your personal life. But remember, he or she can't always tell that you're feeling stressed, anxious or upset just by looking at you. It's important to be honest with your doctor if you are having these feelings. First, he or she will need to make sure that other health problems aren't causing your physical symptoms. If your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems, you and your doctor can address the emotional causes of your symptoms. Your doctor may suggest ways to treat your physical symptoms while you

work together to improve your emotional health.

If your negative feelings are so strong that they keep you from enjoying life and they don't go away, it's especially important for you to talk to your doctor. You may have what doctors call "major depression." Depression is a medical illness that can be treated with individualized counseling, medicine or with both.

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How can I improve my emotional health?

First, try to recognize your emotions and understand why you are having them. Sorting out the causes of sadness, stress and anxiety in your life can help you manage your emotional health. The following are some other helpful tips.

Express your feelings in appropriate ways. If feelings of stress, sadness or anxiety are causing physical problems, keeping these feelings inside can make you feel worse. It's OK to let your loved ones know when something is bothering you. However, keep in mind that your family and friends may not be able to help you deal with your feelings appropriately. At these times, ask someone outside the situation- -such as your family doctor, a counselor or a religious advisor- -for advice and support to help you improve your emotional health.

Live a balanced life. Try not to obsess about the problems at work, school or home that lead to negative feelings. This doesn't mean you have to pretend to be happy when you feel stressed, anxious or upset. It's important to deal with these negative feelings, but try to focus on the positive things in your life too. You may want to use a journal to keep track of things that make you feel happy or peaceful. Some research has shown that having a positive outlook can improve your quality of life and give your health a boost. You may also need to find ways to let go of some things in your life that make you feel stressed and overwhelmed. Make time for things you enjoy.

Calm your mind and body. Relaxation methods, such as meditation, are useful ways to bring your emotions into balance. Meditation is a form of guided thought. It can take many forms. For example, you may do it by exercising, stretching or breathing deeply. Ask your family doctor for advice about relaxation methods.

Take care of yourself. To have good emotional health, it's important to take care of your body by having a regular routine for eating healthy meals, getting enough sleep and exercising to relieve pent-up

tension. Avoid overeating and don't abuse drugs or alcohol. Using drugs or alcohol just causes other problems, such as family and health problems.

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