westcoast SCI
ACTIVE PHYSIOTHERAPY

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Managing Your Mental Health

Managing our mental health is a very complex task and it is something that everyone will need to do regularly during their lifetime. Struggling with mental health can manifest in a huge variety of ways and will look different for each person (Eg. Apathy, exhaustion, zoning out, burn out, loneliness, sadness, stress, anxiety)

If you are struggling with your mental health right now, it is very important to talk to someone. Just sharing your experience can be a great tool to help your mental state. Talking to a friend, parents or your doctor is important for helping you to get any assistance you may need in managing mental health

There are several strategies that you can put in place to help with maintaining your own mental health as well. Mental health is something that takes a lot of work to maintain. Setting up good habits can put you in a better position to tackle problems before they come up or manage problems as they arise. It is very normal to have fluctuations in mental health. Having a good plan in place and a good support network is essential for when things get tough.
Here are some strategies that may be helpful!

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is a very commonly used strategy for managing mental health and this is because it has been shown to be very effective for managing stress and anxiety. Mindfulness is the practice of training the brain to be present and stop focusing on the past or future. This can take several different forms and there are tons of apps that can help!

a) One thing you can try is called a body scan. This is a mindfulness practice where you focus on the sensation from each part of your body.
b) Another mindfulness practice is something called a BreathWork or deep breathing technique. By practicing proper breathing techniques, we are able to stimulate something called a vagus nerve in our chest. This sends a signal to our nervous system to move into a more relaxed state.

Other resources for mindfulness meditation:
- Guide to Mindfulness and Meditation by Headspace on Netflix
- Headspace app
- Calm app
- Insight Timer app
- Breathwrk app
- Westcoast SCI's YouTube Videos: Body scan & BreathWork

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Sleep: Sleep is absolutely imperative in the maintenance of all types of health, it is what helps the body recover each day. Sleep appears to have many important functions for the body:

- Almost every physiological process and organ in our body has been shown to benefit from having enough sleep.
- Sleep helps us to learn, memorize, and make logical decisions and choices.
- It plays a big role in healthy brain development in childhood and adolescence (brains still developing to approx age 25) and has a large impact on emotional regulation.
- Sleep also helps to maintain the health of our immune system which can play a role in preventing illness or infection.
- Adequate sleep is associated with healthy body weight management, can contribute to a healthy cardiovascular system, and can help us recover from injuries.

Being deprived of sleep changes the pattern of how cortisol (a stress hormone) is released in our day, meaning that cortisol gets released more consistently throughout our day instead of the normal peaks and valleys that should occur. Higher cortisol levels over a long period can negatively impact our immune system, and have been associated with depression, infection, inflammatory conditions, fatigue, cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, cancer, obesity and even mortality.

Sleep hygiene tips:
- Try to stick to a consistent schedule. Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day (even on weekends) can help regulate your sleep cycle.
- Exercising at least 30 minutes a day can be really helpful for sleep! However strenuous exercise too close to bedtime (2-3 hours before bed) can interfere with sleep, so aim to exercise earlier in the day if possible.
- Avoid caffeine after 12 pm if you are having trouble sleeping: caffeine has a half-life of 5-7 hours, meaning that the cup you drank at 10 am is still in your system at 50% capacity at 4:00pm. If you drink coffee later in the afternoon or evening, it can play a large role in keeping you awake.
- Napping can be helpful to catch up on sleep when needed, but aim for earlier naps if possible. For those who are trying to maintain a regular sleeping schedule at night, napping after 3pm can make it tough to fall asleep. Try to limit naps to 20-30 minutes to avoid feeling extra groggy and to avoid interfering with night time sleep. For shift workers, taking a short nap (less than 40 minutes) before a night shift can help with maintaining alertness.
- A night-time ritual to help you relax before bed such as reading, or listening to music can be really helpful to relax you before sleep.
- And if you have trouble sleeping, don't immediately reach for your phone as it can be stimulating. If you find yourself awake for longer than 20 minutes, get up and do a relaxing activity before you are sleepy enough to go back to bed.

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Nutrition: Let's talk about gut health!

The gut is also known as our gastrointestinal system and it is composed of the stomach and intestines. It is responsible for absorbing nutrients, a lot of our immune system function as well as digesting and eliminating waste. Our gastrointestinal system is connected to the brain through its own branch of nerves called the enteric nervous system. This means that things we eat affect our brain and how we feel.

Inflammation in the gut has been linked to stress and mental health problems. Focusing on a healthy diet can help with stress as well. If you are someone with chronic stomach aches, this can actually be affecting your mental health as well. Foods that cause inflammation in the gut will also send a stress response to your brain and affect how you feel. This is significant because it can be constantly affecting you. It also works the other way around. Stress you are experiencing in life can also cause more stomach problems.

Focusing on healthy food choices can improve our stress response and aid with gastrointestinal and mental health. Healthy food options may be different for each individual. Sometimes it can take some trial and error but people should avoid foods that cause an inflammatory response in their gut. Foods that cause inflammation in your gut may be different for each person, so focus on foods that make your body feel good and avoid foods that produce stomach pain.

For more information, seek the assistance of a registered dietitian or naturopathic doctor. Consulting a health professional to optimize your gut health, can also help with stress and anxiety.

Exercise: Exercise is another great way to manage all types of health. Physical activity in teenagers may improve physical self-perceptions and self-esteem. Physical activity has also been shown to help with depression. Being physically inactive has been associated with increasing the risk of depression by 40%. Exercise increases endorphins that make us feel good, helps regulate hormones, helps the body transition into a relaxed state after workout, makes it easier to sleep and increases energy.

Here's a Quick Full Body Workout that you can do at home:
Link to Video: https://youtu.be/n6at8w6pO98
   1) Hip Thrusts 4x15
   2) Bent Over Rows 4x12
   3) Reverse Lunges 4x10

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4) Push Ups 4x8
5) Deadbugs 4x10

Remember, mental health looks different for everyone and everyone will have a different response to these strategies. The important thing is reaching out if you need help and finding what works best for you. Additional resources for mental health can be found here:

https://www.fraserhealth.ca/health-topics-a-to-z/mental-health-and-substance-use#.Yf7XQxNKiEs

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