

Raising Awareness About Mental Health

This article is one of a series written by the Reading Board of Health intended to provide Reading residents with scientific data on human health and welfare topics. We hope the information presented will help people make informed decisions regarding these issues.

Mental illnesses are common in this country. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 18.1% of our adult population, ages 18-55, have some kind of anxiety disorder and 6.7% have a depressive disorder. These mental health diseases can be accompanied by substance abuse when the person suffering attempts to self-medicate. It is important to recognize that mental illness is a disease and should not be accompanied by shame.

Early identification of mental health illnesses is key. Primary care physicians can offer a first line of defense in detecting the earliest signs of these issues. Consider asking your doctor to give you and any children under your care a basic mental health screen. In addition, the Reading Coalition Against Substance Abuse offers Mental Health First Aid trainings for residents and adults that work in Reading. The program covers the warning signs of mental health problems and teaches individuals how to help someone in crisis. Learn more about trainings and local mental health/substance abuse resources at www.reading.k12.ma.us/community/RCASA.

If further medical intervention is necessary, medication, talk therapy, or both might be recommended. In addition to medications, there are several lifestyle changes, including sleep, exercise, attitude, and social interaction, that can help strengthen a person's mental well-being.

Lack of sleep can make you irritable and impair your concentration and coping skills. The National Sleep Foundation has released sleep guidelines based on age. Children should get between 9-11 hours of sleep each night, teenagers between 8-10, adults between 7-9 hours, and older adults about 7-8 hours.

Numerous studies have shown that exercise improves mental health. A 2005 study from the Harvard Medical School found that walking fast for 35 minutes a day five times a week or 60 minutes a day for three times a week had a significant positive influence on mild to moderate depression. Similarly, a 2008 study published in the scientific journal *Depression and Anxiety* demonstrated beneficial effects of exercise on anxiety.

Attitude and social interaction also play an important role in mental well-being. According to a study available at the National Institutes of Health website, optimists typically are more resilient to stress and are inclined to use more appropriate coping strategies. For people who tend to be more pessimistic, there are methods that can help one develop a more positive outlook. For example, according to the Mayo Clinic, humor can be learned. Find a way to laugh about your own situations in order to help reduce your stress. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing.

Creating and maintaining relationships are also highly associated with a positive life outlook. According to the University of Rochester Medical Center, staying socially active and maintaining interpersonal relationships can help you maintain good emotional health.

Put succinctly, for better mental health, get a good night's sleep and exercise regularly, try to maintain a positive outlook, and stay connected with friends and family.