

Mental Health Traps & Tips



Our mind and mood are keenly sensitive to the world around us. Distressing life events—a bad breakup, unemployment, the death of a loved one—often leave us rattled or sad, of course, but our daily routine and patterns of thinking also have a big impact on our mood. Bad habits like skimping on sleep, drinking too much, or nursing grudges can undermine our mental health, whether that means a brief episode of the blues or full-blown depression and anxiety. Happily, many of these mental pitfalls can be avoided. Below are 12 of the most common and tips for how to steer clear of their sometimes devastating effects.

1. Avoiding Exercise

Why it's harmful: In addition to keeping your body in shape, physical activity plays a key role in propping up mood; it can even help ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety, research suggests. Regular exercise appears to have a positive effect on brain chemicals and mood-related hormones, and it may confer psychological benefits (such as increased confidence) that foster better mental health.

What you can do: If you struggle to stick to a workout schedule, it might be too ambitious. To start, try setting aside 15 to 20 minutes per day for a brisk walk. Studies have shown that even modest exercise routines are associated with improved mood.

2. Ignoring Clutter

Why it's harmful: Even if your pack-rat tendencies don't rise to the level of hoarding, unchecked clutter in your home can be a subtle source of psychological distress. Clutter makes us feel weighed down, both literally and figuratively. It has been shown to be related to depression, anxiety, and even weight gain.

What you can do: If you haven't used something in 12 months, give it away to someone who can make good use of it. That will actually make you feel good and instead of spending your money on more stuff, consider saving up for a special dinner or vacation. Research shows that these so-called experiential purchases actually buy us more happiness than material goods do.

3. Not Sleeping Enough

Why it's harmful: Anyone who's missed out on sleep thanks to a deadline or bawling infant is familiar with the irritability, stress, and gloom that can set in the next day. If sleep deprivation and disturbances become chronic, they increase a person's risk of developing depression or anxiety disorders.

What you can do: Prioritize sleep and practice healthy bedtime behaviors, such as limiting caffeine and alcohol in the hours before bed. It's also important to curb your computer, tablet, and smartphone use late at night, the blue light emitted by these devices suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin and can disrupt your circadian rhythm.

4. Drinking Too Much

Why it's harmful: Alcohol depresses the nervous system, slowing you down and potentially dragging your mood down as well. What's more, drinking too much alcohol in the evening—though it may initially make you sleepy—tends to cause nighttime waking and less refreshing sleep.

What you can do: Limit your intake to "moderate" levels, which doctors define as one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men. If it's a special occasion and you do choose to exceed those limits, be sure to pace yourself, count your drinks, and alternate alcoholic beverages with water.

5. Keeping Up With the Joneses

Why it's harmful: Constantly comparing our income or possessions to those of others is one of the reasons Americans are not as happy as people in other countries. Coveting your neighbor's riches tends to breed dissatisfaction, and it's also a bit irrational, since the relationship between income and happiness is actually much weaker than we think.

What you can do: Focus instead on being grateful for what you do have. Studies have shown that simple exercises—such as keeping a "gratitude journal", or writing a letter to a loved one are associated with greater satisfaction, optimism, and happiness.

6. Obsessive Thinking

Why it's harmful: Turning the same thoughts over and over again in your mind sends your body and brain into the stressed-out state known as fight or flight. Your breathing and heart rate quicken, and your body releases the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol, all of which takes a toll on both your physical and emotional health.

What you can do: Learn to recognize the thoughts you dwell on most, and train yourself to avoid those obsessive pathways. Deep breathing helps, as does snapping yourself out of it—literally. Put a rubber band on your wrist as a reminder and every time you're ruminating, pull it back a little. It's a reminder to stop ruminating and change your train of thought.

7. Bottling Up Anger

Why it's harmful: Anger and frustration are completely normal reactions to life's inevitable challenges. But when you suppress those feelings and let your grudges and grievances fester, it can backfire. Several studies, in fact, have found that suppressed anger and "angry brooding", a type of obsessive thinking, are associated with depression symptoms.

What you can do: It's important to express negative emotions, but only in appropriate ways. If you can communicate your anger in an assertive but calm manner, you're likely to feel better afterward. If that's not an option, your best bet might be to just let it go: Research suggests the act of forgiving confers mental health benefits.

8. Working Too Much

Why it's harmful: When our work-life balance is out of whack, we tend to get stressed-out and we increase our risk of more serious mental health problems. A 2011 study of British civil servants found that working 11-plus hours a day (versus a more reasonable 7 or 8) more than doubled a person's odds of sliding into depression.

What you can do: Think carefully about your values and priorities and make sure your schedule reflects them. Set aside time for family, friends, and hobbies the same way you'd commit to a meeting at work. It sounds kind of funny to plan for fun or relaxation, but making it protected time is really important.

10. Staying Inside

Why it's harmful: Holing up inside deprives us of two mental-health essentials: vitamin D, which is produced by the body in response to sunlight and has been shown to protect against depression, and nature itself, which appears to soothe us on a subconscious level. In a recent study, brain scans showed that people who walked through parks were calmer and less frustrated than when they walked on busy city streets.

What you can do: Get outside! If you work in an office, take a walk in a green space, if possible, or sit, outside during your lunch break. Even a pretty small amount of sunlight, 15 minutes, can really, really help.

11. Social Isolation

Why it's harmful: Although withdrawing from friends and family is a common symptom of depression and anxiety, social isolation, and especially accompanying feelings of loneliness, also increases the likelihood of experiencing those mental health problems. By the same token, strong relationships tend to protect against depression and promote happiness.

What you can do: Even if you're preoccupied or not in the mood, make an effort to connect (or reconnect) with friends and loved ones, even for just a few minutes over coffee. Social interactions like this are uplifting, and they often end up being more fun than we expect.

12. Perfectionism

Why it's harmful: Trying to meet an unattainably high standard of perfection in everything you do, be it tonight's dinner or tomorrow's work presentation, is a recipe for disappointment and low self-esteem. So it's not surprising that perfectionism has been linked to a suite of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

What you can do: Instead of perfectionism, aim for what mental health experts call healthy striving. That means setting more attainable goals, welcoming mistakes as avenues for learning, and, most of all, enjoying the journey, not just the destination.

We have more information available on all of these tips and traps! Please, ask your therapist for more information if you are dealing with one or more of these.