



Good Ideas for Better Health

Jennifer Viveros and Dr. David Schramm

Many of us want to take better care of ourselves, but it is not always easy. We might not think we have enough time, money, or energy to do things that will help us be healthier. However, improving our health can actually be much simpler than we think.

The following areas are important parts of living a healthy life:

- Getting adequate sleep
- Consuming a nutritious diet and staying hydrated
- Exercising regularly
- Taking breaks when you feel stressed out
- Maintaining a support system
- Limiting alcohol intake and avoiding drugs

It is impossible to change everything all at once. Instead, identify areas that are already your strengths, then focus on the little ways you can improve the other areas. Here are some ideas if you need help:

Getting Adequate Sleep

- Make getting at least 8 hours of sleep each night a priority.
- Establish and consistently follow a routine to help you wind down and prepare to fall asleep at night.
- Go to sleep at the same time each night.
- Wake up at the same time each morning.
- Use dark-out shades or ear plugs to make your bedroom more conducive to sleeping.
- Do not exercise or participate in stressful

activities right before bedtime.

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and other sleep-interfering chemicals 4-6 hours before bed. (APA, 2014; Harvard, 2007; Smith, 2017)

Consuming a Nutritious Diet and Staying Hydrated

- If you feel the need to distract yourself from your stress, eat a healthy snack or engage in another activity, such as exercise, instead of turning to unhealthy foods and portion sizes.
- Do not eat while doing other activities. Multitasking will likely lead you to eat more than you normally would.
- Eat a variety of foods containing B vitamins, magnesium, Omega 3's, and vitamin C because these nutrients are especially helpful at handling stress.
- Drink approximately ½-1 ounce of water for every pound of your body weight each day.
- Drink whenever you are thirsty because thirst is a sign that you are already dehydrated.
- Carry a water bottle with you, especially in high-stress situations.
- Keep a glass of water on your night stand and/or desk.
- Replace one serving of coffee, soda, juice, etc., with water each day.
- Spread out your water consumption throughout the day instead of trying to drink it all at once.

(APA, 2014; Bruce & Shatté, 2015; Shaw, 2009)

Exercising Regularly

- You are more likely to do something you enjoy so find a type of exercise that you enjoy and that fits your lifestyle (i.e., taking a walk, playing sports, doing yoga).
 - Try to get out in nature and explore the outdoors.
 - Find a friend or group to exercise with so you can cheer each other on.
 - Schedule your workouts and treat them like appointments.
 - Set exercise goals to help you progress, and give yourself a pat on the back for achieving them.
 - Start slow and listen to your body. Overdoing it will decrease your motivation to stay active.
 - Aim to work out for 30 minutes several days a week. If you do not have that much time, even 10 minutes is better than no exercise.
 - Break your workout into shorter periods several times a day if needed.
 - Calculate your maximum heart rate (220 minus your age) and aim to be in the 60-65% range of this number. This range is called your target heart rate.
 - Even if you break your routine, start again the next day. Do not give up on your plan.
- (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Smith, 2017; Zamora, 2008)

Taking Breaks When Needed

- In order not to reach burnout, it is important to find an outlet that allows you to relax and enjoy what you are doing.
- Take time to participate in a favorite hobby (e.g., listen to music, read a book for fun, do yoga).
- Laugh.
- Check your email less often.
- Do not take work home with you.
- Breathe in slowly and then, while exhaling, say “relax.” Repeat 10 times.
- Stay present by focusing on your thoughts, feelings, and movements.
- Plan your schedule so you do not have to rush.
- Take annual vacations.

(Dartmouth College, 2016; Mayo Clinic, 2016; Smith, 2017)

Maintaining a Support System

- Strengthen your relationship with friends that you trust and would be comfortable confiding in. Be this kind of friend for others.
- Find new friends by volunteering, taking a class, joining a church or gym, or attending a situation-related support group (e.g., military, mental illness).
- Be cautious of social settings that drain your emotional energy and cause more stress.
- Stay away from those who participate in unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking or being violent.

(Mayo Clinic, 2015; Smith, 2017)

Limiting Alcohol Intake and Avoiding Drugs

- Track how much you drink.
- Find alternative ways to spend your time.
- Know what triggers the urge to drink or use drugs.
- Have a plan for how to say no.
- Find friends who will help support you and not negatively pressure you.
- Establish family rules.
- Stay away from tempting situations.
- Get help from friends, family members, or professionals (www.ncadd.org).

(NCADD, 2015; NIAAA, n.d.)

While improvement in any of these areas will result in benefits for your health, remember that optimum health is the result of a balance of all these areas. For example, if you become very committed and high achieving in the realm of physical activity but fail to get enough sleep at night, your health will still suffer. Start improving one step at a time, but keep improving your overall health as the goal (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Living a healthy life may not be easy, but it is worth it. Start by making small changes today. As you seek to live a healthier life, you will be more prepared to live your life fully, be happier, and enjoy the relationships you have with others (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

References

- American Psychological Association [APA]. (2014). *Stress in America: Are teens adopting adults' stress habits?* Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2013/stress-report.pdf>
- Bruce, J. T. & Shatté, A. (2015). How food affects your stress levels—Both good and bad. Retrieved from <https://www.success.com/article/how-food-affects-your-stress-levels-both-good-and-bad>
- Dartmouth College Student Wellness Center. (2016). *Relaxation, stress, and sleep*. Retrieved from <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/>
- Harvard Medical School Division of Sleep Medicine. (2007). *Twelve simple tips to improve your sleep*. Retrieved from <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/getting/overcoming/tips>
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *How of happiness*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Mayo Clinic. (2016). *Stress management: Job stress*. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/coping-with-stress/art-20048369?p=1>
- Mayo Clinic. (2015). *Stress management: Social support*. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/social-support/art-20044445?p=1>
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence [NCADD]. (2015). *Ten tips for prevention for youth*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncadd.org/about-addiction/underage-issues/ten-tips-for-prevention-for-youth>
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIAAA]. (N.d.) *Tips to try*. Retrieved from <https://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/Thinking-about-a-change/Strategies-for-cutting-down/Tips-To-Try.aspx>
- Shaw, G. (2009). Water and stress-reduction: Sipping stress away. Retrieved from <https://www.webmd.com/diet/features/water-stress-reduction>
- Smith, B. (2017). *20 science-backed ways to reduce stress*. Retrieved from <http://www.mensfitness.com/life/entertainment/20-science-backed-ways-reduce-stress>
- Zamora, D. (2008). *Fitness 101: The absolute beginner's guide to exercise*. Retrieved from <http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/fitness-beginners-> The Penguin Press.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ken White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University. (4-2018)