



*Sedgwick County...
working for you*

December 2011

Mental and Emotional Health

I don't suffer from a mental illness, but how do stay mentally and emotionally healthy, especially during times of stress?

Mental and emotional health refers to your overall psychological well-being. It includes the way you feel about yourself, the quality of your relationships, and your ability to manage your feelings and deal with difficulties. Being mentally or emotionally healthy is much more than being free of depression, anxiety, or other psychological issues. Mental and emotional health refers to the presence of positive characteristics. People who are mentally and emotionally healthy have:

- A sense of contentment.
- A passion for living and the ability to laugh and have fun.
- The ability to deal with stress and bounce back from adversity.
- A sense of meaning and purpose, in both their activities and their relationships.
- The flexibility to learn new things and adapt to change.
- A balance between work and play, rest and activity, etc.
- The ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships.
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem.

These positive characteristics of mental and emotional health allow you to participate in life to the fullest extent possible through productive and meaningful activities, strong relationships and also help you cope when faced with life's challenges and stresses. Taking care of your body is a powerful first step toward mental and emotional health. Practice getting enough rest; good nutrition; exercising to relieve stress; getting a dose of sunlight every day; and limiting alcohol and avoiding drugs.

Taking care of yourself includes pursuing activities that naturally release endorphins and contribute to feeling good. In addition to physical exercise, endorphins are also naturally released when we do things that positively impact others. You should also consider practicing self discipline which leads to a sense of hopefulness. Learn or discover new things. Manage your stress levels by making leisure time a priority and limiting unhealthy mental habits like worrying.

Risk factors for mental and emotional problems also can be shaped by early childhood experiences or genetic and biological factors.

The risk factors that can compromise mental and emotional health are:

- Poor connection or attachment to your primary caretaker early in life.
- Traumas or serious losses, especially early in life.
- Negative experiences that lead to a belief that you're helpless and that you have little control over the situations in your life.
- Illness, especially when it's chronic, disabling or isolates you from others.
- Side effects of medications, especially in older people who may be taking a variety of medications.
- Substance abuse. Alcohol and drug abuse can cause mental health problems and make preexisting mental or emotional problems worse.

Everyone experiences stress and may relate to one or more of the risk factors at some point. However, if you're experiencing these red flag feelings and behaviors, consider seeking immediate attention from a health care professional:

- Feeling down, hopeless or helpless most of the time.
- Concentration problems that are interfering with your work or home life.
- The inability to sleep.
- Using food, drugs or alcohol to cope with difficult emotions.
- Negative or self-destructive thoughts or fears that you can't control.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.