

Back To Basics: Practical Mental Health Information

Since the start of the pandemic, more and more people are talking about mental health. More of us are starting to see it for what it is: one important component of our overall health and well-being, just like our physical health. But mental health conditions, resources, and conversations can still feel complicated and out of reach.

Are there common warning signs for mental health conditions or crises? Specific factors that can lead to mental health conditions or even crises? What resources are out there – and how do I know if they're right for me?

Many of us are learning about mental health topics for the first time. Having a better understanding of mental health and wellness can help if we or someone we know is experiencing a mental health condition or crisis.

Around half of people in the U.S. will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition at some point in their life, so everyone should know what to look out for and where to find support.

There's often no one single cause for a mental health condition. Instead, there are many possible risk factors that can influence how likely a person is to experience a mental health condition or how serious the symptoms may be.

Some risk factors for mental health conditions include: trauma, which can be a one-time event or ongoing; your environment and how it impacts your health and quality of life (also known as social determinants of health - like financial stability and health care access); genetics; brain chemistry; and your habits and lifestyle, such as a lack of sleep.

Of course, understanding the risk factors for a mental health condition can be more difficult when it's your own mental health. Take time to ask yourself about your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to see if this is part of a pattern that may be caused by a mental health condition. To get started, ask yourself:

- Have things that used to feel easy started feeling difficult?
- Does the idea of doing daily tasks like making your bed now feel really, really hard?
- Have you lost interest in activities and hobbies you used to enjoy?
- Do you feel irritated, possibly to the point of lashing out at people you care about?

One of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take a mental health screening. There are online assessments, where screening is an anonymous, free and private way to learn about your mental health and to see if you are showing warning signs of a mental health condition or illness.

There are many online screening tools – you might start with one of these websites: Mental Health America (www.mhascreening.org), Region 3 Innovations in Behavioral Health website (www.region3.ne.networkofcare.org), or Bryan Health (<https://screening.mentalhealthscreening.org/bryanhealth>). Plus, many colleges and universities have online screening tools for their students.



Most screenings only take a few minutes. And, after you are finished, you will be given information about the next steps you should take based on the results. A screening is not a diagnosis, but it can be helpful for starting a conversation with your doctor or a loved one about your mental health. We would encourage you to consider talking to someone you trust about your results, and also to seek out a professional to find the support you need.

Whether we realize it or not, mental health plays a big role in our overall well-being. When we're mentally healthy, we are able to enjoy our lives and the people in it, we feel good about ourselves, we keep up good relationships, and we deal better with stress. It's normal for our mental health to shift over time – we all face difficult situations in our lives.

Creating positive habits is a great way to support your mental health – this is true when you're doing well and it also helps you build skills to use if you do face symptoms of a mental health condition. Three important habits people can work on that will impact their mental health are healthy food choices and nutrition, exercise, and sleep.

Websites like Mental Health America (www.mhanational.org) share practical mental health information to help us begin learning the basics about mental health and wellness. There are local resources, too, including your local public health department, Region 3 Behavioral Health Services, the Lanning Center, and our many community mental health providers working in schools and colleges, hospitals and clinics, and in private practices across the health district.

May is Mental Health Month and South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD) is using this opportunity to raise awareness of the important role mental health plays in our lives.

While you may not need this information today, knowing the basics about mental health will mean you're prepared if you ever need it. You'll also be ready to support others when they need it.

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