

# Mental Health Minute

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## New Year's Guide to Your Mental Wellbeing

One in four people will have mental health problems in the coming year. After the highs of the holidays, the start of a new year can seem daunting. When all the parties are over, all the money is spent and the weather is at its worst, the New Year can put mental wellbeing at risk.

### **Exercise**

Post-holiday exercise is often associated with shedding the excess pounds gained during the eating frenzy of the festive season. Yet research shows that it is also one of the most effective ways to beat stress and depression. Studies have found that exercise may be more effective than drugs in treating mild to moderate depression. A simple walk can be uplifting. What's more, the effects of exercise on mood are immediate.

### **Food and Mood**

Starting a diet in the New Year shouldn't just be about losing weight. By avoiding certain foods, such as sugar, caffeine, alcohol, chocolate and saturated fats, you can help improve your mood. Water, vegetables, fruit, oil-rich fish, nuts and seeds, fiber and organic foods can also lift your spirits. Improving your diet can improve coping skills and confidence and help you to feel calm.

### **Friendship**

Research has found that friends are a main source of support for people with mental health problems. Those surveyed stated that 67 percent of their friends offered understanding and 71 percent showed concern. Just listening and talking to friends who are feeling down can make a huge difference. So make sure you devote time to maintaining your friendships for your sake and for that of your friends.

### **Pull Yourself Together**

It is well known that a large number of people experience discrimination in response to their own or another's mental distress. False assumptions are sometimes made about people who suffer from a mental health problem, such as they aren't reliable, they complain a lot and they're dangerous. So this New Year why not examine your own thoughts and perceptions about mental health? People with mental health problems need support and understanding, not prejudice.

### **Depression**

This New Year improve your knowledge about depression, which the World Health Organization predicts will be the world's most debilitating illness by 2020. Show that you care, understand and are non-judgmental. People with depression need help and support to overcome a problem that most often responds well to treatment.



## Seasonal Affective Disorder or “The Winter Blues”

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) typically starts during the fall or winter season. If your mood, energy level, and motivation decline in January but bounce back to normal in April, you may have SAD.

“SAD is thought to be related to a chemical imbalance in the brain brought on by lack of light due to winter’s shorter days and typically overcast skies”, says Dr. Angelos Halaris, Chief of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience at Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine. As many as 10 to 20 percent of Americans may experience a mild form of SAD, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

Certain people may have a genetic vulnerability to developing the condition, which affects more women than men and tends to start appearing in the teen years.

“This condition, characterized by depression, exhaustion and lack of interest in people and regular activities, interferes with a person’s outlook on life and ability to function properly”, Halaris said.

The good news is that you can take steps to reduce the risk of developing SAD. If possible, get outside during the winter, even if it is overcast. Expose your eyes to natural light for one hour each day. At home, open the drapes and blinds to let in natural light.

If you do develop SAD, it can be effectively treated with light therapy and in some cases, antidepressant medication and/or psychotherapy. One of the latest treatments involves a headband containing mounted lights that deliver light to the retina whether you are inside or outdoors.

Find ways to enjoy what daylight you can find – and other activities that can keep you active and moving.

Source: [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)

## Is it Dementia?

It is important to understand that there are two major considerations when looking at the signs and symptoms of dementia. First, when an older adult starts to display signs of memory loss and confusion the symptoms may be caused by a multitude of factors that are treatable (for example, thyroid problems, severe depression, hormonal imbalance, anemia, cardiac or respiratory problems, nutritional deficiencies, infection, pain). Second, the symptoms may be related to one or more causes of non-reversible dementia (for example, Alzheimer’s disease, mini-strokes or vascular dementia, diffuse Lewy Body Dementia, Parkinson’s disease, Pick’s disease, or frontal temporal dementia).

Key to determining dementia is a having a thorough evaluation by a well-trained physician. A diagnostic workup may include blood work, an MRI, urinalysis, cognitive testing, and a battery of neuropsychological tests to help rule out any treatable conditions and to pinpoint the area of the brain that is causing problems. Many family doctors are not appropriately trained or equipped to make such an evaluation.

Geriatricians and neurologists that specialize in dementia evaluation can provide an accurate assessment. Your local Alzheimer’s Association is one resource that can refer you to specialists in your area.

Visit [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) for information on your local Alzheimer’s Association Chapter.

### Did you know:

**Dementia is not a natural process of aging and it does not affect everyone.**

**The percentage of people with dementia in the US is estimated at:**

- 5% of those age 71-79
- 24% of those age 80-89
- 37% for those age 90 and over

