

Take Your Temperature on

Mental Wellness



By Peter Tonguette

How to support your mental health as effectively
as your physical health

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When it comes to staying in good physical shape, most of us know the drill: Get ample exercise, make smart food choices and stay up to date on health screenings and tests.

When it comes to mental wellness, though, many of us find ourselves operating in the dark. In the absence of a handy checklist to consult, how do we make sure that we are investing in the well-being of our minds as well as our bodies?

In fact, physical and mental health have long been understood to be intertwined. "When we are physically active, our body releases endorphins that help elevate our mood and increase our energy and alertness," says Francesca Festa of Dragonfly Counseling & Wellness, whose services in support of mental well-being include counseling, yoga, massage and acupuncture.

"A massage, a gentle touch or a loving hug can help regulate our emotions," Festa says. "Conversely, mental stress, especially when chronic, affects our body, contributing to several physical issues and tensions."

Long story short: If you have your head in the right place, good things are likely to follow.

Of course, the experts concede that this can be easier said than done. For example, the concept of mindfulness—in which concentrated focus on a moment in time is encouraged—is widely known but just as widely misunderstood.

"When you hear the description of mindfulness, it's not really super useful," says "attentional fitness" trainer Daron Larson, who adds that the concept is too vaguely presented to be put into practice by most people.

"It sounds and looks like being relaxed all the time," Larson says. "You get a picture of someone with their eyes closed, sitting on a beach, maybe sitting in a [yoga] posture. ... It's too abstract to be very useful."

In his work with individual clients and groups, Larson seeks ways to make use of mindfulness amid the hectic daily grind. "There are the things that have been learned by people who have spent a lot of time exercising their attention, regardless of their worldview," Larson says, pointing to the monastic roots of techniques like mindfulness. "How can we take those insights and exercise them and apply those to the messiness of our real-life experiences?"

Larson says that most people perform actions on autopilot: They may be driving a car, but they are really engaging in problem-solving—that is, thinking of other things they must do even as their foot is on the gas pedal. "In the background of our awareness, there are all kinds of sensory things—sounds around us, sensations in our body, things

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that we can see," says Larson, who encourages foregrounding such perceptions during daily intervals of mindfulness.

"I could set a time and do it for a few minutes," he says. "I could bring that quality of attention to a task, like unloading the dishwasher, brushing my teeth, driving my car."

The end result, Larson says, is an increased ability to process positive and negative occurrences in life. "The more I practice paying attention in this way, I start to notice that I have the capacity for savoring pleasant moments more and fighting with unpleasant moments less," he says.

Exercise practices like yoga and Pilates take the state of deliberate attention into a physical dimension: Muscles are being exercised at the same time that brain neurons are being fired. "We're asking you to focus on a muscle and oftentimes deep muscles that you don't focus on in typical workouts," says Caitlin McTigue, who owns Club Pilates locations in Grandview and Powell, with an additional spot soon to open in New Albany. "We're asking you to connect the breath with that movement, and what that does is basically exercise your mind."

Self-care—even if it's as simple as getting one's hair cut or styled—shouldn't be discounted as a means to achieve a feeling of mental wellness, too.

"We're behind the chair all day. Sometimes, someone comes in and they are emotionally distraught," says Doug Henderson, co-owner of Square One Salon. "We put on the hat—through personal touch and the words that we use and making them feel good about themselves—to help them through that process."

Henderson, whose salon promotes a stress-free environment by offering guests a scalp

massage before a haircut and a hand/arm massage during a color treatment, has seen firsthand the impact of a caring gesture for a guest who might be going through trying times.

Mental health experts are aware of the stress flowing from recent coronavirus-related stay-at-home orders. Cheryl Cook, a clinical social worker at Global Wellness Center, emphasizes the importance of connectivity. "You want to stay connected to folks," she says. "That's via phones, Skype, just talking to folks." For her part, Festa of Dragonfly Counseling & Wellness recommends basic, universal tips applicable to nearly everybody, including asking for help when needed, feeling gratitude for what you have and staying active both mentally and physically.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that it's normal to feel blue now or during any other time. However, if certain indicators of depression—among them persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety or emptiness; inability to sleep or sleeping too much; and overeating or decreased appetite—continue for at least two weeks, you may be experiencing a depressive episode that necessitates professional help.

Part of being conscious of your mental state is being aware of when such help is called for. "It can be a very brief, time-limited approach, so you don't have to be like, 'Oh my God. I'm going to see a therapist for two or three years,'" says Cook, whose organization offers treatment for mental health and substance abuse disorders. Just think of your mind like any other part of your body. "The message for all folks is that you can get help and it can be just like with your [primary care] doctor—like if you broke your ankle."