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EAP EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER



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DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:
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*Navigating Your
Holidays*

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National Emotional Wellness Month

Emotional Wellness Toolkit

How you feel can affect your ability to carry out everyday activities, your relationships, and your overall mental health. How you react to your experiences and feelings can change over time. Emotional wellness is the ability to successfully handle life's stresses and adapt to change and difficult times.

Six Strategies for Improving Your Emotional Health

Brighten your outlook.

People who are emotionally well, experts say, have fewer negative emotions and are able to bounce back from difficulties faster. This quality is called resilience. Another sign of emotional wellness is being able to hold onto positive emotions longer and appreciate the good times.

Here are some tips on developing a more positive mindset:

- *Remember your good deeds.* Give yourself credit for the good things you do for others each day.
- *Forgive yourself.* Everyone makes mistakes. Learn from what went wrong, but don't dwell on it.
- *Spend more time with your friends.* Surround yourself with positive, healthy people.
- *Explore your beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life.* Think about how to guide your life by the principles that are important to you.
- *Develop healthy physical habits.* Healthy eating, physical activity, and regular sleep can improve your physical and mental health.

Reduce stress.

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Stress can give you a rush of energy when it's needed most. If stress lasts a long time, however—a condition known as chronic stress—those "high-alert" changes become harmful rather than helpful. Learning healthy ways to cope with stress can also boost your resilience.

Here are some tips to help manage stress:

- *Get enough sleep.*
- *Exercise regularly.* Just 30 minutes a day of walking can boost mood and reduce stress.
- *Build a social support network.*
- *Set priorities.* Decide what must get done and what can wait. Say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
- *Think positive.* Note what you've accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've failed to do.
- *Try relaxation methods.* Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or tai chi may help.
- *Seek help.* Talk to a mental health professional if you feel unable to cope, have suicidal thoughts, or use drugs or alcohol to cope. Your EAP is a free mental health resource.

Get quality sleep.

To fit in everything you want to do in your day, you often sacrifice sleep. However, sleep affects both mental and physical health. It's vital to your wellbeing. When you're tired, you can't function at your best. Sleep helps you think more clearly, have quicker reflexes, and focus better. Take steps to make sure you regularly get a good night's sleep.

Here are some tips on getting better quality sleep:

- *Go to bed the same time each night, and get up the same time each morning.*
- *Sleep in a dark, quiet, comfortable environment.*
- *Exercise daily* (but not right before bedtime).
- *Limit the use of electronics before bed.*
- *Relax before bedtime.* A warm bath or reading might help.
- *Avoid alcohol and stimulants* such as caffeine late in the day.
- *Avoid nicotine.*
- *Consult a health care professional* if you have ongoing sleep problems.

Be mindful.

The concept of mindfulness is simple. This ancient practice is about being completely aware of what's happening in the present—of all that's going on inside and all that's happening around you. It means not living your life on “autopilot.” Becoming a more mindful person requires commitment and practice.

Here are some tips to help you get started:

- *Take some deep breaths.* Breathe in through your nose to a count of 4, hold for 1 second, and then exhale through the mouth to a count of 5. Repeat often.
- *Enjoy a stroll.* As you walk, notice your breath and the sights and sounds around you. As thoughts and worries enter your mind, note them, but then return to the present.
- *Practice mindful eating.* Be aware of taste, textures, and flavors in each bite, and listen to your body when you are hungry and full.
- *Find mindfulness resources* in your local community, including yoga and meditation classes, mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs, and books.

Cope with loss.

When someone you love dies, your world changes. There is no right or wrong way to mourn. Although the death of a loved one can feel overwhelming, most people can make it through the grieving process with the support of family and friends. Learn healthy ways to help you through difficult times.

Here are some tips to help cope with loss:

- *Take care of yourself.* Try to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. Avoid bad habits—like smoking or drinking alcohol—that can put your health at risk.
- *Talk to caring friends.* Let others know when you want to talk.
- *Find a grief support group.* It might help to talk with others who are also grieving.
- *Don't make major changes right away.* Wait a while before making big decisions like moving or changing jobs.
- *Talk to your doctor* if you're having trouble with everyday activities.
- *Consider additional support.* Sometimes short-term talk therapy can help including support from the EAP.

- *Be patient.* Mourning takes time. It's common to have roller-coaster emotions for a while.



Strengthen social connections.

Social connections might help protect health and lengthen life. Scientists are finding that people's links to others can have powerful effects on health—both emotionally and physically. Whether with romantic partners, family, friends, neighbors, or others, social connections can influence our biology and wellbeing.

Here are some tips to build healthy support systems:

- *Build strong relationships* with your kids.
- *Get active and share good habits* with family and friends.
- *If you're a family caregiver,* ask for help from others.
- *Join a group focused on a favorite hobby,* such as reading, hiking, or painting.
- *Take a class* to learn something new.
- *Volunteer* for things you care about in your community, like a community garden, school, library, or place of worship.
- *Travel* to different places and meet new people.

Source: U.S. National Institutes of Health. (Reviewed 2018, December 10). Emotional wellness toolkit. Retrieved 10 June 2021 from <https://www.nih.gov>

Mindfulness for Your Health

The Benefits of Living Moment by Moment

Paying attention to what's going on right this second can be hard. People often spend more time thinking about what's coming up in the future or dwelling on things in the past that they can't change. People can miss out on experiencing the present.

It's possible to train yourself to focus on the present moment. You become aware of what's going on inside and around you—your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and environment. You observe these moments without judgment. This is called mindfulness.

"We're looking at our thoughts and feelings with curiosity, gentleness, and kindness," explains Dr. Eric Loucks, Director of the Mindfulness Center at Brown University.

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditation. Meditation is a practice that aims to increase awareness of the mind and concentration. In recent years, mindfulness has become a household term. Mindfulness programs are now commonly found in schools, workplaces, and hospitals.

Mindfulness can involve a sitting meditation that's practiced in a quiet space. In this practice, you focus on your breathing or sensations in your body. If your mind wanders—like thoughts popping in about things you need to do—you try to return your mind to the present moment.

However, mindfulness doesn't have to be done sitting still or in silence. You can integrate the practice into things you do every day, like walking or eating. You can also be mindful while interacting with others.

Health Benefits of Mindfulness

Studies suggest that focusing on the present can have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. Mindfulness-based treatments have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression.¹ There is also evidence that mindfulness can lower blood pressure and improve sleep.² It may even help people cope with pain.

"For many chronic illnesses, mindfulness meditation seems to improve quality of life and reduce mental health symptoms," says Dr. Zev Schuman-Olivier of Harvard University.

One of the first mindfulness-based therapies was used for depression. Many studies have shown that it can be effective for some people.

Mindfulness appears to help with depression in two ways. First, it helps you develop the ability to stay grounded in the present, explains Dr. Sona Dimidjian of the University of Colorado Boulder. She studies the use of mindfulness-based treatments to prevent relapse of depression, including among pregnant women.³

With depression, "your attention can get hijacked into the past or future," she explains. You spend time focusing on past negative experiences or worrying about things to come.

Second, mindfulness can help you "de-center" from such thoughts. "It's like being able to sit on the riverbank and watch thoughts floating by like leaves on a stream," Dimidjian says. "Developing the skill of mindfulness can help stop you from being pulled into any one thought and carried down the stream. People often experience thoughts like, 'nothing ever works out for me,' or 'it's always going to be this way.' Over time, and with practice, you can develop the ability to stand back from these painful thought patterns."

Researchers are now studying whether mindfulness training can help with a variety of other conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, and addiction.⁴

Schuman-Olivier is looking at whether mindfulness can help reduce anxiety among people being treated for opioid use.⁵ This could help prevent relapse.

Developing Healthy Habits

Being mindful may also help you make healthier choices. Loucks's team at Brown created an eight-week mindfulness program for people with high blood pressure. They studied whether the program increased participants' awareness of their habits. This included how they ate. The study found that participants chose a healthier diet after taking the course.⁶

You can bring mindfulness to your eating habits, too. Studies suggest that it can help reduce binge eating and emotional eating. Paying closer attention to your body can help you notice signals that you're full and help you better enjoy your food.

This body awareness seems to be one part of how mindfulness helps people adopt healthier habits. If you've just eaten a jelly donut, you may be more likely to notice an unpleasant sugar crash, Loucks explains. Remembering this can help you to make better food choices in the future.

This goes for positive feelings too. “With physical activity, just about everybody feels better afterwards. So, with mindfulness training we’re aware of it improving our mood, and then we can use that reward to actually train ourselves,” Loucks says.

Mindfulness may also help with setting a goal. “We can place our mind on being more active or eating more fruits and vegetables. And if we place our intention there, it may be more likely that we’re going to carry through and make it happen,” Loucks explains.



Learning to Be Mindful

If you want to practice mindfulness, there are many online programs and apps, but they’re not all created equal. Experts suggest looking for resources from medical schools and universities. Check to see if they’re evidence based.

Dimidjian’s team developed an eight-week self-guided online mindfulness program. Her studies showed that the program helped reduce symptoms of depression more than a standard treatment alone.³

“If you end up having difficulty with an app, though, don’t take it personally or think that you’re somehow bad at mindfulness, or it’s not meant for you,” Schuman-Olivier says. You can also try finding a teacher or someone with the skills to guide you in mindfulness training.

Just like any skill, mindfulness takes practice. “Just because something is simple, doesn’t mean that it’s easy,” Dimidjian says.

Mental training can take time and dedication. Aim for a few minutes of mindfulness each day to start.

A body scan meditation can be a good way to connect with your body. It helps make you aware of how your body feels as you mentally scan from head to toe:

- Start in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Take several deep breaths. Then, notice your feet. How do they feel?

- Let your scan travel up your body—legs, stomach, arms, hands, neck, and finally, head. Notice any sensations or discomfort. Try not to change or judge these feelings—you’re simply checking in. Doing body scans on a regular basis can help increase mindfulness.

Being Mindful

Becoming more mindful requires practice. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- *Take some deep breaths.* Breathe in through your nose to a count of four, hold for one second, and then exhale through the mouth to a count of five. Repeat often.
- *Enjoy a stroll.* As you walk, pay attention to your breath and the sights and sounds around you. If thoughts and worries enter your mind, note them but then return to the present.
- *Practice mindful eating.* Be aware of taste, textures, and flavors in each bite. Listen to when your body is hungry and full.
- *Do a body scan.* Bring your attention to how each part of your body is feeling. This can help you connect with your body.
- *Find mindfulness resources,* including online programs and teacher-guided practices.

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Source: Wein, H. (Ed.). (2021, June). *Mindfulness for your health: The benefits of living moment by moment*. NIH News in Health. Bethesda, MD: U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). Retrieved March 25, 2022, from <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov>

Yoga for Health: Positioning Your Body and Mind

Have you rolled out a yoga mat lately? If so, you're among many who have taken up yoga to relax and stay fit. One in seven adults in the U.S. has practiced yoga in the past year. Yoga may help bring several health and wellness benefits.

Based in Indian philosophy, yoga involves both the body and mind. It began as a spiritual practice. Modern yoga focuses more on physical poses, breathing techniques, and meditation. Meditation involves exercises that help you clear and calm your thoughts.

"With practice, yoga can teach you to direct the mind on a single object," explains Dr. Pamela Jeter, a U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) expert on yoga research. "It's practicing being aware and present from moment to moment."

But, she says, it takes a lot of practice. She suggests focusing on the physical aspects at first. With time, the meditation part becomes easier.

There are many types of yoga. Some are slower and focus on holding poses. Others involve flowing movements that connect to your breathing.

Research suggests that yoga may help improve general wellness. In studies, yoga has helped some people manage stress, improve mental health, lose weight, or quit smoking.

There's also evidence that yoga may be helpful for some medical conditions. Yoga may help lessen pain and menopause symptoms. It has improved sleep in studies of older adults and people with cancer.

Several studies have shown that yoga can help those with chronic low back pain. Some experts now recommend it as a first-line treatment for low back pain, among other nondrug treatments.

Jeter cautions, however, that more high-quality research is needed to confirm yoga's health benefits. "There's a lot of research out there for different health conditions, but there's not enough to say for sure," she says. Yoga shouldn't replace treatment from your health care provider.

It's also unclear what it is about yoga that helps. The practice combines physical, mental, and spiritual elements. "There are a lot of components in yoga. We don't know what the active ingredient is," Jeter says.



Research into yoga is ongoing. Studies are now looking at whether yoga is helpful for specific groups of people. For example, whether it can reduce chronic pain for military veterans or improve quality of life for people who have had breast cancer. New studies are also looking into whether yoga may help mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What should you know if you're thinking about starting yoga? "Start slowly and carefully in order to avoid any sort of injury," Jeter says. If you have a medical condition, talk with your health care provider before getting started.

Everyone's body is different. Yoga postures should be modified based on your abilities. Choose an instructor who is experienced and attentive to your needs.

You may also want to seek out a yoga therapist. "Yoga therapists have more extensive training than that required of a regular yoga teacher," Jeter explains. "They're trained to work with different conditions and mostly work one-on-one or in small groups."

If you want to try yoga, see the tips on getting started below.

Getting Started with Yoga

- Start with an appropriate yoga class. Look for ones called beginner level, "gentle" yoga, or senior classes.
- Ask about the training and experience of the yoga instructor you're considering.
- Talk with your health care provider before trying yoga if you're pregnant, older, or have a health condition.
- Let your yoga instructor know about your individual needs and any medical issues.
- Go slowly to prevent injury. Avoid extreme positions and forceful breathing. Listen to your body.
- Find studies recruiting people for research on yoga. You can start at ClinicalTrials.gov (<https://clinicaltrials.gov>).

Source: Wein, H. (Ed.). (2019, November). Yoga for health: Positioning your body and mind. NIH News in Health. Bethesda, MD: U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). Retrieved June 29, 2022, from <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov>