



ALEXIS I BROWN

Writing Sample - Blog

8 WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF FEEL BETTER

There are two types of stigma associated with mental illness – the kind where we don't talk about it because we want to avoid people (ourselves included) from thinking we're sick or crazy; and the kind where we initially associate our mental health with the evils of Big Pharma, the danger and unknown of medications, and a messed up "health care" system.

If you made it here, you probably don't engage (much) with the first type of stigma. At least not enough to prevent you from looking for ways to feel better. I hope this first post can show you some **EASY** things you can do to help yourself feel better, whether you've been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, ADD, or a combination. Actually, these are things we should ALL do to help ourselves feel better, diagnoses or not.

I think the first four are fundamental, but the first two are my personal must-do-every-day.

Omega 3s



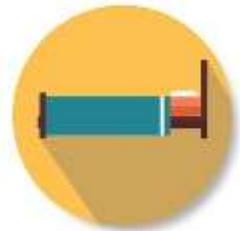
Omega 3s [help reduce inflammation](#) in your brain, which effects the neural network/neurotransmitters, slowing down the firing synapses and [effecting motivation and behaviors](#). Omega 3s help our brain fire messages quicker, they interact with mood-chemicals, and they help the brain adapt to new information. There are [three types of omega 3 fatty acids](#); EPA and DHA are best for brain health. They're most commonly found in cold-water fish. Don't worry, vegans. Marine algae is also a good source. Try to take about 1,000-2,000 mg per day.

Vitamin D



One-fourth of the population has a vitamin D deficiency, and that's been [linked to depression](#). Vitamin D goes well with exercise...get outside and get some sunshine! Except, it requires regular build up (which takes months!), you can't use sunscreen, and you may not live in New Mexico with 300 days of sunshine a year. So, take a supplement. If you have [severe depression](#), ask your doctor for a vitamin D test and then possibly a prescription for a high-dose vitamin. Fish-oil omega 3's will have some Vitamin D, but you still need more. If your doctor won't prescribe a high dose version, find a quality over-the-counter that gives you 2,000-10,000 IU per day.

Sleep



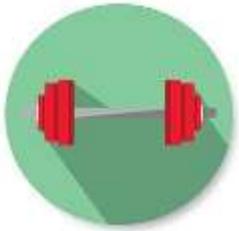
Get an adequate amount every night, preferably on a somewhat consistent schedule. Sleep is necessary for many regenerative functions. It plays into emotional well-being, processing emotions, our mood, creating memories, and it helps our immune system. There may be different reasons you aren't getting enough sleep or your sleep schedule is erratic, whether work, being glued to a screen, sleep apnea, or insomnia, but its important that you seek solutions. [This article](#) on *Psychology Today* explains some of the connections between sleep and depression.

Drink Water



Your brain is 85% water, so it makes sense that [dehydration impacts memory, attention, and mood](#). Drinking water seems to be the answer for a whole lot of physical AND mental health stuff, including concentration, [sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression](#). And, admit it – you probably aren't drinking enough water every day. Eight 8-ounce glasses is the [minimum](#) recommended amount. Sixty-four ounces sounds like a lot, but four pint glasses doesn't. If you're exercising vigorously and/or regularly or if you live in a dry environment, up your intake. (In CrossFit, they recommend that you drink half your body weight in ounces, which, depending on your weight, is going to be around half a gallon to one gallon.) Keep a glass of water by your bed and drink it first thing when you wake up. Buy a cool bottle so you can easily fill up throughout the day. And drink a glass before bed. Just do it.

Exercise



Release those endorphins for an immediate mood boost! But, what you really need to aim for is consistent, sustained low-intensity exercise. This helps with sleep, [mood, self-esteem, and stress, and can slow cognitive decline as we age](#). It can also help with more severe issues, like [ADHD, anxiety, depression, and PTSD/trauma and helps us become more resilient](#). Low-intensity exercise helps develop strong, new neural network connections because of a [release of proteins](#). It aids in [neural growth, reduces inflammation](#), and helps create new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being. And, it can act as a great distraction from nagging negative thoughts.

Low-intensity workouts mean you aren't really breaking a sweat, getting out of breath, or reaching a high heart rate. Comfortable levels of walking, biking, swimming, dancing, and yoga are good places to start. Even some weight training can be low-intensity.

Build up to regular and sustained exercise; don't just exercise when you're bummed out. I know that exercise can be dang near impossible to do if you are currently depressed or anxious, so do your best to start out at 5 minutes a day and build up your time and activity from there.

Meditation



Meditation boosts [serotonin and norepinephrine](#) – neurotransmitters that help transmission of signals in the brain. It also [boosts](#) endorphins, melatonin, GABA, and DHEA while reducing cortisol. (Higher levels of cortisol is associated with depression and anxiety.) Meditation calms down the amygdala region of our brain – where our once-useful-but-now-often-debilitating “fight or flight” response is born. And, meditation can help in breaking the downward spiral of negative thoughts, can help us become witness to what our brain is doing, and helps us live in the present moment.

Community & Service



Having a strong community of friends, family, and colleagues with whom you regularly interact, as well as volunteering, can help you feel better. Socializing builds bonds; volunteering self-validates. I remember studying small communities around the world that had a longer life span AND higher “happiness quotient.” One in Japan, one in southern CA, and a few others. The commonality among them all was community and community service. With strong community, you also have ears to listen and shoulders to cry on, and you probably know people who deal with similar issues as you.

Do Your Chores



This is a tenet from Feng Shui. Keep your chi flowing by keeping your home in order. It's also my least favorite "simple" step to health, because I've always been surrounded by clutter and seemingly disorganized. But, our environment reflects our mind and mood, just as it can impact our mind and mood. When in a depressed or anxious episode, it can feel impossible to tackle simple tasks like doing the dishes, much less getting organized. So, try to build some basic habits before a major episode so it gets easier. Cleaning and decluttering involve removing, reducing, or rationalizing things in our immediate environment. It helps us let go. It looks and smells better. You can find the things you seem to always be losing. I know that once I get the motivation and energy to pick up the laundry and do the dishes, I immediately feel better. It may also be the forced action and the focus on something outside of self that helps.

Recap

These are my 8 simple tips for helping yourself feel better.

1. Omega 3s (1,000-2,000 mg/day)
2. Vitamin D (2,000-10,000 IU/day)
3. Sleep
4. Drink water
5. Exercise (low-intensity)
6. Meditation
7. Community & Service
8. Declutter

Don't think you have to tackle all 8 steps at once.

For me, I started with getting more sleep and going to bed a little earlier. (That may not be the best starting point for someone with insomnia.) I then started to walk my dog more often and for ever-increasing amounts of time while also increasing my daily water intake. When that all felt more natural, I started taking the omega 3s and vitamin D every day. I made that step easier to remember by filling my week-long pill dispenser every Sunday and leaving it by my toothbrush. Then, I started to get more quality social time – making a point to spend time with the people who are invested in me, support me, and don't judge me. Eventually – months after the process began – I started to do a few minutes of meditation in the morning (which was mostly chasing thoughts away by focusing on breathing) and I got back into volunteering in my community. Declutter came last; I made a chore schedule where I had a set short period of time to clean each day. This kept the mess from getting out of hand while also keeping me from feeling overwhelmed.

You may not be at 100% for any given step. But you're doing better than before. You may slip off and lose a habit, but you can always come back to it.

The order that I did things may not work for you at all. Find what works best for you, one step at a time. Be patient with yourself. This isn't a race. There's no deadline. You're building seemingly simple healthy habits (that have a scientifically proven positive impact on your mental health), and that takes time. Once you're at a place where you can include all 8 steps in your daily life in some capacity, then you can work on increasing and fine tuning and improving on each step.

You got this!