

# "Your Toolbox for Tackling Depression and Anxiety"

## A Holistic Approach—Addressing Physiology, Psychology, and Lifestyle Factors

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*The purpose of this resource is to provide a comprehensive toolbox of anxiety and/or depression-busting tools—all in one place—that you can immediately put into practice to improve your well-being. With my “3-Legged Stool of Mental Health” that addresses Physiology, Psychology, and Lifestyle factors you’ll have an evidenced-based, holistic approach to overcoming anxiety and depression. These suggestions can help you “fill your bucket” as well as repair or heal your bucket or simply help you preventatively avoid developing an “empty bucket.” This is a compilation of real solutions to the very real challenges of mental health issues. There is hope! There is help! (Hotlinks within the handout will take you to additional resources.)*

### Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety

Anyone can fall prey to anxiety or depression given the right stressors and situational circumstances. And with the COVID-19 pandemic on top of everything else in life, symptoms of anxiety or depression have increased from 36% to 41% among adults<sup>1</sup> and have reached nearly 33% among young people aged 13-19.<sup>2</sup> People are experiencing anxiety at more than double the rates even of depression.<sup>3</sup> Both are significant issues to address. Mental health issues are an epidemic in the United States and around the world. Anxiety and depression are becoming more and more common human conditions, which hopefully will continue to alleviate some of the stigma.

### What Depression and Anxiety Feel Like

Living with depression is like living under a dark cloud. People often think depression is just being lazy or feeling sad, but it's much more than just sadness or fatigue. It can include a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, anger, irritability, loss of energy, self-loathing, appetite or weight changes, unexplained aches and pains, etc. It can feel like you have little control over your own mind and have lost the ability to feel positive emotions. You may feel paralyzingly numb and lifeless. It affects your self-worth, concentration, energy, interest in activities, motivation to do things, and physical wellness.

For men, depression especially tends to show up as anger, irritability, emptiness, negativity, aggressiveness, withdrawal, and feeling stuck or uptight. They often think that just because they don't feel sad or hopeless that they aren't experiencing depression. What we sometimes think of as “grumpy old men” may actually be that they are dealing with depression.

It's often thought that anxiety is just worrying too much or feeling nervous about things. Anxiety is actually much more than that. It can include spiraling intrusive thoughts and self-judgments, panic attacks, an uncontrollable feeling of worry, increased irritability, feelings of guilt and shame, restlessness or feeling “on edge,” avoiding situations, and a variety of physical

symptoms like trouble concentrating, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, nauseousness, or a churning in the stomach, and/or headaches. You often feel stressed out or worried about things that may seem inflated to others who are not dealing with mental health issues. Mental health struggles create both mental and physical symptoms. In both cases, you just don't feel like you—your sense of self feels a little wobbly—and it is negatively affecting your life.

Those with either of these common mental health issues often experience fear, worry, sadness, irritability, unexplained fatigue or lack of energy, general negativity or pessimistic thinking, cognitive distortions, lack of motivation or drive, feelings of overwhelm, avoiding people and social situations, teariness, restlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, emptiness, guilt or feelings of worthlessness far beyond that which we all experience at some point or another. When any of these feelings last for more than two weeks and are negatively impacting your life it's especially important to do something about it.

### Causes of Depression and Anxiety

Mood disorders like depression and anxiety develop from a complex set of factors including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, hormones, and life events. Causes are a combination of genetic and environmental factors—nature and nurture. Thus, a person's genetic make-up and life history in addition to their brain chemistry (neurotransmitters) may determine one's tendency to become depressed or experience anxiety. There can be biological susceptibilities to biochemical imbalances in the brain and/or issues caused by accumulated life stressors like neglect, abuse, or other traumas that contribute to anxiety or depression.

Neglect, abuse, and trauma tend to train you to believe some very depressing or anxiety-inducing things about yourself, your life and others, which can become self-perpetuating and self-sabotaging.

Rather than simply seeing depression or anxiety as a “disease” or a “mental illness” we might also see these issues as healthy responses that are part of our biological defense system. As one psychologist states, “Depression is not just a mental ‘disorder.’ It’s the body’s biological adaptation to stay safe.”<sup>4</sup> Anxiety and/or depression are understandable effects of living in an overwhelmingly unhealthy, even toxic, environment. We might even think of the term “depletion depression” to understand the accumulating effects of our unhealthy, toxic environment and life experiences. Neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Daniel G. Amen, MD, of the Change Your Brain Change Your Life Foundation asserts that most psychiatric issues are not really “mental health” issues as much as “brain health” issues. Addressing one’s Physiology (see Leg #1) becomes especially important.

Unfortunately, many of our common activities make depression and anxiety worse. It’s like “junk food for the mind”—things like irregular sleep/staying up too late, caffeine, alcohol, sugar, processed foods, skipping meals, not drinking enough water, lack of exercise, a messy room/living space, too much screen time, lack of fresh air, saying ‘yes’ too much, and watching too much news. Sometimes it can be easier and less work to “subtract” things from our lives that are not helping our situation than it is to add something good to an already overwhelmed mind. An easy place to start is to choose one of the unhealthy/toxic things mentioned above to remove from your life.

### Mind/Body Illness & Hope

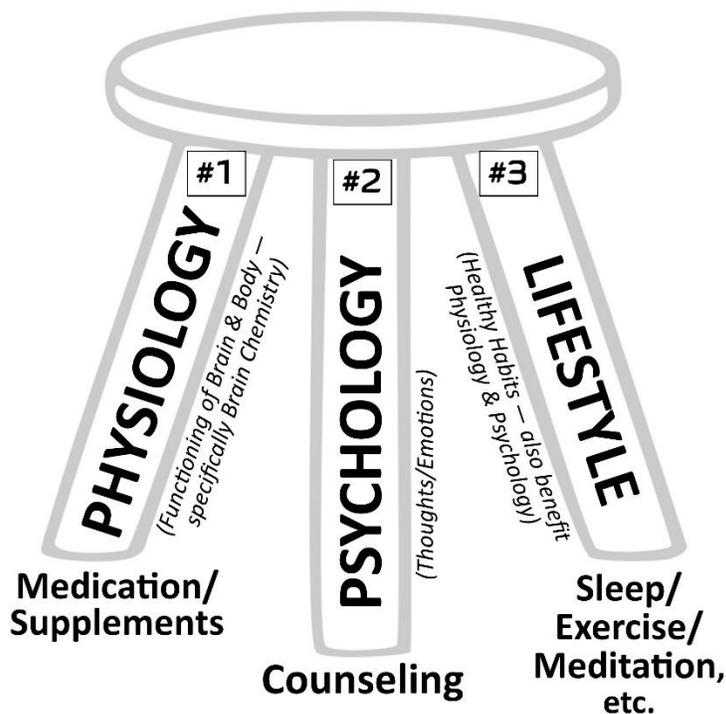
Mental health issues like depression and anxiety are diseases of the mind and body. No one chooses to have anxiety or depression any more than anyone chooses to have cancer or diabetes. Anxiety and depression like many other illnesses can be managed or overcome. I have personally experienced and overcome depression, so I know it’s possible with the right help (including the tools shared in this resource).

Contrary to old stereotypes dealing with anxiety and/or depression has nothing to do with one’s personal character or spirituality. These illnesses aren’t due to any character flaw or moral failing any more than cancer would be. It isn’t something where affected individuals can just tell themselves to snap out of it. It’s a legitimate, complex physiological mental health illness with physical, social, and relational dimensions. It’s like diabetes or cancer but has even greater psychological and relational components. Due to its many dimensions and complexities, it isn’t just something that a pill alone will be able to cure.

### Addressing the Three Dimensions of Mental Health

Research affirms that the key components of overcoming depression or anxiety is a combination of addressing one’s “Physiology” (specifically balancing one’s brain chemistry) and one’s “Psychology” (addressing thoughts and emotions), as well as “Lifestyle” factors (e.g., sleep, exercise, meditation, etc.). Many of the suggestions under leg #3 “Lifestyle” factors also affect physiology and/or psychology. They just aren’t the steps that alone will usually help enough without first addressing things in

# 3-Legged Stool of MENTAL HEALTH

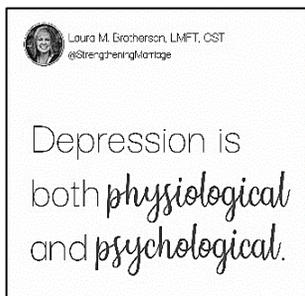


leg #1 - “Physiology” and leg #2 - “Psychology.” Addressing the physiology is where medication or mental health supplements come in. Addressing the psychology is where counseling comes in. (I illustrate the three dimensions of mental health with my “3-Legged Stool of Mental Health” shown above.)

In addition to the more commonly known approaches of medication and counseling, research is finding that the third leg of the “mental health stool” includes a variety of lifestyle factors, such as exercise, meditation, yoga, etc.<sup>5</sup> This third dimension plays an oft-overlooked role in mental wellness allowing for a more holistic approach to mental health issues. Good mental health requires a holistic approach incorporating all aspects of life as you’ll see by the information shared here.

Addressing the first and second leg of the “mental health stool” (Physiology and Psychology) might be compared to repairing or healing the holes you may have in your bucket, while that and the third leg (Lifestyle factors) is what can help you fill your bucket back up now that the “holes” (e.g., imbalanced brain chemistry, unhealthy ways of thinking, trauma, etc.) have been addressed and filled.

By the time most people get their hands on a resource like this they have probably not been doing well for some time. They are likely in need of first finding a good doctor or therapist while adding in any of the lifestyle changes that they can. It can often feel overwhelming or unattainable to even tackle something like regular exercise given the lack of motivation or energy depression or anxiety may induce. Those with milder symptoms of depression and/or anxiety may be able to start feeling better by simply incorporating some of the lifestyle changes shared here from the third leg of the mental health stool. Those who are trying



to prevent mental health issues may find this resource helpful in keeping their bucket full or depression-proofing their lives.

You don't have to figure everything out by yourself. Hopefully this resource will get you started and then adding a counselor and a doctor will help you find the specific answers you may need.

### Why Get Help?

Living with depression and/or anxiety is like seeing and experiencing the world through distorted eyes. Life experiences, relationships, your job, etc. will all be seen through a negative lens creating a self-sustaining (and often self-sabotaging) picture of the world as depressing and/or filled with worry. That need not be if you will incorporate the suggestions shared here to nurture your mental and emotional health.

Because mental health issues make us more susceptible to unhealthy coping mechanisms, compulsive behaviors, and self-medicating addictions (e.g., overeating, shopping, pornography, gaming, substance abuse, etc.) it is important to tackle mental health struggles as soon as you can to get to the root of the issue. The root of the issue is the Physiology, Psychology and other Lifestyle factors as addressed in the "3-Legged Stool of Mental Health" diagram above. Chronic depression or anxiety can also lead to other significant physical health issues so it's important to get on this as soon as you can.

Preventing the slide into deeper feelings of suicide is an especially urgent reason to take your mental health seriously. You can call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or chat with someone immediately if you are ever feeling suicidal. Visit

[SuicidePreventionLifeline.org](http://SuicidePreventionLifeline.org) for more information. If you know of anyone who might be suicidal, please be the one to help save a life by taking these 5 steps:

- 1) ASK if they are thinking about suicide.
- 2) BE THERE for them – physically or talk to them on the phone.
- 3) KEEP THEM SAFE – find out more about their plans and take steps to keep them safe.
- 4) HELP THEM CONNECT – help them connect with someone who can help or even contact the hotline above if you're not sure what to do.
- 5) FOLLOW UP – after your initial contact follow up to see if they got the help they need.



No one else can ever really know exactly how you are thinking, feeling, or doing, so it's important to take ownership for your mental and emotional wellness and reach out for help as soon as you can. Getting help and using the tools in this handout to improve your mental health will minimize the need to mood-alter or to compensate in other unhealthy ways for anxious or unhappy feelings.

Sometimes people feel like their anxiety or depression will just go away on its own. Sometimes people don't want to try anything in case it doesn't help, and they end up feeling even more hopeless. That kind of thinking is understandable but keeps people stuck in a bleak state. Unfortunately, mental health issues

don't just go away on their own any more than a broken arm would heal itself without some help. Depression and anxiety are real ailments and have real solutions.

### Why I Created This Resource

As a therapist, I struggled to find a comprehensive and reliable resource that included the key overall direction for tackling anxiety and depression plus the specific tools immediately available to help one's state of being. This handout is my effort to put it all into one easily accessible resource for my clients (and anyone else) to preventatively "anxiety-proof" or "depression-proof" their lives as well as help people know how to tackle mental health issues that have shown up.

The suggestions here can both prevent and help people out of the mental muck of anxiety and depression and into a life of peace, contentment and even joy. There is hope and help for feeling happiness and contentment again!

Since many of the tools here can help with both anxiety and/or depression, this toolbox can be used for either mental health issue. Many of these tools can thankfully be immediately put into practice to improve your thoughts and emotions as you also engage in some of the more in-depth efforts to overcome anxiety and/or depression (such as finding a counselor and/or starting supplements or a medication).

This toolbox includes the following suggestions that address the three legs of the "mental health stool" diagram shown above—the Physiology, Psychology, and Lifestyle changes needed for mental health. We'll start with the two key steps (Physiology and Psychology) then list out the many lifestyle changes that can make a real difference in your life as well:

#### LEG #1 – PHYSIOLOGY

##### **1. Take Medication and/or Mental Health Supplements**

#### LEG #2 – PSYCHOLOGY

##### **2. Participate in Counseling**

#### LEG #3 – LIFESTYLE FACTORS

##### **3. Get Enough Good Quality Sleep**

##### **4. Eat Healthy / Be Healthy**

##### **5. Exercise / Get Active**

##### **6. Engage in Process Writing**

##### **7. Boss Your Brain / Change Your Negative Self-Talk**

##### **8. Feed Your Mind**

##### **9. Reduce Stress**

##### **10. Learn Acceptance, Let Go of Perfectionism, and Practice Self-Compassion**

##### **11. Do EFT Tapping**

##### **12. Set Healthy Boundaries**

##### **13. Get Some Sunlight / Full-Spectrum Light**

##### **14. Do Meditation, Mindfulness, or Yoga**

##### **15. Take a Social Media Break**

##### **16. Engage with People**

##### **17. Smile and Laugh**

##### **18. Get Educated about Depression**

##### **19. Partner with God**

## LEG #1 – PHYSIOLOGY

### **#1 – Take Medication and/or Mental Health**

**Supplements.** Research shows that anxiety and depression are best beaten by addressing the “three-legged stool of mental health” mentioned above—Physiology, Psychology, and Lifestyle factors. Research in neuroscience points to an imbalance in the brain’s neurotransmitters (brain chemistry) as an explanation for depression. Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers that send signals between brain cells. Balancing the brain chemistry is often the first step needed to address significant mental health struggles.

Mild, situational, or seasonal depression or anxiety may resolve itself with some of the lifestyle changes suggested in the third leg of the stool, but if those efforts aren’t enough to improve your well-being or if you simply don’t have the motivation or will to bring yourself to do those things, you may need to help out your brain chemistry first.

Generally, this first leg of the mental health stool (Physiology) will need to be addressed in order to be able to do the other psychological work (leg #2) necessary to get at the underlying issues of anxiety and depression. Once we get your brain in better balance things that once seemed insurmountable become much more doable or attainable. Medication can be an incredible godsend.

To get your brain’s neurochemistry back in balance either seek out a good doctor to prescribe medication or you could try some of the mental health supplements suggested below. SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) are the most common antidepressant medications for the treatment of anxiety and depression. Serotonin is a feel-good chemical (neurotransmitter) responsible for modulating mood, thoughts, learning, memory and numerous physiological processes. As serotonin levels in the brain increase you naturally experience more positive thoughts and emotions.

To find good medical help for getting an antidepressant or anti-anxiety medication it may be easiest to look for the following medical professionals: (Be sure that they specialize in “psychiatry”/ mental health medication management.) D.O.s (Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine who tend to take a more holistic approach), Nurse Practitioners (NP’s), Physician’s Assistants (PA’s) (NP’s and PA’s tend to be a little easier to get into than MD’s) or you could see medical professionals that also specialize in hormone issues if that might also be an issue.

While psychiatrists are the premier expert physicians on mental health issues, they often cost more and may be harder to get into but can be great assistance especially if you are dealing with more difficult to treat situations. The other medical professionals mentioned previously tend to spend a little more time with the patient, tend to be more holistic (see all dimensions of the person instead of just the physical/medical) and use a wider variety of approaches (supplements in addition to psychotropic medications) than regular doctors or psychiatrists. Of course, that also depends on each medical professional.

If postpartum or menopausal issues might be at play be sure to find a medical professional who specializes in hormones so they can do the blood work necessary to check and help balance out your hormones as well. Especially if you’re dealing with perimenopause or menopause, it’s important to check and

balance estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, and thyroid, which all affect sleep and mental health.

Since the demand for psychiatric medical professionals is higher than usual with the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic (as is the demand for counselors) it could be a good idea to get on a few different doctors’ schedules and/or cancellation lists to see who can get you in sooner.

For some people they may need an augmentation or adjunct to medication and therapy especially if they’ve tried a few different medications and still couldn’t find the help they needed (treatment resistant). Many people have found great success with [Neurofeedback](#),<sup>6</sup> [Ketamine](#)<sup>7</sup> treatments, or [Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation \(TMS\)](#)<sup>8</sup> treatments.

I always recommend that clients do some of their own research as well so that they can make informed decisions about their mental health needs. Not all doctors will be familiar with supplements or alternative health approaches for mental health issues. For those who prefer to try supplements first, you will need to do some of your own research and consult with your doctor. Ideally you can find a good holistic medical professional who is versed in alternatives so that you can consult with them about trying something more natural first if that is your preference.

Some of the down sides of medication are that people don’t want the stigma of taking an antidepressant or may not be willing to deal with potential side effects. Mental health supplements become a great option in these cases and are especially helpful to try first with young people.

Many who are hesitant about taking medication will often consider trying supplements that specifically help with mental health issues. I’ve created a list of some highly effective supplements for mental health issues. I call these my 1<sup>st</sup> tier mental health supplements. These are some of the best supplements I’ve found to help balance the brain chemistry in a more natural way bringing about relief and a greater sense of well-being quicker and without side effects. These **1<sup>st</sup> tier supplements** include:

- SAM-e (Nature Made)
- QMax Premium (QSciences)—a multi-vitamin for the brain
- Serosyn (Metagenics)

People have found that these supplements additionally help them reduce stress, have more energy, feel more at peace, and have an overall improvement in their sense of well-being with minimal to no side-effects. I personally found SAM-e to be a life saver when I experienced postpartum depression many years ago. SAM-e is a naturally occurring substance in the body, is backed by research, and is recommended by many medical professionals. You can learn more about SAM-e in the book [Stop Depression Now](#) by Richard Brown, M.D. who uses SAM-e regularly in his practice. (See these [notes from this book](#) for more insights.) [This additional handout](#) provides more information about each of these 1<sup>st</sup> tier supplements.

After taking medication or a mental health supplement clients often make comments like, “the sky just seems bluer now.” Clients talk about feeling like their brain has more time to think before they react to something. It reminds me of a quote from Viktor Frankl, “Between stimulus and response there is a space.

In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” Increasing the space between a stimulus and our negative responses buys us time to make better choices in our behavior.

In addition to the supplements mentioned above, additional dietary supplements can provide added help to the body and mind. These three supplements are recommended by well-known neuropsychiatrist and brain disorder specialist Dr. Daniel G. Amen, MD who believes these supplements are not really optional but are needed by most everyone to boost brainpower, mood, and overall mental wellness.<sup>9</sup> I call them my **2<sup>nd</sup> tier supplements** for mental health. These include:

- Omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil)
- Vitamin D
- Magnesium

There is no shame in having to take something for anxiety or depression any more than there would be in having to take insulin for diabetes. But keep in mind that because of the complex nature of depression and anxiety a pill alone won't do the trick without incorporating the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> leg of the mental health stool—Psychological and Lifestyle changes.

A client recently mentioned how much she appreciated this information about depression because for most of her life she had only relied on antidepressants but never took on doing the additional psychological work she was now doing in counseling to root out her insecurities and negative ways of thinking.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

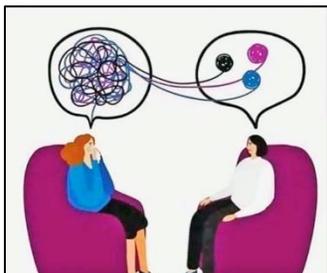
- Find a medical professional to prescribe medication.
- Consider taking [mental health supplements](#) to help balance the brain chemistry.

## **LEG #2 – PSYCHOLOGY**

**#2 – Participate in Counseling.** The two most important steps in overcoming depression and/or anxiety are getting help to balance the brain chemistry plus counseling (talk therapy). If you don't know where to start with all these depression/anxiety-busting tools a good first step is to find a counselor to help you figure out your next best steps. Having a knowledgeable, nonjudgmental, and therapeutically helpful person providing unconditional positive regard to talk to and walk with you through the healing process can be so powerful in and of itself. New clients often mention how much they appreciate having someone to talk to about things they often can't really talk to anyone else about. People need to talk. It's often how we figure out or make sense of what we think.

Counselors provide a therapeutically helpful listening ear where you can be fully open, vulnerable, and transparent. They can help you identify and process underlying thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and experiences that feed anxiety and depression.

They can help you learn better coping skills, better communication skills, healthier ways of thinking and feeling, and help you develop greater self-awareness. Together you can brainstorm ideas and solutions to develop and heal



the self and your relationships with others. They can be a witness to your pain and to your story.

A counselor can help you identify and address any underlying trauma, abuse, or emotional neglect you may have experienced throughout your life, which can create unhealthy ways of functioning. They can help you change unhealthy, negative, or limiting core beliefs you've picked up from your upbringing and other negative life experiences. Some of these beliefs may include, "I can't trust others to be there for me," or "I'm not important," or "I'm not loveable," etc. Counseling can help you change depressing or anxious ways of thinking and reprogram the way you see yourself and the world. A good counselor provides a profound gift of helping you to feel truly seen, heard, and understood—possibly for the first time. Counseling can also help address any social or relational skill deficits, and help you develop better coping and problem-solving skills.

Since depression is present in more than half of the cases of suicide, it can lead to suicidal ideation. A counselor can work with you to collaboratively determine a good safety plan and help with coping strategies. If you are suicidal you can immediately call the national suicide hotline -- 800-273-TALK (8255) and speak with someone who can help.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)<sup>10</sup> is a common empirically validated approach to addressing depression.<sup>11 12</sup> Therapists help clients confront and modify irrational thoughts and beliefs that are often at the root of maladaptive behaviors. In addition to CBT, a counselor has many other tools and approaches to help with the specific aspects of your struggles as well as the challenges that depression and/or anxiety can bring to your life and your relationships. If you are dealing with trauma, one of the best therapeutic approaches is [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing \(EMDR\)](#) so be sure to find a counselor that has that specific training. (You can specify that "type of therapy" when searching for counselors at the link [here](#) and below.)

Couples or family counseling can also help a spouse or other family members as they love and support you through your mental health challenges and the healing process. This kind of counseling gives your loved one's support as well since they can develop their own degree of "reactive depression" in the process of trying to help you while managing their own life challenges. One client said to me, "I do okay if I'm not okay, but my husband is okay, but we don't do okay if I'm not okay and he's not okay too." That's a lot of pressure on the one not personally experiencing the anxiety or depression, so counseling can help you both through the process.

Once you have found a counselor to help you get on your path to recovery it can also be helpful to participate in a support group if there is one available locally or online. Groups can be particularly helpful in decreasing your feelings of loneliness and isolation by sharing your journey with those having similar challenges. It's therapeutic to know you're not alone in your mental health struggles.

One of the most comprehensive resources for finding a good counselor (or a support group) in your area is to search [PsychologyToday.com](#). You can specify all the characteristics you would like in a therapist (e.g., gender, counseling issue, therapeutic approach, religious preferences, insurances taken,

etc.). The demand for counseling has certainly increased with the pandemic, so you may need to try multiple counselors to find one that's available. Ask to be put on their cancellation list if their available appointments are a ways out.

### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Find a good counselor to walk with you and help you overcome your mental health challenges.
- Consider finding a support group to help you along your journey as well.

## **LEG #3 – LIFESTYLE FACTORS**

**#3 – Get Enough Good Quality Sleep.** Getting sufficient rest (7-9 hours of quality sleep) so that your mind and body can rest and process the experiences and emotions of your day is essential to maintaining good mental health. Anxiety and depression can make it difficult to sleep well. And sleep problems can exacerbate depression and anxiety creating a negative cycle between sleep and mental health issues. One of the quickest ways to mess with your mental health is to not get a good night's sleep on a regular basis. Sleep is so important that it should definitely be the first lifestyle factor that's addressed if it's at all an issue for you. The brain has a harder time thinking positively when it's in a state of sleep deprivation.

The key to healthy sleep is to consistently go to bed and wake up at the same time each day to assist your internal sleep clock (circadian rhythms). Developing a nightly routine for winding down and eliminating screen time can help cue the body to prime itself for sleep. If stress or busyness is affecting your sleep, see if you can cut back on just one thing from your to-do list to make more time for sleep.

If you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep you might try some of the suggestions here: Read a book (not electronically); write out 10 things that are causing distress to get them off your mind and onto paper; notice your breath and practice slow, deep breathing to relax your mind and body to prepare for sleep; if you need some extra help try some [sleep supplements](#) that can be a safe and easy way to get a better night's sleep. (Check out [this handout](#) for additional helps for improving your sleep.)

Developing healthy habits of sleep, good nutrition, sufficient water intake, healthy mental nourishment, etc. all play a vital role in your mental health. Check out this [Healthy Habits Worksheet](#) to identify other things you could easily improve to create healthy habits for your life.

### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Get 7-9 hours of good sleep.
- Use some of the suggestions provided to help you sleep better.
- Consider [sleep supplements](#), if needed.
- Review the [Healthy Habits Worksheet](#) to identify other areas you could improve.

**#4 – Eat Healthy / Be Healthy.** Feeling depressed or anxious tends to affect our eating habits and our eating habits can affect the prevalence of depression and anxiety. It's easy to turn to unhealthy foods for self-medicating purposes especially when dealing with depression and/or anxiety. What we put into our

mouth is just as important as what we put into our mind and can significantly affect our thoughts and emotions. Food is more than just a source of energy and nutrients. It is the fuel for the body and plays a major role in our health, wellbeing, and mental health.<sup>13 14</sup> You might even think of food as medicine for your brain and body.

If you can be mindful of what you are eating and change even one eating habit to be a little healthier, it can make a difference in how you feel. It is true that you are what you eat. Cutting out sweets, soda, or caffeine and adding more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, or nuts and an extra glass of water can help you combat "stinkin thinkin" (the automatic negative thoughts that fill our minds). Sugar can be especially detrimental during the winter months when seasonal depression ("winter blues") can be particularly challenging.<sup>15</sup>

A client recently shared how after going away on a getaway she let her good sleep, healthy eating, and exercise habits slip, which caused enough depression that she "felt like a wreck" after she returned until she could get things back on track. Exercise, sleep, and healthy eating are at the top of the lifestyle list for reducing depression and anxiety.

Recent research also identifies inflammation in the body as a culprit in depression.<sup>16</sup> Lifestyle factors such as aerobic exercise, maintaining a healthy body weight, getting enough good sleep, reducing stress, eating a healthy diet, consuming omega-3 fats can all help reduce inflammation and its depressing effects on the body and mind.

### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Eat healthy foods.
- Cut out sugar and processed foods.
- Drink more water.
- Make other lifestyle changes such as, reducing stress, eating omega-3 fats, etc.

**#5 – Exercise / Get Active.** In reviewing 30 years of research, it's clear that exercise plays a powerful role in both the prevention and treatment of mental illness.<sup>17 18</sup> Whether going for a run, lifting weights, playing basketball, dancing, or doing yoga, it's important to get your body moving. Cardiovascular and aerobic exercise plus strength training at moderate to high intensity several times per week is especially recommended, but any movement that gets your heart rate up is good. Yoga and other mind-body exercises are especially helpful for those dealing with anxiety.

Exercise has so many benefits.<sup>19</sup> It's the number one way to increase the feel-good hormone serotonin, which makes you feel happier. Exercise helps with weight loss; it can increase your energy levels; it helps your brain health and memory; it helps with relaxation and sleep quality; and it increases brain neurotransmitters and improves hormone function involved in mental health.<sup>20</sup> Exercise boosts mood and increases endorphins and can even be as effective as some antidepressants.<sup>21</sup> Exercise helps the feel-good hormones flow and can distract you from ruminating thoughts. Physical activity counters too much mental activity—or overthinking.

As mentioned, exercise can be as effective as antidepressants for those with mild depression and some doctors even hesitate to prescribe medication until a good exercise

regimen has been started. The challenge is that sometimes without addressing your brain chemistry or doing counseling it's hard to find the will or motivation to start exercising.

Begin small and find an activity you are likely to enjoy. Just getting out and moving your body—doing anything different than you normally do—can jumpstart your mind and your mood. I like to suggest the “5-minute rule” of doing any exercise for just 5 minutes in the beginning because it can psychologically feel more doable than starting with a major exercise regimen—especially if you're already struggling with motivation to do anything.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Start going for a walk, run, or some other enjoyable physical activity.
- Turn on some fun music and dance—both for the movement and to uplift your thoughts and emotions.
- Set small goals for physical activity, recognizing its powerful anti-depressant effects.

**#6 – Engage in Process Writing.** Sometimes no one is available to listen to when you need to talk. And sometimes there is simply too much to say. Journal therapy or process writing is an accessible way to identify and help process what you're thinking and feeling and help you let go of the mental debris we all accumulate throughout our lives. Putting thoughts and feelings onto paper (instead of just ruminating about them in your mind) helps to make the thoughts tangible and then by throwing the paper away (or shredding it) it's easier to let those thoughts and feeling go.<sup>22</sup>

Process writing can be in the form of simple bullet items listing out your feelings using “I...” statements. Process writing can also be free-form writing where you vomit out your thoughts and worries onto paper. It can also be in the form of a written conversation with God. You decide what form of process writing works best for you to process and let go of unhealthy, unproductive thoughts and feelings.

I often have clients start with writing out 10 or 20 “I feel...” or “I'm angry...” statements to express the anger, frustration, fear, guilt, resentment, or sadness they are feeling. Giving your genuine thoughts and feelings a voice has a way of giving them light and air to breath so they can dissolve. Process writing allows you to validate your feelings and let them go. Negative feelings buried alive tend to stay alive within us—keeping us stuck. They need some processing to begin to dissipate.

Some clients have found it particularly helpful to alternate their “anger lists” with a “grateful list” in order to feel more balanced or to keep negative emotions from feeling out of control. Developing a habit of listing expressions of gratitude increases feel-good hormones, strengthens the immune system, and improves personal relationships.

Other clients find that they can't stomach writing anything positive or any “gratefals” until they truly feel heard in their hurt and pain. Those who try to skip the step of identifying and acknowledging their inner demons and negative emotions in writing often get stuck and don't really get better. We also tend to put our thoughts and emotions onto those around us if we don't process them out on paper. I like to say, “Put it on paper so you don't put it on people you love.”

Sometimes writing a letter to the person you are upset with and then shredding it or writing a letter to God about a situation can help you process it and let it go—helping you heal. God already knows what you are thinking, feeling, and going through, so being honest and open with your feelings—even the unpleasant ones—is vital for beating anxiety and depression. These writings are just for your own processing and releasing, not for “journaling” a record of your life. Many people find it additionally therapeutic to burn or shred their process writing as a symbolic way of letting them go. This can help them feel safer to be thoroughly open and honest knowing no one will see what they've written. (For more information check out this [“Process Writing”](#) handout or this [“Clearing Out Your Emotional Closet”](#) worksheet.)

Another process writing tool is to create a two-column list of “Things I can control” and “Things I can't” to remind yourself of where to put your time and energy and where to let things go.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Get yourself a simple process writing notebook.
- Get in the habit of writing out both “anger/frustration lists” and “grateful lists.”
- Burn or shred your “anger/frustration lists” to help you let them go.

**#7 – Boss Your Brain / Change Your Negative Self-Talk.** While anxiety and depression come from a chemical imbalance of the brain it creates a psychological ailment of the mind. Anxiety and depression create mental habits of negative, depressing, worrisome, ruminating thoughts and beliefs.

These negative thoughts invade your mind like ants at a picnic. Neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Daniel G. Amen, MD, calls these “ANTS” (Automatic Negative Thoughts).<sup>23</sup> These thoughts lie to you and make situations seem worse than they are. It's important to remember that thoughts are not facts! What we are thinking is not always true. It's just a result of the accumulated experiences and “mental debris” from throughout our lives. Most of our thoughts on a given day are negative and repetitive.<sup>24</sup> Our brains are wired for negative thinking as a survival mechanism, but we don't have to let those negative thoughts have so much power anymore.

You can learn to NOT believe everything your brain tells you and replace negative thoughts with healthier, more productive ways of thinking. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) can help you with this. You can learn to be the boss of your brain,<sup>25</sup> and to take charge—much like a good parent redirects the behavior of a toddler. The brain is lazy and wants to do what is easy and familiar. Therefore, it takes commitment and effort for any lasting changes in your thought patterns to take place.

To stop anxiety and depression, you'll need to proactively train your brain to stop the stinkin' thinkin' of unrealistic expectations, all-or-nothing thinking (and other thinking errors), having a victim or blaming mentality and other unproductive habits of the mind. This includes refraining from “shoulding” on yourself (or others). Addressing negative and unhealthy thinking is where a good counselor can help.

Even just noticing the negative thought and labeling it - “I notice I'm having the thought that no one likes me” is something

called “cognitive defusion.” It can help you separate or “de-fuse” from your thoughts. Catch yourself when you assume negative intentions or outcomes and catch yourself when you over-generalize them to everyone and everything. Ask yourself, “What if a positive outcome were to occur instead?” Let your mind ponder the possibility. Catch yourself when you minimize the positives that happen in your life. Just say, “Stop!” to negative thoughts as you practice bossing your brain!

Actively developing the habit of positive self-talk and stopping self-criticism can work wonders on depression and anxiety. You might think of any negative thought or feeling that comes along as poison for the mind. Such thoughts may show up, but you don’t have to let them stay. They are unwelcome intruders. Simply acknowledge their presence, then send them away! A good self-talk mantra to repeatedly feed your mind might be something like, “*I’m doing the best I can, and my best is good enough.*”

Adding to a “grateful list” each day can help highlight the positives in your life and counter the negatives—moving your mind into a higher energetic state of gratitude. Actively watch for even 5 specific things you can jot down each day for which you are grateful. You can keep a gratitude journal or even just create a note on your cell phone to add to your list easily and regularly. Doing process writing as mentioned above can especially help get your negative thoughts out on paper instead of ruminating in your mind.

Working with a counselor who utilizes Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can help you learn ways to stop self-defeating and self-sabotaging patterns of thinking. This handout “[How to Change Your Thinking](#)” can also be helpful as a self-help resource.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Notice negative, unproductive thoughts (ANTS) and send them away.
- Practice positive self-talk – “*I’m doing the best I can, and my best is good enough.*”
- Focus on positives. (Keep a gratitude journal.)
- Review the “[How to Change Your Thinking](#)” handout linked above for other helpful suggestions.

**#8 – Feed Your Mind.** The mind is constantly buzzing with thoughts that originate from our past experiences and accumulated mental debris. Rather than letting your mind run amok with ruminating negative thoughts, proactively feed it healthy, uplifting, inspiring “mental food.”

By listening to good audio books, podcasts, or uplifting music you can challenge some of your stinkin’ thinkin’ and even reprogram your mind to think in healthier ways. Listening to some of the audio books mentioned below can help you learn to live in a state of acceptance and surrender, which is so important in overcoming depression and anxiety. Music itself acts as a medium for processing emotions, trauma, and grief. It can also be utilized as a regulating or calming agent for anxiety or dysregulation.<sup>26</sup>

Listening to audio books can be even more powerful than reading them because it is like having positive, reprogramming “background music” going on in the mind. Some good audio books to feed your brain might be:

- [Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life](#) by Byron Katie (2004 audio version is best!)
- [The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself](#) by Michael A. Singer
- [Living from a Place of Surrender: The Untethered Soul in Action](#) by Michael A. Singer
- [The Outward Mindset: Seeing Beyond Ourselves](#) by The Arbinger Institute
- [Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead](#) by Brené Brown
- [Self-Compassion](#) by Kristin Neff

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Give your brain some positive mental nourishment by listening to uplifting audio books, music, podcasts, etc. to reprogram our automatic negative ways of thinking.

**#9 – Reduce Stress.** Chronic stress is one of the key accelerators of anxiety and depression.<sup>27</sup> A good idea for both the prevention of mental health issues and helping to heal such issues is to find ways to reduce stress in your life. Think of the things that cause stress in your life. Think of the things that you have control over. See if there are some things you can do to reduce stress in your life. (See also “[Stress Relief/Self-Soothing Tools](#)” and “[De-Stressor List](#).”) Some ideas for reducing stress include the following:

- *Take a break from consuming the news.* With so many upsetting things going on in the world today it can immediately reduce stress to stop letting it into your system. One of my clients was pondering the words of a hymn, “we will heed not what the wicked may say”<sup>28</sup> (or do). She found that by stopping her daily intake of disturbing images and information in the news media it significantly reduced her daily distress.
- *Stay away from any disturbing movies or other media* to reduce the stress response in the body.
- *Cut back or cut something out.* What is one thing you could cut out of your life or cut back to 80% each day? Sometimes letting some things slide or doing less than your ideal is a good way to reduce your daily load.
- *Take slow healing breaths.* Breathwork—taking slow, deep abdominal breaths can feel like a superpower during a moment of anxiety or distress. Pay attention to your breathing throughout the day. Take a few moments to fully inhale as if taking in the fresh scent of fragrant flowers. Put your hand on your stomach and close your eyes as you fully inhale and exhale while repeating a calming word like “peace.” Turning your attention to your breath and doing 5-10 slow breaths whenever you can is a wonderful way to reduce momentary distress. *Have some down time* or take time for some fun. Taking time to be still or do nothing can work wonders on an overwhelmed mind. Giving yourself permission for downtime, self-care or other enjoyable yet potentially “unproductive” activities can provide balance.

## ACTION ITEMS:

- Choose one way to reduce stress in your life.

**#10 – Learn Acceptance, Let Go of Perfectionism, and Practice Self-Compassion.** Women seem to be especially good at self-judgment, guilt and shame—never feeling like they are good enough. Men aren't exempt from this “not-enough” syndrome. Young people are especially good at not feeling like they measure up. Learning to gently accept things as they are rather than resisting “what is” can bring a significant measure of peace despite our difficulties. (Think the “Serenity Prayer.”)

You've heard the phrase, “That which you resist, persists!” Accepting what is, trusting the Lord, and learning to see yourself through the eyes of compassion are all necessary for breaking the spell of depression and/or anxiety. You can trust that the Lord is mindful of you and has a purpose for all things (see Doctrine & Covenants 122:7).

Being human means, we will make mistakes and have at least a few struggles and weaknesses. Perfectionism tells you that you can't make mistakes, but the reality and key to emotional health is expecting that we *will* make mistakes. We are all imperfect humans having an earthly experience where we get to practice being okay when we might not actually be okay. Being *good enough* really is good enough. By partnering with God, we can learn to be okay being imperfect and be okay being “good enough.”

We all have our own struggles and shortcomings that show up in a variety of ways at any given time. I love how Henry B. Eyring recommends that we assume that everyone we meet is going through something difficult.<sup>29</sup> It's a great reminder to know that everyone is dealing with something and to not take other people's difficulties (or negative responses) personally. You never truly know what someone else might be experiencing. I also love how Dieter F. Uchtdorf reminds us that we are all imperfect and that we struggle and sin differently from each other.<sup>30</sup>

Sometimes people feel like it's their fault if they have depression or anxiety. But mental health issues aren't anyone's fault any more than any particular physical disease would be your fault. No one chooses cancer. No one chooses depression. All the ways we beat ourselves up and think we are not good enough, not worthy enough, not perfect enough, not lovable enough are just tools of the adversary to keep us stuck in the muck of self-denigration, which fuels anxiety and depression.

A helpful tool, in addition to the grateful list we've discussed earlier, is to keep a numbered log of 5 specific things you like, love, or appreciate about yourself every day. This list helps you focus on the good, accept yourself as you are, and have more compassion for yourself. Self-acceptance and compassion are how we can most easily improve ourselves anyway. You can begin to reprogram your self-view to that of a person with strengths and worth by keeping this list and learning to focus on your positives.

It can also be helpful to listen to the audio book [Self-Compassion](#) by Kristin Neff (or any of her [Self-Compassion Break](#) audio meditations) that teach us to be mindful of or allow, in present-moment awareness, our pain and our personal difficulties rather than over-identifying with any of our negative feelings.

Self-compassion is the ability to be kind instead of judgmental with ourselves and to see our struggles and weaknesses as part of the universal human experience. You might think of self-compassion as treating yourself and speaking to yourself the way you would a best friend who was struggling. The three components of self-compassion are: 1) mindful awareness of your suffering or pain, e.g. “This is a moment of suffering;” 2) common humanity, e.g. “Suffering is a part of life, it's not abnormal to feel this way;” 3) self-kindness, e.g. put your hand over your heart and say something like, “I'm so sorry this is happening.” Research shows that self-compassion is a valuable tool in emotional resilience and overall healthy psychological functioning.<sup>31</sup>

Perfectionism is a poison for anyone—especially anyone struggling with depression or anxiety—whereas self-compassion is great for combatting the perfectionism that fuels depression. Self-compassion has been found to reduce a variety of negative psychological states such as anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders. It is a skill requiring practice and mental discipline.

## ACTION ITEMS:

- Accept things as they are.
- Let yourself be an imperfect human who makes mistakes.
- Let go of perfectionism.
- Keep a daily log of 5 things you like, love, or appreciate about yourself.
- Listen or read to the book [Self-Compassion](#) or listen to the [Self-Compassion Break](#) audios by Kristin Neff.

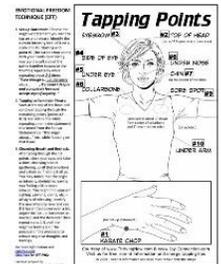
**#11 – Do EFT Tapping.** One of my favorite self-help tools for letting go of negative thoughts and feelings and reprogramming more positive perspectives is something called the [Emotional Freedom \(tapping\) Technique](#) (EFT). It's an energy therapy technique utilizing the philosophy of energy meridians associated with acupuncture except you tap on certain spots on your face and body instead of using needles. You might think of it as “psychological acupuncture” or detox for your brain.

You can find information and videos about EFT tapping online or here is a simple [handout](#) I use with clients. Next to process writing, this is one of the tools that helped me most in overcoming my own depression. It is a powerful self-help releasing tool in your toolbox for healing.

## ACTION ITEMS:

- Use the EFT tapping tool to release anxiety and any negative thoughts and beliefs.

**#12 – Set Healthy Boundaries.** Setting healthy physical and emotional boundaries with others is essential for both physical and emotional health. Not having boundaries is like leaving the door to your home open or unlocked allowing anyone—including unwelcome guests—to enter at will. Setting healthy boundaries may be as simple as saying “no” when you need to say no or letting people know what you will or won't allow in your presence.



Setting and enforcing boundaries in your relationships especially with people who aren't always good at respecting you, helps you: 1) take responsibility for your own well-being, 2) communicate your needs, 3) protect your self-esteem, 4) maintain self-respect, 5) require respect from others, and 6) generally enjoy healthier, more equal relationships.

When we don't have healthy boundaries with others, it can make us more susceptible to making too many personal sacrifices and/or allowing ourselves to be treated poorly, causing emotional pain that can lead to dependency, depression, anxiety, and even stress-induced physical illness. For more information, check out this [Healthy Boundaries](#) handout.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Take responsibility for your own well-being and show yourself more respect by setting and enforcing healthy physical and emotional boundaries.

**#13 – Get Some Sunlight / Full-Spectrum Light.** Sunlight stimulates feel-good hormones and neurotransmitters. Make sure you open the blinds or curtains in your room and/or home first thing every day as part of your regular depression-busting routine. The winter months can especially make feelings of depression worse due to the lack of sunshine (“winter blues” or Seasonal Affective Disorder – SAD).

Getting out in the sun when it does shine can do wonders, as can getting a [full-spectrum lightbox](#) to use indoors. These light boxes can help with regulating circadian cycles (internal clock) and the serotonin and melatonin levels that help with sleep and mood issues. Full-spectrum lights can make a difference for people especially during the winter but can be helpful year-round since most of us don't really get out in the sunlight enough.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Open your blinds.
- Get out in the sun as often as you can.
- Get a [full-spectrum light box](#) to use every morning as you get ready for the day.

**#14 – Do Meditation, Mindfulness or Yoga.** Each of these clinical mind/body treatments have been empirically studied for help with anxiety and depression. Meditation, mindfulness, and yoga assist with increased emotional awareness and regulation, cognitive flexibility, less reactivity, increased relaxation, improved stress management, increased immunity and greater overall mental discipline—all vital to mental, emotional, and physical health. Meditation and yoga can decrease stress and increase endorphins that make you feel good.<sup>32</sup>

Mindfulness basically means being more mentally, emotionally, and physically present in the moment in a non-judgmental and accepting state. Mindfulness includes being aware of the present moment experience, including one's sensations, thoughts, bodily states, consciousness, and the environment, while encouraging openness, curiosity, and acceptance.<sup>33</sup>

Mindfulness increases your awareness as you become more in tune with your senses—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Even five minutes of intentional meditation or mindfulness can do wonders for slowing down a racing mind and calming both mind

and body. Mindfulness can be simply engaging the senses by inhaling a scented candle or massaging some fragrant lotion into your hands. Engaging the senses can act as a neurological reset.

Mindfulness includes breathwork or relaxing breathing exercises. Living in the heightened stress of a pandemic and everything else that is going on can create anxiety and/or depression, which can affect our breathing. It keeps us in a physiologically strained or heightened state of “fight or flight” mode where our mind and body have to work harder to function—overtaxing our systems and the natural flow of our energy. We commonly live in a state of an overactive sympathetic nervous system. Any time you can just close your eyes and pay attention to your breath as it naturally slows down it ministers to the healing power of mindfulness. Pay attention to your breathing—your internal experience—instead of filling each moment with activity or noise.

Make friends with silence in your daily life. Be still. Allow for silent moments to just be. Enjoying some mindful stillness each day can be like a valuable “vitamin” in your life.

As an easy beginner's guide to meditation simply close your eyes and focus on your breathing for a few minutes every day. With each exhale you can repeat in your mind a calming word like “peace” or “one” to bring your attention back to each exhale. You can also increase your connection with God by repeating in your mind something like, “I'm listening” with each exhale. These practices can help with controlling your thoughts and developing deeper communion with God in a much more personal and profound way.

The practice of meditation and mindfulness develops mental discipline, which helps you gain greater power over negative thought patterns. Every time you pull your thoughts back to your breathing or to the statement, “I'm listening,” it's like weightlifting for the muscles of the mind. Developing greater mastery over your thoughts is a vital step in overcoming anxiety or depression.

Meditation, focusing on your breathing, being more mindful, and utilizing the powerful physical and psychological effects of yoga can all help with the next step of stopping the stinkin' thinkin' that tends to run rampant in the depressed or anxious mind. Yoga is especially vital in overcoming trauma as well.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing for a few minutes each day. Repeat in your mind something like, “peace,” or “I'm listening” with each “out” breath.
- Sit in intentional silence every day.
- Be more mentally present or mindful of your surroundings through all your senses.
- Start a practice of yoga.

**#15 – Take a Social Media Break.** Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor sleep habits all have some correlation with social media use and the social comparison and envy it engenders. Since social media posts tend to reflect the best of someone's characteristics and activities, it can easily exacerbate feelings of inferiority and negatively affect one's psychological well-being—especially when one is already struggling.

Developing the ability to focus on the positive characteristics of oneself is vital to eradicating depression. A constant barrage of the idealized lives (and bodies) of others whether through social

media or any other forms of media often provide fuel for depressed or anxious thinking. Given the addictive nature of social media platforms as an easy escape, it can eat up needed sleep time and affect one's ability to sleep well—especially when cell phone or screen time use is significant in the hours directly before bedtime.

Social media use can also negatively affect one's actual social interactions with real people in real time. Connecting with people is an important aspect of reducing depression, so being mindful of one's social media use is important.

Some prescribing physicians often encourage their patients to first reduce their social media activity and other screen time before they will even prescribe antidepressant medication. Whether you cut out social media completely for a time or at least cut back to minimal levels, the change can bring a boost to your life and psychological well-being.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Take social media breaks to free yourself from social comparisons and wasted time.

**#16 – Engage with People.** COVID-19 has increased our social isolation, which has exacerbated things like anxiety and depression, which in turn fuels more social isolation creating a vicious downward cycle. Anxiety and depression can happen as a result of social isolation, but they can also cause it.<sup>34</sup> Mental health issues like anxiety and depression tend to make us isolate ourselves and avoid social contact. That exacerbates the loneliness and “loser-ness” we are already feeling. Instead, socializing can help improve our mental and emotional health. It boosts endorphins, staves off feelings of loneliness, helps sharpen memory and cognitive skills, increases your sense of happiness and well-being, and social interaction may even help you live longer.<sup>35</sup>

*Getting support.* One suggestion is to create a list of support people (trusted friends or family members) to solicit their assistance to help you avoid disconnecting. Who do you feel safe being genuinely honest and transparent with? Who do you trust to be there for you? Let them know you are struggling with depression or anxiety and that you just need someone you can talk to without feeling like they need to fix anything. You might even set reminders on your phone to reach out to them in rotation to avoid isolation or overusing one resource. It can also be helpful to reach out to care and attend to them as well so that neither of you will feel like it's a one-sided relationship.

As you are able to master some of the negative thinking about yourself, it may help to push yourself, as needed, to engage in social interactions. Attend church or any other church, work, or community activities that you can. Do your work in an office instead of at home if you can. This puts you in a position to interact with others and develop friendships which is vital to healthy thinking and human connection.

Rather than staying home, push yourself to go out with friends or family members, push yourself to participate in activities or join a group or a volunteer organization to have pre-scheduled social or service opportunities. It can pull your mind out of depressive thinking even just temporarily and help retrain your brain. Service and social interaction can help you work to get

outside yourself and counter the preoccupation with self that depression and anxiety tend to induce.

In the presence of caring people, you also have more chance to touch, hug, and/or have eye contact (whether you are the receiver or the giver). This can create oxytocin, which is a bonding hormone that can make you feel more connected. Any appropriate opportunities you may have to give or receive a hug or other forms of physical touch (e.g., someone's arm around you or being arm-in-arm with someone) is particularly potent in releasing that wonderful oxytocin.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Set up a support system of trusted friendships to be there for you when you need some connection.
- Pre-schedule social and service opportunities to proactively get outside yourself.

**#17 – Smile and Laugh.** Any time you see a mirror smile at yourself even if just to exercise your facial muscles. It sends a signal to the brain that you are happy. It may take some time to change your mental message, so keep on smilin'!

Humor can put a pause on depression as well. There is plenty of research about the health benefits of laughter including that it increases feel-good endorphins.<sup>36</sup> Give yourself a mental break by watching a funny movie or find some comedy clips to get you laughing. Smiling and laughing can counter default negative thinking that tries to convince you that life is always sad, worrisome, dreary, or depressing.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Smile at yourself every time you see a mirror.
- Find ways to laugh.

**#18 – Get Educated about Depression.** After doing some of the suggestions here to start feeling better first, it can then be helpful to seek out learning about the particular struggles you are having with anxiety and/or depression. Getting educated can help you overcome your challenges more easily. The Lord will direct you to the specific resources you need. Some good books on depression and anxiety to consider are:

- [\*The Depression Cure\*](#) by Stephen S. Ilardi
- [\*Cognitive Behavioral Therapy\*](#) by Ryan James
- [\*Undoing Depression\*](#) by Richard O'Connor
- Any of the [\*Change Your Brain\*](#) resources by Daniel G. Amen, M.D.
- [\*Feeling Great: The Revolutionary New Treatment for Depression and Anxiety\*](#) by David D. Burns, M.D.
- [\*You Can Heal Your Life\*](#) by Louise L. Hay
- [\*Everything Isn't Terrible: Conquer Your Insecurities, Interrupt Your Anxiety, and Finally Calm Down\*](#) by Kathleen Smith

You might start by reading some of the reviews to see which ones speak to you.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Learn more about anxiety and depression by reading good books on the subject.

**#19 – Partner with God.** This is the most important step in this whole process and should technically be the first step, but many people overlook the practical need to turn to our Savior, Jesus Christ, and submit our lives and our challenges to Him. We can literally partner with God who is then able to help us in ways we are not able to help ourselves. Those who have actively worked the “[12 Steps](#)” of addiction recovery know that some challenges are simply out of our human reach.

When we turn our lives and our will over to God and humbly trust in Him, His will, and His timing—even when things aren’t happening the way we think they should—we are able to access His mighty enabling and strengthening power. Confidence and faith in Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, according to His will, allows us to endure better, endure longer, or overcome our challenges when we couldn’t have done so on our own.

The faith and humility of partnering with God and [surrendering ourselves to Him](#) brings peace despite any of our challenges. Many of the suggestions here will help you stay in closer contact with your Savior even while you may continue to struggle with feelings of depression or anxiety. Strive to increase your “conscious contact” with Him daily and develop a more [personal and profound relationship](#) with Christ.

Mental health issues are a great refiner’s fire. [Trust the Lord](#). Trust that He loves you and knows what He is doing and why He is doing it. Let Him refine you by willingly submitting to whatever He would have you go through (see Mosiah 3:19). He may be simply developing compassion, endurance, patience, or a host of other Christlike characteristics in you, which we came here to develop. Know that He will consecrate your afflictions for your highest good (see 2 Nephi 2:2). (For more insights on the spiritual purposes of adversity see this “[Understanding Adversity](#)” handout.)

I like to remind myself that God is a lot smarter than I am. His ways are higher and better than our ways (see Isaiah 55:9). I can truly say I’m so grateful now for my trial with depression. Because of it I have learned to turn to Him and turn my will over to Him. I have grown in so many ways and can now help others who struggle. With spiritual submission comes peace, endurance, strength, and eternal hope despite the difficulties in our lives. All of our difficulties are designed to turn us to Christ. I hope you will believe and let that happen for you. Consider this favorite quote about our mortal afflictions:

*No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God, . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire.<sup>37</sup>*

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Partner with the Lord in your difficulties.
- Turn to Him. Talk to Him more often. Trust in Him and His purposes.

- Allow yourself to be refined. Know that there are divine purposes for every trial you experience.

Despite our earthly challenges with mental health issues, we can find inner peace, contentment, and even joy. Taking care of our mental and emotional health is as important as taking care of our physical or spiritual health. By incorporating these strategies into your life, you will be more able to overcome your mental health difficulties and live a happier and healthier life. Simply taking things one day at a time is sufficient to find your way through to health and peace. Please feel free to share this toolbox with others.

#### **Related Resources:**

- ARTICLE – “[22 Habits of Happy People](#)” by Dr. Mercola
- WEBSITE - [PsychologyToday.com](#) – to find a counselor
- BOOK - [Stop Depression Now](#) by Richard Brown – to learn more about the supplement SAM-e
- HANDOUT – “[Emotional Freedom Technique](#)” (EFT tapping)
- PRODUCT - [Full-Spectrum Lights](#) – for winter blues or any time of the year
- BOOK - [The Depression Cure](#) by Stephen S. Ilardi
- BOOK - [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#) by Ryan James
- BOOK - [Feeling Great: The Revolutionary New Treatment for Depression and Anxiety](#) by David D. Burns, M.D.
- BOOK - [Undoing Depression](#) by Richard O'Connor
- BOOK - Any of the [Change Your Brain](#) resources by Daniel G. Amen, M.D.
- AUDIO BOOK - [Loving What Is](#) by Byron Katie
- AUDIO BOOK - [You Can Heal Your Life](#) by Louise L. Hay
- AUDIO BOOK - [Self-Compassion](#) by Kristin Neff

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#### **BIO -- Laura M. Brotherson, LMFT, CST**

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and Certified Sex Therapist, Laura M. Brotherson is the founder of [The Marital Intimacy Institute](#) with a mission to help couples create “Sextraordinary Marriages.” She counsels with couples and individuals in private practice (and online). Laura is the author of the best-selling books, [And They Were Not Ashamed: Strengthening Marriage through Sexual Fulfillment](#), [Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage](#) and her latest book [From Honeymoon to Happily Ever After: 23 Keys to Prepare for a Sextraordinary Marriage](#) Laura and her husband are the founders of [StrengtheningMarriage.com](#)— your trusted resource for education, products and services to strengthen marriages ... intimately!

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*NOTE: While this resource is intended to help with mental health issues, it has been written for informational purposes only, and is not intended as a substitute for therapy and/or medical care. It’s*

always recommended that you seek professional help for all individual questions, issues, and concerns.

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