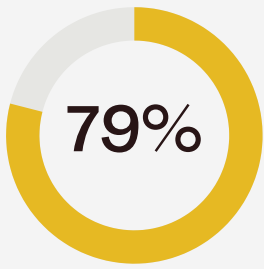




POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH A MONTHLY CHECK-IN

July 2021

Looking after your mental health



Everyone knows about a regular medical check-up — a scheduled visit to the doctor to check blood pressure, weight and review medications. However, we need to get used to the idea of a regular mental health check-up, especially considering the uncertainties and pressures brought on by the pandemic. A recent College of Psychiatrists' survey on impact of Covid-19 on Mental Health in Ireland found that there has been a significant increase in mental health issues with 79% reported seeing an increase in generalised anxiety, 72% an increase in health anxiety, 57% an increase in depression and 54% an increase in panic symptoms.. 79% of therapists expecting that their workload to increase even more in the next few months. One positive side-effect of the pandemic is that it has made us stop and ask ourselves what we can do to keep ourselves mentally well. A mental health check up allows us to notice our mood and anxiety level as well as noting the subtler signs of stress, such as tiredness or a lack of energy, difficulty concentrating or getting to sleep. These sheets may be one help in this, in that we will look at how the brain works, how the body reacts to stress and how we can better look after ourselves.

Looking forward positively: the Brain is a Prediction machine

We tend to think of our brain as the place where thinking goes on, and where we make decisions based on facts. **However, the brain is actually made to predict reality. It's part of its function to control our bodies so that we stay alive and well.** All through the day, it continually receives data from the outside world via the eyes, ears, and other sense organs as well as through words and thoughts. And what the brain does is compare those bits of data to experiences we have already had in our lives or to things that we learned about from parents, friends, or through other sources like the media and social media.



In this way the brain is continually constructing our lives. From the moment we wake up in the morning to when we go to sleep, it receives sensations and thoughts, and builds up a picture and a course of action which it believes is the best way to keep us safe. And usually it has a number of probabilities to deal with a given situation, a number of ways that we can act or feel. Sometimes it chooses the best course of action, but not always. Because it is primarily designed to keep us safe, it notices dangers more or what comes in negative packaging. This means that with the ongoing focus in the current pandemic on possible negative scenarios (among many possible outcomes) our brain can get stuck in an anxious, cautious mode,

However, it does not have to be always fearful. Because we have a predicting brain, **we have much more control over our actions, moods and experiences than we might think.** In other words, we can change our predictions about how the weeks ahead will be, by changing what we pay attention to and the words we use to speak to ourselves about what will happen. Regaining energy and dropping a constant sense of anxiety takes time, but as our brains adjusted to our current state of life, they can also adjust to the post-COVID reality.



How we talk to ourselves

We have about 70,000 thoughts per day, according to the Laboratory of Neuroimaging at the University of Southern California. Whether that figure is right or not, it is clear that the mind never stops thinking, analysing, and trying to figure things out. This thinking mind can be our most powerful servant or our most terrible master.

This is because there is always some kind of “self-talk” is going on —we are talking to ourselves. And it is common that we can be very hard on ourselves some of the time. We often say things to ourselves that we would never say to a friend, such as " Why am I such an idiot" or "I'll never be able to do this ". We also see that our mood pushes our thoughts in one direction or another. When we're in a good mood, the frequency of negative thoughts decrease. But when we are having a difficult time, or there is a lot of uncertainty or negative news - like at present - negative thoughts become more strong and frequent, and we can live in fear. Fear can be very debilitating. One common type of thinking is catastrophizing, where we always expect the worst case scenario in the future - What if this happens? - which quickly leads to blaming. These types of thoughts simply increase anxiety and may never turn out to be true.

Our thoughts drive our moods, so it is good to keep an eye on our inner dialogue. It can help us be a more positive person, and improve our health. Banishing an inner critic has no downside. Make sure to unplug from the news and social media for periods each day or each evening as they just drive anxiety, anger and complaining. Notice when you are thinking in unhelpful or overly negative ways and ask yourself, ‘is there another, more helpful way I could think about this situation?’ Sometimes there are patterns of thought that we can get stuck in, and we can let them define us or limit the ways we can live our lives. If we are free of fear, we don't let negative judgments or other peoples evaluations control our lives, and this helps us choose how we will talk to ourselves.

4-7-8 Breathing A helpful relaxation tool



If you find yourself getting agitated with the uncertainty of these days

This technique was developed for inducing relaxation and helping people get to sleep.

To try it: Exhale fully through your mouth, making a soft “whooshing” sound.

Close your mouth, and **inhale through your nose to a count of four.** Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale through your mouth making the whoosh sound for a count of eight.

Repeat three more times.

It is recommended to try this technique at least twice a day to start seeing the benefits sooner. At the start avoid doing more than four breath cycles in a row until you get used to the technique.

A monthly mental health support developed by CKLP.

If you are experiencing distress or worried about someone else please contact your GP, your Emergency Department or call the Samaritans for support on Freephone: 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.ie