

Know thyself . . . a key strategy for navigating life

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“Good mental health is fundamental to the health and well-being of every person and of the nation as a whole,” is the view of Mental Health America (formerly National Mental Health Association). Yet, good mental health – or mental wellness – remains largely undefined and is left to the public to figure out on an “as-needed” basis.

Over the course of a lifespan, positive personal attributes such as resilience, optimism, judgment, insight, humor and positive self-esteem may provide some leverage against the common mental health challenges we often face as we grow older, enabling us to weather losses and continue to develop as individuals and active community members. Often we are pushed to develop new strategies for maintaining our mental wellness only when we run into trouble with stress overload from just too many stressors to handle.

With our average life expectancy almost 30 years longer than it was a century ago, older adults commonly encounter a broad range of losses, to be sure. Even the normal process of aging involves stressful physiological and psychosocial changes that increase our risk of depression.

Mental wellness is more than just the absence of mental illness. You might remember the song, “Don’t Worry. Be Happy.” But it’s not so easy, is it? If you have lost a loved one, received a diagnosis of serious illness, lost your home –or are experiencing any of a number of such severe, acute stressors – sad or anxious feelings are not only normal, they are important to experience despite the suffering they cause.

But there is no end of things to worry about in this world, and many of us indulge in worry even while our lives are pretty good. It is an indulgence we can ill afford. Along with harming our quality of life, chronic stress and worry affect our health in significant ways.

When we worry, we are imagining the negative possibilities, and according to Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., “What we imagine, we experience, and what we imagine affects us. It affects our immune system, and our strength, and our optimism...” as well as our cardiovascular functioning, glucose regulation, and systemic inflammation, “...so we need to take control of our imagination and use it for our well-being.”

To take control of our imagination... what does that look like? Know thyself! This aphorism, attributed to at least six ancient Greek sages, may be key to that control.

How well do you know yourself? Are you an emotionally reactive person, easy to offend? Or more of an easy-going type, seldom taking things too seriously or too personally.

Do you engage in negative self-talk, calling yourself a dummy when things don’t go well? Do you notice when group activity turns from enriching your life to wearing you out? Do you believe in your ability to make changes, or have you become discouraged by too many failed New Year’s resolutions?



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Knowing yourself, noticing your “automatic thoughts,” and becoming realistic about the way you “do business” will help you to manage the difficult challenges of life, know what type of support will help you get through, access that support, and utilize support more effectively.

Those of us blessed with clear thinking, good insight, reasonable judgment, and a stable mood have the capacity to use our imagination and attention on behalf of our own well-being, as Dr. Remen advises.

But many individuals are not so fortunate. Individuals coping with thought disorders, dementia, or severe depression often find it difficult to connect with others, participate in community, develop an effective action plan, or access services on their own behalf.

While Washington State has taken steps to improve mental health access and parity, we know that many mentally ill individuals are still unable to access the care they need to manage and recover from their illness.

In general, to reduce chronic stress and worries and promote good health across the lifespan, follow these principles:

- ▶ Stay involved with others.
- ▶ Recognize and express your feelings.
- ▶ Maintain a healthy lifestyle routine – good nutrition, exercise and sleep.
- ▶ Schedule enjoyable and relaxing activities.
- ▶ Identify areas of life where you have control and can make choices.
- ▶ Find a way to help others.
- ▶ And finally, seek help when you need it.

We all need help at times. Accessing help when we need it is an effective way for each of us to maintain a high standard of mental wellness – and optimum independence – throughout our life-span.

Earlier this year, Senior Services was awarded funding to provide a new service, Older Adult Outreach with a Focus on Mental Health. The program will assist Snohomish County residents, age 60 and older, to access needed mental health or chemical dependency services.

Additionally, in order to respond to the range of needs within the community and the variety of calls received, Senior Services is working to expand its database of community mental health and chemical dependency service providers and to develop and strengthen its community partner connections.

For information about this new program, to inquire about mental health or chemical dependency resources for seniors in Snohomish County, or to be considered for inclusion in the provider database, please call Lillian Gonzalez at 425-290-1260.

Other Resources:

▶ Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association) is America’s oldest and largest organization dedicated to addressing issues of mental health and mental illness. For more information visit nmha.org or call 800- 969-6642

▶ The National Alliance on Mental Illness can provide support, education, information, referral and advocacy for mentally ill individuals and their family members. For more information visit nami.org or call 800-950-6264

▶ The National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration tells us that “Bereavement precipitates anxiety in nearly one-fourth of survivors during the first six months following the death of a loved one and in nearly two-fifths of those left behind during the second six-month period.” And “15 percent of men and 12 percent of women age 60 and over treated in primary care clinics regularly (drink) in excess of limits recommended by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (i.e., no more than one drink per day).” For more information visit samhsa.gov or call 877-726-4727.