The Psychological Society of Ireland's 40 (practical) tips for mental health, well-being and prosperity.

Psychology Matters

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As part of celebrations to mark its 40th anniversary, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) has compiled this list of practical tips. Psychology is unique among the human sciences and helping professions for the way it uses research to help people solve or cope with problems. Each of the tips below is supported by at least one study that demonstrates the tip can be helpful. Whether you want to learn to be more content in general or are struggling to cope with a challenging situation, check out the 40 tips below for sound, practical and evidence-based suggestions.

The Basics

1   Look after your basic needs first: Eat and sleep.

Before trying to tackle any of the complex demands of day-to-day life, it is vital that we start with full energy levels. Feelings of tiredness and hunger can make many problems seem worse, so make sure to get the sleep you need and maintain a nutritious diet.

2   Listen to your body and use your breathing.

Take time each day to pay attention to your body and what it is telling you. Try to recognise when your body and mind are stressed. Can you feel tension or stress building up? Sore back? Headache? Don't ignore these signals. Try to alleviate them before they build up. If you are feeling stressed or anxious, take a few deep breaths and concentrate on letting go of all your worries. This can be the most useful immediate tip to stop getting caught in a cycle of stress.

3   Happiness happens without money.

A person's happiness is not related to their financial wealth. Yet research has shown that people believe that money is important in order to be happy. Even if you would be happy to get some money, remember that we can achieve happiness without it too!

4   Laugh and remember the laughs.

Even forced laughter in a laboratory setting can bring about a positive mood. Laughter has also been shown to have a beneficial effect on our coping skills. Remembering the times we laughed together makes us evaluate our relationships more positively. So don't be afraid to laugh and remember the laughs you have shared.

5   Try to find something to be grateful for.

Taking time to be thankful and to say thanks to other people improves your mood. Remember, though, this is not the same thing as ignoring problems or denying anger. Look for what is positive and/or beautiful during your day.

6   Get active.

While physical activity (that suits you and your level of ability) is good for your body, exercise is good for the mind too. Regular exercise gives you energy, improves mood and relieves stress, anxiety and depression. Once you get into it, it can also be great fun!

7   Drink alcohol responsibly and in moderation.

Drinkers in Ireland drink more than in other western European countries and many have risky drinking habits that lead to adverse consequences. The Department of Health and Children advises that up to 21 standard drinks a week is considered low risk for men and up to 14 standard drinks a week is considered low risk for women. Drinking above the advised weekly limits for low risk drinking is associated with much poorer outcomes for people with mental health problems and various other health risks. So if you do enjoy a drink, spread out your drinking over the week and don't save it for one session or big night out.

8   Engage in meaningful, creative activities.

Get involved in meaningful, creative work. Do things that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive, whether or not you get paid for it – things like gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something.

9   Do what you love.

Getting good at something doesn't often come easy and people who become excellent at something aren't necessarily "gifted" at a young age. Expert performers such as soccer players, piano players, neurosurgeons and tennis players are nearly always made, not born. It's practice that makes perfect. If you like something you are more likely to work hard at it to become very good at it. When it comes to choosing what you would like to do with your life, choose something that you like.

10   See fun as a priority not an indulgence.

Make leisure time a priority. Do things for no other reason than that it feels good to do them. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.

11   Lose yourself.

Learn an activity that makes you lose sense of time, that makes you feel fuller as a person after doing it and gives you a sense of calm. This could be knitting, repetitive prayer, meditation, or playing a musical instrument. If practised daily for at least 20 minutes it has been shown to reduce blood pressure, improve levels of anti-oxidants, reduce stress, and improve mood.

12   Don't let a little anxiety stand in your way.

While there are obviously certain fear-inducing situations or activities that should be avoided, often people can avoid doing things that they want to do or that are good for them because of nerves. Doing the things that we are a little anxious about helps them become less frightening. Avoiding activities or situations that are fear-inducing only results in increased anxiety about that situation.

13   Set yourself realistic goals.

Break the big goals into smaller steps or tasks. Smaller tasks are much easier to complete. And it's easier to see your progress with smaller tasks too. These provide a gradual sense of accomplishment that can motivate you to continue. Rome wasn't built in a day but some of it was!

14   Avoid conversations about weight and appearance.

Conversations around weight, appearance and pressure to be thin, result in increased body dissatisfaction. But it's not that easy to avoid. Young women can be afraid to avoid this topic for fear they will be seen as "stuck-up" or conceited by the other women. But continuing to talk about these topics, creates a norm that can keep us believing all women feel poorly about their bodies.

Daily Routine (Home, School, Work)

15   Exercise your brain.

The human brain is a wonderful organ. It contains 100billion neurons, weighs only 3lbs and uses 20% of the body's energy to function. Learning new things and a continuous curiosity keeps your brain working, generating new brain cells and new neural connections in the brain. Such mental stimulation keeps the brain fit and can prevent cognitive decline in older age.

16   Remember to remember.

People often realise too late that they have forgotten to do something that they had meant to do and setting an alarm or leaving a 'post-it' is not always practical. You can increase your chances of remembering what to do by thinking about where and when you're going to do it. For example, you might think, "when I get home and sit down on the couch, I will pick up the phone and call my mother". Anxiety can often make these everyday lapses seem worse. Try to relax and give yourself a break. It can help to improve your memory.

17   Set academic goals to better yourself, not others.

It can be a competitive world and we can often feel pressured to do better than the people around us, rather than simply trying to better ourselves. Research has shown that students who work towards improving their own performance, rather than working towards outperforming others, show the best motivation, learning strategies and academic outcomes.

18   Study together.

Working collaboratively with peers provides adaptive opportunities for learning. This can encourage us to change our usual techniques and find a system for thinking, teaching and learning that works for us. Find other people to work with you and you will reap the benefits.

19   Choose an activity, join a group and get involved.

Join a special interest group or get involved in extracurricular activities. These groups offer wonderful opportunities for finding people with common interests – people you like being with who are potential friends. And studies of college students have shown that personal adjustment and integration into campus life plays a huge role in student retention in college.

20   Remember work isn't everything.

While work plays an important role in many people's lives, it's important to get the work life balance right. Employees who enjoy down time or relaxation outside of their job are more likely to recover their energies and be engaged when they are at work; that is, they have more energy available to them at work and they feel more dedicated to the task at hand. So a balanced approach to work is a win-win for you and your employer!

21   Get to know your work-mates.

Engaging with a social group in work has been shown to reduce stress and increases your life and job satisfaction.

22   Volunteer.

Doing something that helps others has a beneficial effect on how you feel about yourself. Volunteering can bring about feelings of personal achievement, a sense of community spirit and solidarity. There is no limit to the individual and group volunteer opportunities you can explore. Schools, churches, not-for-profit and charitable organisations of all sorts depend on volunteers for their survival.

Children

23 Listen to what children have to say

Adults are inclined to think they know what's best for children but it is important that children are included in the decisions that involve them. Being listened to, being heard and being given the opportunity to ask questions is greatly important to children and research shows that empowering young people in this way provides them with psychological benefits.

24 Focus on your child's inner strengths.

Every child is different. Recognising and encouraging your child's unique strengths can enhance their self-esteem and well-being.

25 Emphasise learning and enjoyment over winning for children in sport.

Children who are motivated by self-improvement as opposed to performing better than others are less anxious, less likely to cheat and show greater persistence. Encourage your child to be the best they can be regardless of others and to have fun while doing it.

26 Learn and teach media-wise skills.

Children and adolescents spend more time with the media than they spend doing any other leisure activity. While some research shows that TV watching has negative effects on a child's development, other research has demonstrated the opposite. You can regulate many negative effects of TV viewing by engaging in the TV watching with your children. You can use it for education and talking about the programmes, commercials and the issues that arise. This way you can teach your children to be media-wise.

Tough Times

27 Be hopeful.

Being hopeful means believing that you can set (realistic) goals for the future and that you have the ability to successfully work towards them. Hope sustains us even when things are not going the way we want. Nothing lasts forever, and remembering that things will change can get us through tough times.

28 Work on developing different ways to cope

People who actively develop different ways to cope with difficult things are happier. Talk to a friend, meditate, exercise!

29 Write things down.

Keeping a diary or simply writing down a thought can greatly help to cope with problems. Write things down to help you organise and formulate your situation and your thoughts. It also allows you to look at the situation as an outsider. You can re-write it, come back to it later or simply throw it away when you're finished.

30 Ask for support.

The longer you leave a problem, the worse it may become. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a family member, friend or professional. Asking for and accepting help from family and friends strengthens your ability to cope. If you feel overwhelmed or have difficulty meeting your goals on your own, consider seeking help from a psychologist.

31 Get intimate

Almost every close relationship will involve some negative experiences. However, the positive emotions, shared experiences, and the physical intimacy that comes with intimate relationships have a strong link to health and well-being and helps buffer against stressors and mental health difficulties.

32 Simply getting together can be supportive.

Simply having someone who you can be yourself with can be a major protective factor against depression. Men, who traditionally have difficulty seeking support, will naturally begin supporting each other if they are simply brought together on a regular basis.

33 Find support online.

Online groups can develop into self-sustaining networks, with internet friendships enhancing off-line or "real-life" friendships rather than replacing them, and thereby leading to offline benefits for online users.

34 Be a support.

Be a supportive family member or friend. Social support is a significant factor in predicting both psychological adjustment and physical health.

35 Focus on things you can control.

When a person is not doing as well as they would like at a particular behaviour, avoid focusing on the stable uncontrollable things (the past, gender, a permanent disability) as this can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Instead, focus on what can be changed, the things that are unstable and controllable, e.g. the amount of effort put in or the way the person is going about it. This can foster positive feelings of hope and persistence at the task.

36 Think about how you label events

Is a puncture in your tyre really a disaster? Or is it a nuisance, inconvenience and annoying? How you think and talk about events can really influence your mood and the intensity of it.

37 Do something!

Mood and activity: If you're feeling down or blue, aim to DO. Do not rely on your mood or feelings to dictate your activities; do not wait until you "feel like it". The best thing when you are feeling down is to DO something!

38 Be flexible in your thinking.

Avoid "all or nothing", "black or white" and absolutist thinking. Do you find yourself using words like "should", "ought", "must" and "can't"? Using such rigid language can mean that you end up living by very fixed rules. This can lead to increased stress and even anxiety or depression. Try substituting a different word. Instead of "I must" or "I should", try "it would be helpful if I…"

39 Remember your triumphs

Focus on moments in the last week where you were proud of yourself. When people get stressed they tend to go into 'all or nothing' thinking and search for evidence of how poorly they performed or how catastrophic a likely event might become. If you review your week and search for moments where you were really yourself, this will lift your mood and help you avoid a black and white way of looking at the world.

40 Think about mental health and see the person first

There are many misperceptions about mental health problems. These misperceptions can often add to the problems that these illnesses bring. Challenging and looking beyond stereotypes or labels and seeing the person first will help. Educating yourself about mental health will not only reduce misperceptions about mental illness but will help you recognize when you or someone you know is having a hard time.

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