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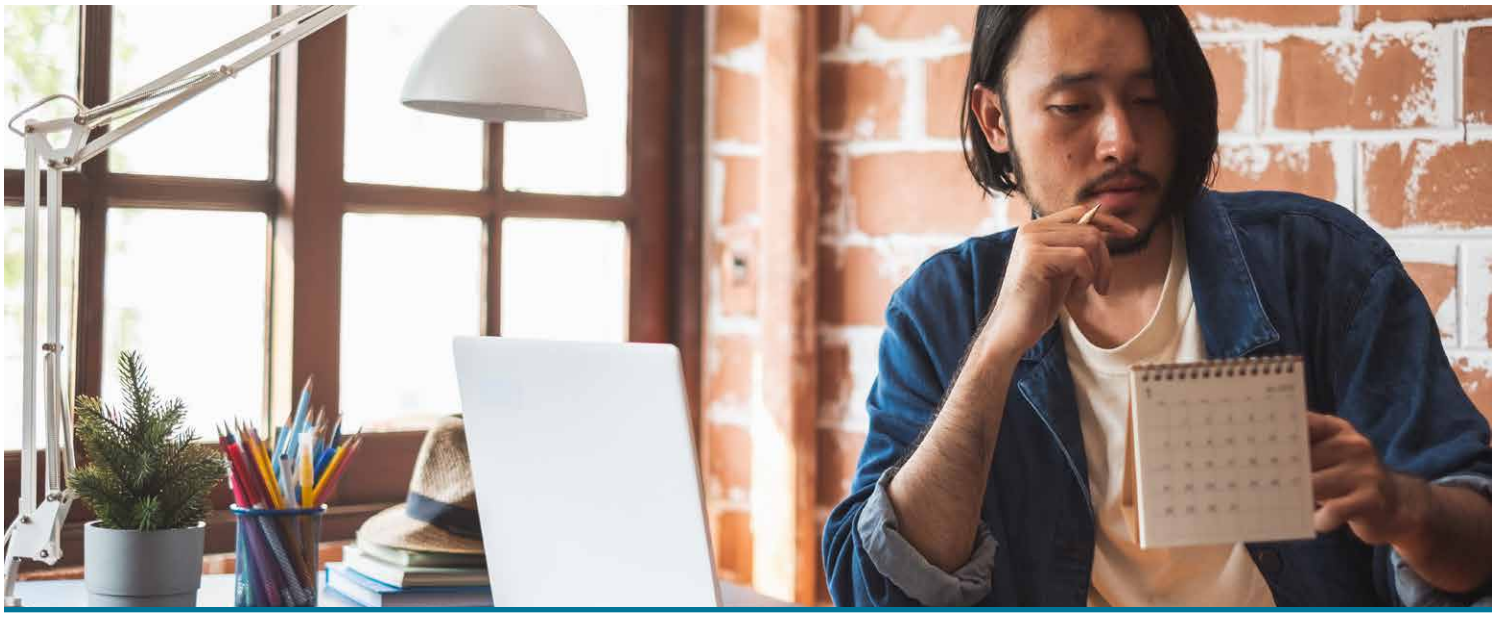
Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #12:

MENTAL HEALTH CHECKUP: PREPARING FOR THE YEAR AHEAD



A new year is nearly upon us. Traditionally, this is a time when many of us reflect on the previous year and make "resolutions," or plans for the coming year. The stresses associated with the pandemic, including job losses; economic uncertainty; deaths of family members, friends or colleagues; burnout; restricted social interactions and the instability, uncertainty and fear have impacted the mental health of many.[1]

With vaccination efforts and continued vigilance, we have largely brought case numbers under control. With the pandemic having shaped our lives for the past two years, psychologists are concerned about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on mental health, and rightly so. Past traumatic events such as natural disasters, the global economic downturn and other public health crises, such as SARS, led to lasting detrimental impacts on mental health[2] and were associated with increased rates of substance abuse, PTSD and depression.[3] Over the past two years, we may have developed unhealthy coping strategies (eating too much or too little, drug or alcohol use, sleeping too much or too little), or we may have just been going through the motions to get through the day without acknowledging our emotions.

Burnout and reflection on the past year

Think about your daily routines of the past two years. You may have started your day scrolling social media and news apps, followed by working from home (video calls, sitting in front of a screen or two), helping children with online school, troubleshooting tech issues, texting, DMs, Skype or Facetime with family and ending the day with more "doomscrolling" before falling into a fitful sleep. And those days all seemed to blur together—how many times have you said "What day is it today?"

While burnout, a state of emotional, physical and mental health exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress,[4] has always been around, it's increased during the pandemic. Our work-life balance was suddenly tipped when we started "living at work" with our kitchen tables acting as our makeshift offices.

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In a recent survey, 85% of respondents said their well-being had declined, 62% were struggling to meet their workload and balance work with other responsibilities, and exhaustion and cynicism were on the rise.[5]

While digital devices were a lifesaver during the pandemic—time spent on digital devices increased from 17% on gaming consoles to 45% on laptops and 76% on smartphones—they contributed to digital fatigue or digital burnout: the state of mental exhaustion from using multiple digital tools leading to lack of energy, mind fragmentation and burnout.[6]

In addition to living through a pandemic for the past two years, and all the challenges that came with it, we've been inundated with negative news. As events unfolded in the United States after the high-profile killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others,[7] protests and political tensions escalated, including the insurrection at the US Capitol building in January 2021. In the spring, many non-Indigenous Canadians were shocked by the discovery of unmarked and mass graves of children at former Residential School sites, with Indigenous communities retraumatized by the news. Climate change—largely forgotten during the pandemic—became front and center again in early summer as record-breaking heat in Western Canada was followed by wildfires that ravaged towns and communities leaving many without homes or jobs.[8]

Even though some of us may not be aware of it, these events, digital burnout, struggles with work-life balance, as well as the pandemic itself, have impacted our mental health and may have caused us to abandon our healthy coping strategies.

With that in mind, and as we start to come out the other side of the pandemic, the new year is an excellent time to check-in and prioritize your mental health and make realistic goals for the coming year.

What does "checking in" with your mental health mean?

First of all, what does mental health mean? As the World Health Organization defines it, "mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to society".[9] It doesn't mean that you're happy all the time—good mental health means experiencing a full range of emotions. Our mental health affects how we think, feel, act, relate to others and our decision-making. It includes our emotional, psychological and social well-being. Poor mental health affects our physical health too; depression increases the risk for stroke, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.[10]

It's important to recognize that there's a difference between mental health and mental illness. Mental illness refers to a number of medical conditions; much like heart disease or diabetes are medical conditions. Mental illnesses involve changes in emotion, thinking and behaviour and are associated with distress and or problems functioning in social, work or family activities. They include depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.[11]

Mental health problems, when left unchecked, can become a mental illness

Checking in with your mental health is a way to determine and acknowledge how you're actually doing. To start your mental health check-in, take some time to reflect on the following. If you notice a shift away from what is typical for you, it's a warning to make changes to improve your mental health.

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- How are your sleep patterns? Are you sleeping more often than usual or less?
- What is your appetite like? Are you eating more or less causing changes in weight?
- How is your energy level? Is it high or low? Do you find yourself watching another show on Netflix rather than getting up and exercising, going for a walk or even cleaning the house?
- Are you able to concentrate, or do you find yourself distracted?
- Are you feeling optimistic about the coming year? Or pessimistic?
- Are you participating in and enjoying activities and people? Many of your usual activities may not be available, but there are alternatives. Are you making efforts to shift to things you can do, such as walking, hiking, biking, virtual book club meetings, small outdoor gatherings, outdoor dining, etc.?
- Is your mood low or high? Are you having difficulty getting out of bed because of your mood?

- Are you irritable or feeling angry? Do you find yourself getting into arguments or yelling?

While we may all have an "off day," if you find that you're experiencing negative changes in your daily life for two weeks or more, it may be time to seek help.

Strategies to prepare for the year ahead

Reflecting on the emotions and experiences you've had during the past two years can help you build awareness and develop skills to improve your mental health. Identify the highest stress triggers, especially those during the pandemic. Some of these may have been resolved already; your children may be back at school and the pandemic news isn't as gloomy every day. Look at the results of your mental health check in and consider how you can make improvements. Look at the start of the new year as a clean slate and a new beginning with new goals.

Build on what you found most important during the pandemic or what you missed the most. One upside to the pandemic is that for some people, the pandemic created space to slow down, spend time with family, refocus on what's important, and connect with one another in new ways. Itai Danovitch, MD, chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai points out that events like the pandemic can lead to growth. "People develop resilience. They learn how to deal with mental health challenges, and they find resources, internal and external, that they didn't know existed."[12]

The following can help you create an achievable action plan for the coming year that can help improve your mental health:

Digital hygiene

- Delete apps from your phone. Do you need to have all those news and social media apps at your fingertips? If these have been a source of distraction and doomscrolling, delete them! You can reinstall them later when you feel back on track. If you want to keep your apps, set time limits and ensure that you stick to them.
- If you're working from home and feel you haven't created a good work-life balance, set boundaries between your personal life and work life. When your workday is done, power off your laptop, close it up and put it and your files away. You'll be less tempted to "just check your email" if you have to power on your computer.
- Take frequent breaks from screen use and structure time in your workday for offline work.

Set realistic, achievable and specific goals

- Creating goals is an excellent way to improve your sleep, eating habits, and exercise and activity regime. If your goals are too vague (such as, "get better sleep" or "eat better"), it's difficult to achieve them. What defines better sleep for you? A more specific and achievable goal would be: "Lights out by 10 and leave my phone/laptop/tablet downstairs at night."
- Write down your goals to hold yourself accountable and keep track of your progress.

Get active

- One of the most effective ways to improve your mental health is regular activity and exercise. Again, set realistic, achievable and specific goals to jump start your activity.
- Recruit family members to join you or plan regular socially distanced activities with friends. Walking, biking, jogging/running, skiing and yoga are activities that you can gradually increase the intensity of as your fitness level increases.
- Set reminders in your phone to take short breaks to stretch or walk around your home/office throughout your workday.
- Have a back-up plan for activities you can do inside during inclement weather (reading, baking, cooking, and even cleaning).

Improve your concentration

- Use to-do lists and prioritize your top tasks for each day. Adjust your list as the week goes on and your priorities change.
- Focus on one task at a time; avoid jumping from task to task or multi-tasking.
- Set scheduled breaks to stretch or go for a short walk to clear your mind.
- Organize your desk to remove distracting clutter. Put your phone away so you're not tempted to check messages.

Make plans for the coming year

- As venues and travel begin to open up, make plans. Even if you're hesitant about international travel or large indoor events, you can choose smaller events and gatherings with small group of friends. It's okay to feel hesitant about going to a party at a friend's house or attending a concert or play, even if others in your circle are taking the leap. Take small steps by grabbing a quick coffee with friends or having a friend over for a movie.
- Make travel plans closer to home; there are likely lots of unexplored places close to home and you can take advantage of this time to check out places you've heard of, but never visited.
- Prioritize safe visits with people important to you; whether that's family or friends.

You may find that as parts of your life slowly return to normal, you begin to feel the impacts of everything we've collectively experienced. You need to determine what you need to recover and heal from what's been a very difficult time. Everyone's different and what works for your family or friends, may not work for you. That's okay. Self-compassion and self-care are essential, as well as time to adjust to post-pandemic life.

If you find that you or someone you care about is consistently in a low mood, lashing out or doesn't know how to start making changes, speak to your primary care giver, or contact your Employee Family Assistance Program for options available to you. You are not alone.

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