

Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLC)

Want to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety, increase feelings of well-being and preserve and optimize your cognitive functioning, using methods which are safe and proven? Here are some things you can do today and from now on that can lead to the emotional life you'd prefer. Few people choose to do them all, but each one you adopt can help.

1. **Exercise** – Assuming you have no medical contraindications, exercise not only improves your physical health, but it also improves your mental health. To get the maximum cognitive and antidepressant gains exercise duration should be at least 30 minutes of strenuous activity preferably combining strength training with aerobics. Not sure what all that means – discuss it with physical therapist.
2. **Nutrition, Diet and Supplements** – Become a pescatarian! The healthiest eating includes a “rainbow diet” of mainly multicolored fruits and vegetables, some fish of the cold-deep-seawater variety which are high in omega-3 oils like salmon and low in mercury (so avoid shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish), and reduce excessive calories. The “pescotarian diet” is naturally low in calories. Omega-3 fish oil has been found the best supported supplement for neurological (brain) health (and also note: Avoid omega-6 which undoes the good from omega-3's and is found in the corn sweeteners so over used in processed foods). Consider as well Vitamin D for brain health.
3. **Time in Nature** – has no down side, and has been documented to promote improved cognitive functioning and a sense of well-being, and perhaps it may counter excessive immersion in media (screen time) and other versions of hyper-reality.
4. **Supportive Relationships** – of all sorts: intimate, family, friends, and others who can act with kindness, compassion and empathy. Humans evolved as social creatures, hardwired for empathy and contact. But supportive relationships don't often just happen. Like everything on this list, it requires taking action, saying yes to invitations, seeking out common interests, joining and even starting groups, letting people know that you are interested, and learning to be a present and interested listener.
5. **Recreational activities** – may overlap with all of the forgoing as we exercise, eat, and romp through nature, perhaps with other people or alone. Enjoyable activities may include both physical engagement, like sports, both competitive and individual, or engagement in games, hobbies, the arts (music, dance, painting, theater, poetry, reading, writing, and etcetera) and humor in all its forms.
6. **Relaxation and Stress Management Skills** – may include some special practices like yoga or relaxation exercises, but most especially the regular practice of **meditation**. Meditation can mean setting aside time to “let go of” or just sit with, whatever is being experienced, anchoring oneself in the present moment, perhaps using the breath as an anchor, deliberately observing the breath while one's thoughts, feelings and sensations come and go, with an attitude of patience, compassion and curiosity, and without trying to hold on to or push away any of these internal private experiences. Some see these as spiritual or religious, or find them embedded within such a context, but a secular meditative practice need not include any such trappings.
7. **Altruism** – contributing and serving others freely, voluntarily, without expectation of a return, “fosters qualities that serve the giver”. Engaging in altruistic behavior, like all of these therapeutic lifestyle changes, shows enlightened self-interest.

“If you are going to be selfish, be wisely selfish – which means to love and serve others, since love and service to others brings rewards to oneself that otherwise would be unachievable” – The Dalai Lama

The extensive research supporting TLC is summarized in “Lifestyle and Mental Health” by Roger Walsh (American Psychologist, Oct. 2011, pp. 579-592)*. This brief and necessarily incomplete summary of that article reflects the preferences of this author, Dr. Henry Steinberger, and may not include some items which Dr. Walsh might have given greater coverage or emphasis.

* <http://www.drrogerwalsh.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Lifestyle-Mental-Health-Advanced-Publication-PDF.pdf>