

Prescription for young people dealing with mental health challenges

Tips from #youthgotthis co-founder Dr Rebecca Overton

Important lifestyle measures to promote wellbeing and positive mental health, to take through to adulthood and beyond.

Adequate sleep

Teenagers need **9-9.5 hours sleep per night**, however many don't get anywhere near this amount.

Lack of sleep can lead to irritability, mood swings, difficulty coping, anxiety, depression, reduced motivation, poor energy levels, reduced sports and academic performance, reduced learning and memory, reduced immunity, risk taking behaviours.

Remove devices from your bedroom to try and promote adequate sleep. Hand over your devices to your parents so you won't be disturbed by them, and you can go to bed. Come on, you can do it!

You will miss nothing good or important on social media overnight.

Try and get into a **routine at bedtime** eg hand over your devices, have a hot shower or bath, drink some herbal tea, take some melatonin, do some stretches, read for a while (nothing too exciting or stimulating), listen to a meditation app.

Melatonin can be a useful supplement to take to help you get to sleep and stay asleep

Exercising every day can also help you sleep better.

Avoid caffeine after midday so it won't impact your sleep.

Mindfulness

During mindfulness we try and stop and be present, paying attention to and being fully engaged with, aware of and focussed on what is happening in the present moment, such as your breathing, or even brushing your teeth or eating a meal. You need to be still and focus on your breathing, scan your body for feelings of discomfort and different sensations, don't think about the past or worry about the future. Mindfulness can help you be more thoughtful in how you respond to situations, have more positive thoughts and emotions, reduce fear, stress and anxiety, and feel greater happiness, acceptance and compassion.

- It is more useful and beneficial with regular practice.
- Meditation is a way of practicing mindfulness. Try the Smiling Mind app, which has free programs for adults and kids and only requires ten minutes a day.

Meditation apps

Meditation can assist you to get to sleep, manage stress and regulate emotions as it relaxes the body, calms and quietens the mind and can free you from unwanted thoughts which can cause tension. Listening to a meditation app each night before sleep can distract you from your worries and help you get off to sleep. Find one you enjoy listening to and try and do it each night before bed.

The Moshi app is a great resource for younger children for sleep and meditation.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This is a method that helps **relieve tension** by breaking the cycle of stress and anxiety which can cause muscle tension. Wear comfortable, loose clothes and lie in bed. Slow your breathing and give yourself permission to relax. When your body is physically relaxed, you feel less anxious. Tense each muscle group for 5 seconds whilst breathing in through your nose, then relax each muscle group as you breath out. Start with the right foot then lower leg, then upper leg, then repeat on the left side. Squeeze you butt and hip muscles then relax. Tense your stomach muscles, breath in deeply to expand your chest muscles and hold. Tense the muscles in your hands by making a fist, then tense your forearm muscles, upper arm muscles then shoulder muscles in turn, breathing in as you tense then out as you relax. Tense your neck muscles, then open your mouth widely, then squeeze your eyes tight, then raise your eyes to furrow your forehead.

At the end of the process, you will have contracted then relaxed each muscle group in your body so you feel a state of total muscle relaxation, all whilst concentrating on the technique to distract your mind from your thoughts or worries.

This feels great after a hot shower or bath.

Do it a few times as practice helps you maximise the benefits.

You can listen to a guided PMR on the **beyondblue** website under relaxation exercises and muscle relaxation (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/relaxation-exercises>).

You can also listen to guided breathing exercises (breathing in and out slowly, focussing on a place you go to feel calm and relaxed) and guided visualisations to help you learn to relax and find peace and calm.

To help quieten your mind and bring your attention back to the current moment when you are stressed, anxious or depressed you can try **grounding techniques** :

- Relax your body, be aware of your surroundings and take a few deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Then focus on the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Breathing exercises

Try 4-7-8 breathing

- Sit in a comfy position and relax your muscles
- Take a big breath in through your nose over **four** seconds
- Hold the breath for **seven** seconds
- Then release the breath slowly over **eight** seconds.
- As you're breathing out, make a "whoosh" sound

Or try box breathing to reduce anxiety

- breath in slowly to a count of four
- hold the breath for a count of four
- exhale slowly through pursed lips for a count of four
- rest for a count of four (no breathing)
- take two normal breaths and start again

Calming affirmation

Try a **calming affirmation**, by saying to yourself :

- I am letting go of my stresses
- My tension is melting away
- My muscles are relaxed
- My thoughts are calming down
- I am letting go of fear and worry
- Calmness washes over me with every breath I take
- I am calm and centred.

Soothe your soul

Find things to do which **soothe** you, such as:

- Reducing the lighting
- Touching soft things
- Taking a warm shower or hot bath,
- Listening to calming music or noises (such as sounds from nature)
- Listen to meditations or your favourite playlist
- Smell aromatherapy oils, scented candles or fresh flowers
- Taste something yummy or healthy or nostalgic
- Do some colouring in, write in a journal (which can help you understand your thoughts and feelings and clear your mind)
- Use the thumb of one hand to massage the palm of the other hand
- Practice yoga, do a meditation, practice slow and steady breathing
- Have a massage

Conscious thinking and gratitude

Think of three things I am grateful for

- Who is a person in my life I am grateful for?
- What is my favourite part of the day?

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- What is something or someone I am proud of?
- What am I proud of myself for?
- What is something I like about myself?
- What do I love most about myself?
- Name one of my strengths
- Name someone who loves me
- If I could write a letter to one of my fears, what would it say?
- Share a song or quote which lifts me up and makes me smile
- Think of three things which made me smile today
- Think of something which made me laugh recently
- What is something outside my window which is beautiful?
- Share a favourite memory from my childhood
- Think of my favourite place in the world to be
- What does my dream life look like?
- What is my favourite season and why?
- Describe a favourite smell which always makes me smile
- What makes me feel truly alive?
- What brings me joy?
- What nourishes my mind, body and spirit?
- What are my passions?
- What might be getting in the way of me achieving my goals?
- What am I afraid of?
- Who is a person who is always kind to me?
- Name an item, person or food which brings me comfort
- Describe the last time I felt at peace
- What advice can I give to my teenage self?
- What is my mission / purpose?
- What do I want my life to look like in three years?
- Where do I want to live in the future?
- Who is my inspiration?
- How can I show myself more love?
- What do I need most to heal right now?
- What am I most grateful for now?

Regular exercise

Regular exercise is so important for physical and mental wellbeing, sleep, stress management and connecting with friends. Think stretches, walking the dog, walking with friends or family, swimming, running, hiking, dancing, riding a bike, team sports.

- Try and commit to exercising every day, even just for 30 minutes.
- Do it with a friend so you can connect whilst exercising.
- Find something online you might enjoy such as yoga, Pilates, Zumba, boxing, cardio.
- Chose an activity you enjoy so you will stick to it.
- If you're feeling restless and agitated from anxiety, going for a walk or run or dancing can help to diffuse the restlessness.

Healthy diet

Aim for a balanced diet of fresh, unprocessed foods from all the food groups which have lots of different colours (carrots, capsicum, kale, berries), include nuts, lean meat, fish, wholegrain foods, legumes (lentils, beans, peas, chickpeas), healthy fats (nuts, seeds, avocado, olive oil, fish, dairy, eggs), green tea, dark chocolate (yes!); ensure an adequate

iron intake, lots of fibre, regular meals; minimise fast food and junk food, have lots of water to drink, minimise alcohol and caffeine consumption, eat together as a family to promote connectedness and communication.

Eating healthy food will help you feel physically better which will help promote good mental health.

Routine

Try and get into a routine around **sleep** (what time you go to bed each day and what time you get up), **exercise** (try and do 30 minutes every day), **meals** (regular meals, snacks and drinking enough water), **study** (break down your workload into manageable chunks, make a list prioritising what you need to do and start to tackle it one task at a time). Having a routine and having things to do each day gives you a sense of purpose, meaning, mastery and structure to your day and a sense of achievement.

Anchors

Find the anchors in your life which make you feel happy such as the people, activities and hobbies which make you feel calm, relaxed, grounded, content, safe and secure and prioritise these anchors in your daily life.

Nature

Try and get back to nature by exercising outdoors, walking on the beach, swimming in the surf, or going for a bushwalk. Fresh air, moving your body and sunshine do help give you a sense of wellbeing and can improve symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Set limits on screen time

Connecting with friends online can improve wellbeing and reduce distress but avoid spending too much time on screens, going down rabbit holes which may cause you distress or may prevent you seeking real, meaningful face to face contact with family and friends.

Achievement

Try and set some mini goals. Achieving your goals boosts self-esteem, confidence and motivation and should be celebrated, and will inspire setting more goals. Start with realistic, smaller goals which play to your strengths and interests. Write lists of things you need to do and goals you wish to achieve and tick them off as you accomplish them, it is so satisfying and will encourage you to set more goals! Your goals don't need to look like anyone else's, they are specific to you. They may relate to fitness, hobbies, sport, schoolwork, creative pursuits, learning a language, mastering a new skill. Achieving goals improves self-esteem and leads to the release of **dopamine**, a feel good, motivation and **reward** neurotransmitter or brain chemical.

Connecting with others

Try talking to and seeing friends and family, or spending time with your pets – this releases a hormone called **oxytocin**, the warm, fuzzy, love hormone that promotes feelings of bonding, love, connectedness and empathy. Oxytocin promotes wellbeing and helps people build relationships. When you are feeling anxious or down you may withdraw from family and friends but pushing yourself to connect with them (even by sending a text or sharing a video or arranging to meet up for a walk) will help you regain your confidence, talk through your worries and re-engage with people generally.

Get involved

Push yourself to participate in activities which complement your interests and talents—such as sports, art, dance, music classes, singing lessons, photography, activism, after-school clubs, youth group at church. You may lack interest and motivation initially, however as you re-engage with the world, you will regain interest, enthusiasm and enjoyment and have meaning and purpose, whilst meeting people with similar interests.

Volunteerism

Doing things for others boosts mood and self-esteem. Find things you are interested in and offer to volunteer to help give yourself a sense of purpose, meaning, some routine and structure eg working at an animal shelter, cooking for a homeless shelter, helping an elderly relative or neighbour, volunteering at the zoo or a local school for kids with additional needs.

Enjoyment from activities

Work out what makes life worth living for you, what brings you joy, what makes you feel relaxed / happy / peaceful. It might be things like hobbies, music, singing, watching movies, dancing, drawing, painting, cooking, meditating, running, walking outside in nature, swimming, cycling, spending time with friends. Try and do these things every day to bring yourself joy and help you feel contentment and peace.

If you are feeling stressed, distressed, anxious or depressed

Start talking – don't face difficulties alone, talk to a trusted adult such as a parent, older sibling, family friend, friend's parent, a teacher / tutor, school counsellor, church elder.

Don't struggle alone, don't suffer in silence | Ask for and seek help if you are facing difficulties | See your GP, talk to a psychologist | Call Lifeline, Kids helpline, go to Headspace

- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24 hour service)
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (24 hour for 5-25yo)
- Mental Health Helpline 1800 011 511 (24 hours, NSW)

- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 46 36
- Butterfly Foundation 1800 33 4673 – eating disorders
- eheadspace – eheadspace.org.au - online counselling
- Inroads program to manage anxiety and drinking (17-30yo) inroads.org.au/register
- Positive Choices for alcohol and other drug information positivechoices.org.au

Headspace - 1800 650 890, headspace.org.au – counsellors, nurses and GPs who are interested in the physical and mental health of adolescents aged 12-25years old. You can get free or low-cost care there.

Mental health apps are a fantastic way to learn more about mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression and to help you learn strategies to help you manage symptoms. These apps can deliver effective therapies for conditions such as anxiety, depression and stress, especially when cost and accessibility around seeing a psychologist face to face are an issue. They have interactive learning activities you can complete in your own time to help you learn skills which you can practice so you have an on-board tool kit of strategies to help you manage thoughts, feelings and behaviours, challenge negative thoughts, improve your self-esteem and prevent and manage symptoms of anxiety and depression.

They can help you identify triggers which cause you distress, help you learn how to solve problems, learn relaxation methods, manage difficult relationships, and journal your feelings. You can do a module in just 15 minutes a day.

Many are free and they can be a great stepping stone to recovery or whilst waiting to see a psychologist. Examples include: **Mood Gym** (free, 16+), **My Compass** (free, 18+), **Head Gear** (free, 18+), **Bite Back** (free, 13-16yo).

Always remember

- Don't struggle alone
- There is always hope
- Things will get better, this crisis will pass
- You are deeply loved and cared for
- Help is available
- Get support and you will feel better

Never forget

- **You are important** – tell yourself this every day
- **You are loved** – tell yourself this every day
- **You are needed** – tell yourself this every day
- **You are worthwhile** – tell yourself this every day
- **You are enough** – tell yourself this every day
- **It's OK to have good days and bad days**
- **It's OK to cry about everything and nothing**
- **It's OK to feel frustrated, sad, anxious, scared**
- **It's OK to feel – learn to sit with your feelings**

Feeling suicidal

Please remember, suicide is never an option and it is never the answer.

If you are thinking of harming yourself or ending your life, PLEASE talk to someone and get help.

It can be a huge relief to say out loud that you don't feel safe, and you have thought about dying.

If you are ever thinking about ending your life, know that **feeling suicidal** is temporary and treatable. Whereas suicide is a heartbreaking, devastating, permanent but preventable **end** to a problem such as depression which can be very effectively managed with the right treatment.

Why do people think about suicide?

- They don't necessarily want to die, they want their pain and distress to stop
- They feel alone and without hope
- They wish to escape their existential distress
- They want to stop feeling like a burden
- They feel trapped in negative circumstances and can't see a way out
- Depression is distorting their reality
- They believe others will be better off without them
- They've made mistakes they don't believe can be solved or improved
- They can't find the meaning to go on

Suicide is never the answer. It must not be an option.

Know that things will not stay this way, this crisis will pass.

Talk to someone, get support and help and things will get better.

"Life changes. You lose love. You lose friends.

You lose pieces of yourself that you never imagined would be gone.

And then, without you even realising it, those pieces come back.

New love enters. Better friends come along.

And a stronger, wiser you is staring back in the mirror.

No matter how bad it gets, better days are always waiting, hoping you'll make it there to accept the smiles and joy they are offering."

~ Preetham Mohanty ~