

Managing Stress with Mindfulness

Tis the Season! As we approach the Holidays and Open Enrollment, we may be feeling a little bit more stress than normal. Our to-do list is long, and we are busier than normal. Let's look at some helpful tips from Stanford Healthcare that will help us to improve our mental health hygiene.

Mental Health Hygiene Can Improve Mood and Decrease Stress

For most people, the concept of hygiene conjures up images of brushing your teeth, applying deodorant, or taking a shower: simple, daily practices to keep your body clean and healthy.

Spending even 15 minutes on mental health hygiene each day can bring a host of benefits, from improved mood and better relationships.

"Mental health hygiene [a concept dating back to 1909] includes simple practices that improve our quality of life by preventing negative behaviors and providing emotional stability," said Hui Qi Tong, PhD, a Stanford Medicine clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences who directs the Mindfulness Program at the Stanford Center for Integrative Medicine.

Even brushing your teeth can become part of mental health hygiene when practiced with deliberation.

"Mindfully brushing the teeth is actually part of the home practice assignments for the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program," Tong said. "In the program, group members are asked to carry out these seemingly trivial, often overlooked routines intentionally, rather than on autopilot as we usually do."

A focused mind is a happy mind

Studies have shown that American adults spend nearly half their waking hours in a state of mind-wandering, with their attention focused on something other than the task directly in front of them. "So often we are absent-minded," Tong said, "and not really mentally there with the things we are doing."

"In an age of endless phone trees and recordings it is so refreshingeven a little shocking to experience such genuine service, thank you again, you truly made my day."

"This is why paying attention to daily routines can make such a big impact..." Tong said. "We all want to achieve big things, but ironically, it's paying attention to the smallest things that can help us get there."

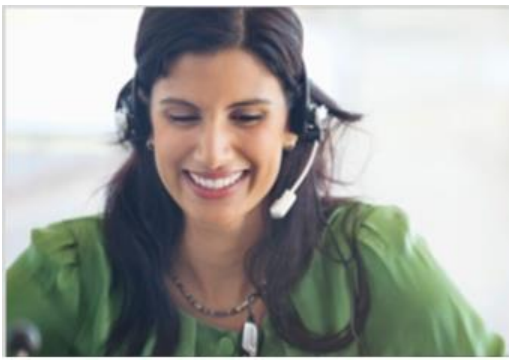
Thankfully, learning to focus doesn't have to mean heading off to a month-long meditation retreat; you can start practicing mental health hygiene wherever you happen to be.

Pay attention to the five senses

Tong recommends starting with one activity you do every day; brushing teeth is one of the most popular choices for a starting place. "To begin," she said, "you simply make sure that from now on, whenever you are brushing your teeth, you stay with the activity of brushing."

"Feel the sensation of the bristles against your gums and teeth," Tong said. "Notice the temperature of the water and the taste of the toothpaste and be aware of what your other hand is doing."

One great thing about this mindfulness practice, Tong said, is that it doesn't take extra time -- you spend the same two minutes brushing your teeth regardless of whether you're paying attention."



“Very knowledgeable & willing to go the extra mile; offered additional resources to help with my decision. I felt heard & respected throughout the process.

Thank you!”

Who’s Caring for You?

**Get to Know the
Member Care Specialists**

Meet Fatimah, one of our newest MCS!

Fatimah was born and raised in the Bay Area (East Palo Alto.) She spent part of her childhood in New Jersey and New York, traveling back and forth between the East and West Coast. Both of her parents are New Yorkers, so she is rooted in the East Coast but a happy mix of the East and West.

Fatimah has a background in theater and the performing arts. She is talented in writing, producing, directing, and acting. She has always been attracted to the realm of fantasy. Alice in Wonderland is one her favorite Disney films because of its “bizarre, whimsical, and imaginative elements.”

When you first meet Fatimah, you will instantly sense her jovial and positive nature. She practices daily gratefulness and makes it a daily intention to maintain an attitude of gratitude.

She loves indulging in traveling, shopping, and pampering herself at the spa. Every year on her birthday she holds a cherished personal tradition of scheduling a spa day for herself at Watercourse Way in Palo Alto, she has been going there since the ‘80’s.

Fatimah’s personal hero is her grandfather, Otto Sampson. “During the Holocaust, he played a crucial role in liberating a concentration camp in Buchenwald, Germany, alongside a few other African American soldiers known as “The Black Angels.” He received recognition for his bravery 55 years later, and his story is now featured in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. You can read the article here.”

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn43705>

Please help us welcome Fatimah to the team!

Building a calmer brain

This practice may sound simple, but Tong says achieving sustained attention is incredibly difficult, especially with so many devices and distractions vying for our attention.

Thankfully, the brain is incredibly adaptable. “Neuroplasticity means that our nervous system has flexibility and can change how it functions and even how it's structured.”

The brain is “an organ of experience. So, if you do something repeatedly, like meditation or playing the piano or exercising, they all have the potential to change the nervous system.”

“People might worry this feels like just one more thing to do and wonder if it's worth doing at all. But these trivial routines are already part of our lives,” Tong said. “We cannot skip cooking, eating or brushing our teeth, right? But if you do these activities with mindfulness, they can change your experiences and how you relate to the activities and can bring lasting benefits.”

Dr. Hui Qi Tong is a clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University. For more information, you will find her publications in academic journals, such as Frontiers in Psychiatry and Journal of Anxiety Disorders.