

WINTER MENTAL HEALTH:

A GUIDE FOR GOOD PRACTICES



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Edmonton
Mental health for all

BE MIND FULL
CHAMPIONS FOR POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH SINCE 1918

Introduction

Winter has arrived, as we enter the 9th month of the pandemic in Alberta.

Every year, winter creates greater challenges around mental health, from reduced daylight hours to cold and often treacherous weather that can create barriers to activities.

Over the past several months of the pandemic, many of us have found solace in outdoor activities, from leisurely social gatherings in backyards and on patios to evening outings that take advantage of the long summer days. With winter here, we face a new set of challenges to maintain good mental health and well-being.

An estimated 15% of Canadians experience what are called the winter blues – if you experience this you might find yourself needing more sleep, indulging more in comfort food, or spending more time alone and less reaching out to family and friends. Another 2-3% experience Seasonal Affective Disorder, a condition of regularly occurring depression in the winter months.

With many of our usual activities either limited or unavailable due to the pandemic and gathering restrictions, this winter figures to be tougher than most for a lot of us. We're already feeling the strain of several months of restrictions and adjustments due to the pandemic, with several more in front of us. It's going to be a challenge, but it's not a challenge you have to face alone. It's more important than ever for each of us to reach out to friends, family, colleagues, and neighbours. To offer support, and to offer friendship. To do that, we have to take care of ourselves first.

At CMHA-Edmonton, we envision mentally healthy people in caring communities. To that end, we have created this guide to help you and the people close to you practice good habits for mental health and well-being over the winter months. It's important to not just identify risks and stressors – though it's critical to be aware of what those are – but to identify what helps and supports you. That's going to look different for every person. We've included some tools and templates we think can help you make a plan that works for you, and to support others in your community. We have included some ideas of activities and habits, and you can find more resources on our website. We hope that in spite of the challenges ahead of us, this winter will turn out to be a time when we all discover new strengths inside ourselves and in the people around us.

Winter is here. Let's make the most of it.

THE TEAM AT CMHA EDMONTON

November 2020



OUR GUIDE FOR **Good Practices**

This guide is intended to help you and the people close to you identify and practice good habits for mental well-being through the winter months.

We cover the different aspects of well-being – mental, physical, and social – with ideas on what you can do to maintain wellness in each of these areas.

This list will serve as a starting point. Not every idea will work for every person. We hope everyone can find at least one new idea.

You may be looking for resources, which you can find on our website. We will update that list of resources throughout winter so we can share the most current and complete list we can.

We also flag what to watch out for in case you encounter mental health challenges, or you think someone close to you is experiencing one.

We also provide some ideas for how you can support employees in the workplace through the coming months.

Finally, we provide tools and templates to build a plan to support your mental health through winter, and for supporting others too.

For a full list of resources, visit edmonton.cmha.ca/wintermentalhealth



TAKING CARE OF YOUR **Mental Health**

Good mental health is critical for our overall well-being. It allows us to be present not just for ourselves and our responsibilities, but for others too. In addition to seasonal challenges, the prolonged pandemic may make it harder for us to maintain good mental health over the coming months. At the end of this document you will find some tools and templates for building a plan and good practices. Here are some areas and activities to consider.

SOCIAL

Whether we're more introverted, extroverted, or somewhere in between, we all need social interaction. Time spent, and conversations with, family and friends, is important. This can be informal such as a spontaneous call or text, or formal, like being part of a club or sports team.

What we can safely do will look different this winter than in years past, especially with friends and family who are not part of our cohorts. However, you can still remain connected in many ways.



Take Time to Call or Write. Try to have regular contact with friends and family, whether by phone or an online platform, or even just sending a quick email or message. You might even hand-write a postcard or letter and send it by mail. Friendly, one-on-one contact, just to check in and chat, can have a restorative effect on your mental health.



Online Group Activities. You can use online video conference platforms like Zoom or Google Hangouts to socialize. Schedule times when you can all be available. You can just chat or do some activity together. You might join a book club (or start one!) and meet to talk about what you're reading. You might have a movie night, where you all watch the same movie while you're on the call together. You might even play a party game together. This face time can make you feel more connected to friends and family no matter where you all are.



Socially Distanced In-Person Activities. You can still gather safely in some locations while maintaining social distance. Science tells us that outdoors is safer than indoors. It might be less hospitable to spend time outside, but even shorter outdoor visits on patios or in parks help maintain social bonds. Cultural institutions like art galleries and museums are open, and you can partake together while maintaining distance.



Volunteering. Doing things for others can give us a sense of purpose and service. Look for opportunities to volunteer in your community. Contact volunteer organizations in your area to see what kind of help they need. In addition, some of your neighbours who are self-isolating might need help with chores like shoveling the sidewalk or preparing meals.



PHYSICAL

Physical and mental health are interconnected. Good physical health is not a guarantee of good mental health, but it makes it more likely you'll be able to develop and maintain good habits.



Meal Plan. If you prepare most of your own meals at home, try putting together a meal plan every week or month. Planning in advance will help you balance your diet and ensure your needs are being met. Make sure your plan is realistic and accommodating of your emotional as well as your physical needs, as well as the time you have to put into meal prep. It can also be an opportunity to be creative and to try new recipes.



Sleep. Ensuring proper rest is a foundation of both physical and mental well-being. Maintaining a regular sleep routine and creating a space where you will be able to rest free of distractions will help support your well-being in other ways.



Fitness. Physical activity – in whatever way you can and wherever you feel safe doing so – is a foundation of good health. If you have the ability, even a corner of your home might be all the space you need for indoor activity. Gyms and studios are offering online classes, and you can find many self-directed programs online at no cost too. Be it yoga, or a strength training program, you don't need much equipment or space to stay active. At the moment, fitness centres are open too and you can assess your comfort level with their health and safety protocols. The outdoors offers many recreational opportunities as well, both formal and informal. If you have the ability to do so, you may want to explore winter sports and activities like skiing (cross-country or downhill), snowshoeing, or skating. Programs and lessons for all ages are available. Walking is also a good activity, and can be done on your own, or with a group, as can cycling.



Socially Distanced Physical Activity. The City of Edmonton and other regional governments provide trail maps and guides to the public. In addition, there are many hiking and bicycling groups that organize socially distanced group outings. If you don't want to endure the cold weather, a possible alternative is mall walking—that is, taking long walks through the West Edmonton Mall or another indoor mall large enough that you can walk a good distance while remaining indoors. You can also meet friends for walks or other activities that allow you to keep distance, get some activity, and catch up.

MENTAL

Maintaining good mental health means paying attention to what causes us stress, but also what brings us satisfaction and happiness. It means habits and practices that help us get through the hard times – or even just the hard moments in our day - and build our resiliency.



Create a Space That Works for You. Our environment affects our mental health. The more time we're spending in a space, the more it's going to impact us for better or worse. This might mean decluttering or reorganizing your space to reflect that you work from or otherwise spend more time there.



Mindfulness and meditation. Mindfulness is a technique of observing your own thoughts calmly and without judgment. It can help you manage thought processes that might otherwise lead to anxiety. Meditation practices contribute to mindfulness. There are apps that can guide you through mindfulness and meditation exercises on a mobile device, and many resources for learning meditation online. These can also be practiced individually for brief or longer times. You might take a few minutes in between meetings to process your thoughts or do that at the beginning and/or end of your day.



Journaling. Putting your thoughts onto paper, even just for your own eyes, can create a sense of relief. It can be as simple as writing down a thought as it pops into your head, be it a hope, a fear, or an observation. Spending some time at the end of day writing about your day can also help you process events in your life.



Explore New Hobbies. If you find yourself with more time at your disposal, you may want to try new activities you've been interested in that can be done safely from your home or otherwise. You may find online classes that help, or that this is something that can be done in a self-directed manner.



Set Goals. This can be a part of your hobbies, and it can help you look forward. For example, you might want to start studying a new language in anticipation of the day you'll travel to a place where it's spoken. You might also use the extra time to plan for the future in other ways, to think through your priorities and to explore activities you might want to undertake.



Decompress and Relax. Sometimes, you just need downtime. There's nothing wrong with a Netflix binge if that's what supports your mental health. Mental breaks to watch a program or listen to music or to simply enjoy solitude are an important part of re-energizing for the next day or week.

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS:

What to Watch Out For

To identify your own mental health needs, or those of another person, it's important to understand the strain that life challenges can place on mental health. Adverse circumstances can have at least four different effects on our mental health and wellbeing: stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression.



Stress is a natural response to a situational threat. Routine pressures like a minor accident, a work deadline, or a situation with conflict might cause someone to experience a low level of momentary stress. Situations that involve higher stakes or longer time periods, such as a competition, a big project at work, or on-going conflict may cause greater stress. Stress can have long-term negative effects when it exceeds a person's ability to manage and cope with it and can lead to other mental health concerns.



Burnout is a state of exhaustion brought on by prolonged periods of excessive stress. It can cause fatigue and reduced immune function, causing someone to feel tired and frequently sick. It can also negatively impact a person's attention span, concentration, and memory. Someone might try to manage their own burnout by withdrawing from other people, procrastinating, or ignoring tasks. Preventing or recovering from burnout is a matter of gaining some control over stressful circumstances, including rest and self-care as part of a normal routine, and removing stressors until our stress reaches a manageable level consistent with long term mental health and wellbeing.



Anxiety is a condition of experiencing fear about an expected upcoming threat; the fearful expectation might have a basis in reality or it might be imagined or exaggerated. The individual's distress, however, is very real, and so are its physical effects. Anxiety can cause headaches, dizziness, fainting, nausea, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, trembling, tearfulness, sweating, and other physical effects of fear and panic. A particularly strong reaction might be described as an anxiety attack. If someone experiences anxiety frequently or chronically, they might be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and be eligible to receive certain kinds of medical care.



Depression is a state of deflated mood and energy. It's more than just feeling sad—it's more akin to extreme burnout. A depressed person doesn't feel pleasure or happiness as vividly, or at all. Depression can cause a significant loss of energy and motivation. It might cause a person to eat or sleep much more than usual, or much less. It can also cause suicidal thoughts. Depression is typically caused by a significant life event, but for some people it becomes a chronic condition that requires medical support. Some people are especially susceptible to depression in winter.

If you think you or someone close to you is experiencing one of these symptoms, there are many resources that can help.

- See if your employer provides an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP). You can use this to access counselling or other resources.
- If you have a benefits plan, see if it covers counselling or psychological support.
- If you do not have a plan, look into free programs and resources that you can access.
- Talk – or encourage someone close to you – to talk to someone.
- Milder stress or burnout may be relieved by taking vacation time, or by adjusting work hours or responsibilities where possible.
- If you or someone close to you is in crisis or distress, call the Distress Line at [\(780\) 482-4357 \(HELP\)](tel:780-482-4357).



HOW YOU CAN

Support Others



Learn About Mental Health. Learn the signs of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression, and their causes and effects.



Know Who to Call. Keep in mind who you can connect people to if they say they need help, for example, calling 211 for resources, or the Distress Line (780-482-HELP) in a crisis.



Be Available. Anxiety and depression often involve intense feelings of shame. Sometimes, the most important thing you can do to help others is to make yourself available. When they reach out, reach back. Be willing to listen. Sometimes, that's all a person is looking for.



Be Kind and Inclusive. You never know what someone is going through. People experiencing anxiety and depression often try to hide it. Stigma around mental health still exists in many communities. Remember that and approach interactions with humility and without judgment.



Take Care of Yourself. Observe your own stress levels and consider your own susceptibility to burnout, anxiety, and depression. The advice we provided above, under "What you can do for yourself," applies to you, too. As the flight attendant always says before takeoff: "Make sure your own mask is secure before helping others."



Ask Questions

- How are you doing with everything going on now?
- Are you tending to your mental health?
- What can I do to help?
- Do you know who to talk to if you need support?



MENTAL HEALTH IN THE **Workplace**

Our work environment has an impact on our mental health. We spend a significant part of our lives at work. Our work can become a key part of our identity too.

The pandemic may have created additional stress at work too. Some of us are adjusting to working from home for the first time. Others may have seen cutbacks that mean they have more work to do or are worried about their job security.

We should all be more attentive to our mental health and that of our colleagues. That includes any volunteers we have in the workplace. Some things we can do:



For Ourselves

- Take care of our own mental health first and foremost.
- If we have a company EAP or benefits that cover mental health supports, use them. Many people benefit from counselling or therapy no matter if they have a mental health diagnosis or concern or not.
- Build our own plan to attend to our mental health and maintain good habits.



For Our Staff

- Check in regularly. Make a mental health check-in a part of your supervision meetings or regular conversations – either one-on-one or with a group.
- Remind your team of the importance of maintaining good mental health, and of any resources available to support them.
- Where you can, offer accommodations, whether that is in schedule or responsibilities. Remember that many of us are dealing with different and often additional responsibilities on top of our work, particularly if we are working from home.



For Our Colleagues

- Set an example. Be open and vulnerable about any challenges you're facing, and what you're doing to support yourself.
- Check in with one another, whether that happens in-person or virtually.
- Share resources you find that might be beneficial.



SELF-CARE PLAN

Use this template to write down your top priorities and what you will do to support your mental health through winter. Make sure to write down the names of people and tools/resources you can use to support your plan too.

My Self-Care Plan

Social

Physical

Mental

At Work or School

By March 31, 2021 I will have ...

My Supports (People)

My Supports (Tools)

MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH WINTER:

Resources

What resources are available in the community will change over the coming months.

For an up to date list of resources, go to: edmonton.cmha.ca/wintermentalhealth





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