NIU EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Healthy Habits for Reducing Depression and Stress

Accept the ebb and flow of your moods and energy as a normal part of life. When you have learned to accept all of you, it becomes easier to accept all of your feelings without interpreting them or giving them too much meaning. As you accept all of the “positive and negative” feelings as just information about how you are today and not something you have to fix, it is easier to appreciate the feelings you like and let go of the feelings you don’t like. You cannot control your feelings only your response. By acknowledging, appreciating and accepting all of your feelings, you can learn what they have to teach you about yourself without a struggle. When you accept your feelings, you can nurture yourself when your feelings are low and appreciate what you are able to do even if it isn’t the best you can do when you have a lot of energy. This is a time to do nurturing things for yourself. Rocking in a glider or rocking chair is immediately soothing. Thirty minutes of rocking decreases anxiety and pain, and feels like you are giving yourself a hug. A hot bath is another way of giving yourself a hug. Listening to music can be soothing or energizing depending on the beat of the music. Dress in clothes that always make you feel good about yourself and are appropriate for the occasion. Just deciding to smile will change your mood and improve your immune system. Remember, if you are accepting of your “negative” feelings, they will not stay as long. As most stories tell us, “It came to pass”…not it came to stay.

Listen to music to change your mood or energy. After 15 minutes of upbeat energetic music, it is very hard to sit still. This can be useful to get you off the couch and into walking. Music with a slow beat can put you to sleep so keep sleeping music in your bedroom so you can use it when you need. For different styles of music to assist you in sleeping, focusing, or improving your mood check out www.tuneyourbrain.com.

Take a 2 minute break and breathe deeply 3 times in through your nose and slowly out through pursed lips. Make sure you exhale completely and slowly. Everyone can find 2 minutes throughout the day. Three deep breaths take no longer than 30 seconds. With the extra 90 seconds, visualize yourself in your favorite relaxing setting and focus on the details of this calming place as you continue to breathe slowly. If you have a difficult time picturing yourself in your favorite setting, bring a picture to work and look at it as you visualize yourself being in the picture. Deep slow breathing is a letting go process. Three slow deep breaths gives your body/brain important cleansing oxygen and have an immediate relaxing effect. Throughout the day, take the 2 minute break whenever you feel stressed and overwhelmed.

Learn progressive relaxation by practicing progressive relaxation every day for at least 30 days. After 2 weeks, when you let the tension go and exhale, say a cue word/phrase to yourself, such as relax, let it go, its ok, stay calm, this will pass. Once you have learned the progressive relaxation skills, apply these skills during a stressful situation using your cue word to trigger your body to relax. This skill will improve the 2 minute breathing break. Progressive relaxation is also helpful when you have difficulty sleeping or to reduce a strong emotional response.

Exercise 30 minutes a day to maintain your health and your emotional well-being. Walking is the single most effective thing you can do to enhance your overall physical health, regulate your sleep, increase your metabolism, keep your appetite in check, improve your mood and increase your positive thoughts. It is also the cheapest (except perhaps in the winter) form of exercise. You can divide your exercise into three 10 minute periods of brisk exercise which becomes easier to build into your daily routine. Pick a parking spot 10 minutes from the building where you work. When you are walking briskly to your building, look up. When you look up, you improve your breathing and your mood. At the end of the work day, when you return to your car, you will have exercised for 20 minutes and just need to exercise for 10 more minutes. Maybe find some stairs to walk down. Thirty minutes of walking daily increases your serotonin which is a feel good hormone. Research has found 30 minutes of daily walking as effective as medication for some people. The difficulty is getting up and doing it when you feel so tired from the depression. So start with small steps. Anything is better than
Looking up at the sky, helps you breathe more deeply and makes you feel better. Perhaps looking up reminds us that the world is bigger than you and gives you a break from your negative thoughts.

**Make sure you take your breaks at work or at home.** This is a good time to go outside (even in the cold) and walk around your building or walk in your building and focus on your breathing. If you work in an office, maybe you can shut your door and do some progressive relaxation. Progressive relaxation and walking will help you let go of the tension you have been holding onto. During this time make sure your self-talk is positive/neutral.

**Smile.** Research has proven what your grandmother use to say, “Put a smile on your face!” If you decide to smile even when you don’t feel like it, your body does not know that this is not how you feel. The act of smiling will strengthen your immune system and therefore makes you less susceptible to illness. After smiling for a while, your mood and self-talk will become more positive.

**Balanced Meals influence your biochemistry and brain function** (Change Your Brain, Change Your Life, Daniel Amen, M.D.). Our body needs proteins in balance with healthy fats and complex carbohydrates along with fruits and vegetables. See a nutritionist to learn about a well balanced diet that will assist you in getting the nutrients your body needs to maintain your energy, mood and sleep.

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