



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #07:

HEALTHY HABITS: POSITIVE INFLUENCES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION



Being in recovery can sometimes feel like you have been placed into a remote location, amid unfamiliar surroundings, with the added complexity and challenge of finding your way back to civilization. Recovery can be lonely, scary and often confusing, with an array of mental and physical obstacles. The path ahead of you doesn't run in a straight line. It's important to recognize and take inventory of the skills and tools you have acquired, and to know how and when to use these strategies to help you navigate your recovery journey. Acknowledging that factors like dedicated time, heartfelt commitment and focused attention are keys to recovery sustainability, you'll need to keep your eyes open to spot all of the resources in your environment that will support you on your journey. As you look at your path each day, you'll discover new self-care supports that may surprise you in their simplicity. No matter how insignificant they may seem, allowing yourself to see the good in every day, appreciating the beauty of natural surroundings, and reaching out for help, or helping others, can be powerful daily additions as you build strength and resilience.

It's easy to rush through your days with blinders on. Sometimes, we're so internally focussed that it can be exhausting, leaving us more susceptible to negative thinking. In many instances, we pay more attention to the "bad qualities in others rather than the good ones: the things that worry or annoy us, or make us critical."¹ With a "negative bias" for the "bad, or at best, [looking at] neutral qualities in others and only a sprinkling of good ones you naturally feel less supported, less safe and less inclined to be generous or [to] pursue your dreams."¹ Developing the ability to move outside of a cycle of negative thoughts and observe the positive in other people can do a lot of good. We learn a lot from other people, and this learning increases and broadens our mental and emotional perspectives, which, in turn, makes us more resilient.



Reflecting on positive moments observed during each day can help you change habits: you can see new ways to fix mistakes and solve problems. Throughout your lifetime, your brain catalogues all of your experiences. The science of neuroplasticity shows us that our brain structure can be changed and adapt to build resilience, form new connections and take control of reorganizing itself.²

So how do you start retraining your brain to see the good in every day? Start with small observations by, "seeing the good in others. It's a simple but very powerful way to feel happier and more confident, and become more loving and more productive in the world."³ When you inevitably reflect on challenges within your day, don't spend all of your time on negatives - be sure also to find at least one good thing. Remember, it doesn't need to be something big. It could be as simple as a smile you offered while you held the door for someone.

It's important to recognize that the good you see in others is also in you. You couldn't see that good if you did not have an inkling of what it was. You, too have positive intentions, real abilities and virtues of mind and heart. Those qualities are a fact, as much as a fact as the chair you're sitting on. Take a moment to let that sink in. You don't need a halo to be a truly good person. You are a truly good person.³

Another essential tool for self-care is developing an appreciation for the beauty of natural surroundings. Research points to the benefits of spending time outside where you can get a boost of happiness and feel better connected to the world. "Well-being increases if people simply take time to notice the nature around them."⁴ The examples in the study showed that nature can be "anything not human-built: a houseplant, a dandelion growing in a crack in a sidewalk, wildlife, or sun through a window."⁴ Participants were asked to take a photo of the natural object they encountered and write a short note about it. It's important to note that "this wasn't about spending hours outdoors or going for long walks in the wilderness, it was about the tree at a bus stop in the middle of a city and the positive effect that one tree can have."⁴

Being in natural surroundings can allow you to be more open to multi-sensory experiences where you awake more of your brain through the sights, smells, tastes, touches, and sounds to create associations that form strong memories.⁵

Go ahead, exercise - go outside for a walk. Look around at your physical surroundings and forget for a moment or two about "your needs, worries, regrets or desires for the future."⁶ You'll not only benefit your mental health but also your physical health by spending time in green space. In one study, "Forest bathing", where people spend time sitting, lying down or just walking around in nature, lowered blood pressure, reduced heart rates and decreased stress. In addition, research suggested that people who spent time outdoors had a lower risk of developing Type II diabetes and cardiovascular disease than those who did not spend any time outside. Spending time outdoors also increased how long research participants slept.⁷ Give it a try - take off your shoes and walk barefoot in the grass. You'll feel more grounded as a result.

Not only can immersing yourself in nature bring significant benefits, but surrounding yourself with positive, supportive people can make a big difference in helping you to keep moving forward on a sustainable recovery pathway. Interestingly enough, this can go both ways. Reaching out and helping others who are just starting their journey through recovery can be a highly effective, positive therapy because it can, "take the attention off yourself... assist the other person in making progress and [you may] receive gratitude for your efforts" which, in turn, can give you perspective, boost your sense of purpose and make you feel happier.⁸ Being able to recognize earlier challenges that you faced and overcame, and speaking with others about it, helps develop strength and gives you a chance to reflect upon how far you have come in your recovery.

Recreation therapy programs help in similar ways. People work to regain control over their lives and actions, relax their minds and bodies, and rebuild social skills, self-esteem and confidence through the connections they make to other people in their community. They can participate in, "exercise groups such as yoga, and other physical activities such as active games, creative arts, woodworking and crafts."⁹

Healthy Habits: Positive Influences on Mental Health and Addiction

While these all help, it's also important to remember some of the most important things that will help during recovery:

1. Taking time to take a break when you need it.
2. Remembering how important exercise and proper nutrition are to your strength.
3. Staying connected to your social circle for support and encouragement.

Having a greater awareness of what it's like to feel well from positive influences will mean that you can develop a sense of the symptoms you may experience if you are feeling unwell. Recognizing those symptoms and using these tools is a supportive way to help you stay on course as you recover, and help you learn when you may need to call for targeted, professional care.

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