

FRIDAY | 1 JANUARY 2021

# Be happy, be healthy

Forget the tribulations of the year gone by and enter the new year with renewed vigour and energy. As Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "That which does not kill us only makes us stronger."

SUREKHA S.

Psychologists believe that navigating through tough times has helped many realise the importance of good health — mental and physical. "Many of my patients are now actively focussing on their mental well-being and are making changes in that direction. They understand its importance," states Sumalatha Vasudeva, clinical psychologist with BGS Gleneagles Global hospital.

Sneha George, counselling psychologist at Fortis Malar Hospital, concurs. "People have gone through a lot in the past year. As we step into the new year, health is the primary focus," she states.

But how does one ensure they have a healthier and happier year ahead?

Psychologists break down the different aspects one needs to focus on, for physical and mental well-being. They believe that if you take care of these key aspects, life will be a lot more fulfilling, healthy and wholesome.



Self-compassion or self-care is the key to one's mental health. Tell yourself, I will be more kind and compassionate towards myself. Ask yourself what is it that brings you joy. Do not get stuck in past thoughts, focus on the present instead. Forget people who hurt you, forget bad incidents that happened and focus on the new

— SNEHA GEORGE, counselling psychologist



Ensure you spend at least half an hour a day doing one activity you really enjoy. It will make a huge difference to your overall mental wellbeing. Spending time by yourself, letting your thoughts flow. Watching your breath is also extremely beneficial.

SUMALATHA VASUDEVA,  
clinical psychologist



The focus should be on nutrient-dense food. A medium-sized bottle of a cola drink has less calories than a medium-sized apple. Does that make it a healthier choice? Make tasty food in a healthy manner. Food doesn't have to be bland or you don't have to only eat salads. Food is the best medicine for health. You eat right, you will hardly need any medication.

Suhasini Mudraganam,  
chief nutritionist

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**Sneha George,**  
counselling  
psychologist

# Self Care: Love yourself

An important aspect of mental health that has emerged through the pandemic is self-care. Vasudeva recalls a case that she encountered during the pandemic. "I remember seeing a patient who was very lonely. She had tested positive for Covid-19 and even after the isolation, was unable to connect back with her friends. She soon realised that through the years she had hardly spent time with herself. She now decided to focus on self-love and on doing things that brought her joy. And there was a marked improvement in her mental health."

"Self-compassion or self-care is the key to one's mental health," adds George. The first step, she says, is to understand self-care. "Tell yourself, I will be more kind and compassionate towards myself. Ask yourself what is it that brings you joy. Do not get stuck in past thoughts, focus on the present instead. Forget people who hurt you, forget bad incidents that happened and focus on the now," she says.

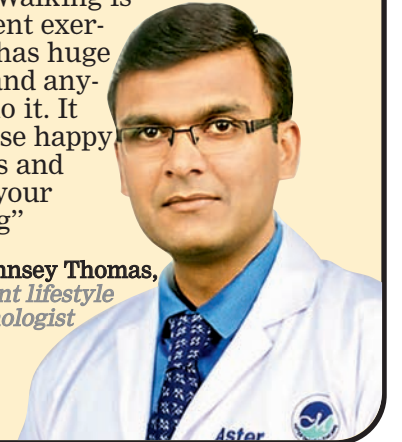
"A lot of people think the new year will magically be different and all the problems of the past year will vanish. But that may not always happen," adds George. "Living with ambiguity is difficult. It is, hence, important to look at what is in our control and what is not. Once you do that, the feeling of helplessness lessens and you feel more empowered. Start small, set small goals and work towards them." And even when working towards one's goals, George insists one must not forget compassion. "While focussing on food or fitness goals, ask yourself am I being kind to myself. Do I let myself enjoy the process? If not, you will experience burnout and lose interest in your goal. Self-care is to allow yourself to take a break, to allow yourself that cheat meal, to take walks in between work or even doodle to feel good," she stresses, adding, "Prioritise yourself and your happiness. Live in the present and be mindful of everything you do. Life will become healthier and happier."

Along with being in the present, it is also important to think positive and many studies have shown that positive thoughts can actually result in positive physical and mental changes. "Thinking affects emotion, which affects behaviour," explains Dr Johnsey Thomas, consultant lifestyle psychologist at Aster Prime Hospital, Hyderabad "So think positive and be grateful for what you are, where you are," he advises.



Exercise forms a very important part of taking care of yourself. Setting aside one hour per day for exercise is highly recommended. Walking is an excellent exercise that has huge benefits and anyone can do it. It will release happy hormones and improve your well-being"

**Dr Johnsey Thomas,**  
consultant lifestyle  
psychologist



## Focus on being fit

The benefits of physical exercise are many. From weight management to better heart health and reduced blood pressure to better brain health and improved muscle strength, studies have over the years scientifically proven the innumerable benefits of exercise on physical health. But the benefits of exercise are not limited to the body. Most of us know that when we exercise the body releases chemicals called endorphins which create a positive feeling, but that's not the only benefit. Endorphins are also associated with reduced stress, anxiety and depression. Exercise also boosts self-esteem and improves sleep. A study published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, found a consistent association between enhanced psychological well-being, as measured using a variety of psychological inventories, and regular physical exercise.

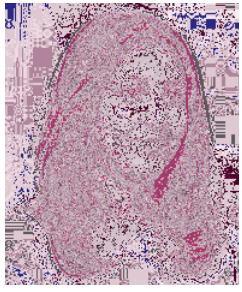
# Take up a fun hobby:

A key aspect of self-care is to indulge in an activity that brings you joy. This could be anything from meditating for a few minutes every day to painting, dancing, cooking or listening to your favourite music. "Ensure you spend at least half an hour a day doing one activity you really enjoy and it will make a huge difference to your overall mental wellbeing," stresses Vasudeva. Just spending time by yourself, letting your thoughts flow. Watching your breath is also extremely beneficial. "Just 10 minutes of breathing exercises or meditation can improve your mental health," adds Dr Johnsey Thomas.

The benefits of pursuing a fun activity or a hobby is backed by science. A study published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* states that creative activity was found to have both indirect effects and direct effects on performance related outcomes. In another study published in the medical journal *Neurology*, researchers found that people who engaged in artistic activities, such as painting, drawing and sculpting, in both middle and old age were 73 per cent less likely to have memory and thinking problems, such as mild cognitive impairment, that lead to dementia. The study also revealed that those who engaged in craft-based activities such as sewing, woodworking and ceramics were 45 per cent less likely to encounter cognitive issues.



**Sumalatha Vasudeva,**  
clinical  
psychologist



Suhasini Mudraganam, chief nutritionist.

# Cultivate good eating habits

**Y**ou are what you eat' is a popular saying and over the years, people have found it to be highly accurate. Many studies have found the association of healthy eating habits with not just good physical health and lack of disease but also with one's mental well-being. A study published in the journal *BMJ*, found that fruit and vegetable consumption was associated with higher mental well-being in both sexes. A review of 12 epidemiological studies, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, found evidence of a significant, cross-sectional relationship between unhealthy dietary patterns and poorer mental health in children and adolescents. The study observed a consistent trend for the relationship between good-quality diet and better mental health. "Eating a healthy, well-balanced diet is an important aspect of your health. This also includes eating on time. Another aspect people tend to ignore is water. Dehydration is dangerous to the brain. One must ensure they consume enough water during the day," says Dr Johnsey Thomas. Most people, today, associate food with calories, feels Suhasini Mudraganam, chief nutritionist. "The focus should be on nutrient-dense food. A medium-sized bottle of a cola drink has less calories than a medium-sized apple. Does that make it a healthier choice? It is, hence, important to look at food with a holistic view," she says.

"Food is considered the best medicine for health. If you eat right, you will hardly need any medication. When it comes to food, here are a few things you should keep in mind —pick foods based on their nutrient density, pick whole foods or minimally processed foods, plan ahead for the week and pick healthy ingredients while grocery shopping, read the labels and check for sugar content and trans fat, eat seasonal fruits and vegetables, include seeds and nuts in your diet and eat as much home-cooked food as possible," she advises.

Another thing to remember is to eat tasty food.

"Make tasty food in a healthy manner. Food doesn't have to be bland or you don't have to only eat salads. Eating healthy is a slow and sustained lifestyle change. So, instead of going on diets try to eat well and you will feel good, physically and emotionally. Also, remember to eat mindfully. When you eat while watching a thriller movie, you are also consuming those emotions. Food forms your energy and your thoughts. So eating well is really essential," she says.



How happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health. Positive relationships have an impact even on your brain.

## Happy Relationships

**A** Harvard study tracked the health of its participants for over 80 years to get clues on what leads to overall good health. Director of the study Robert Waldinger, was surprised to find that 'our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health.'

"Taking care of your body is important, but tending to your relationships is a form of self-care too. That, I think, is the revelation," he was quoted as saying. The long-term study found that more than money or fame, it is close relationships that keep people happy throughout their lives. But that's not it. Positive relationships have an impact even on your brain health. A study published in the American medical journal *Neurology* found that socialising with others made the participants 55 percent less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment. Today, loneliness is a huge problem, not just with the elderly population but even with youngsters, who are hooked on to the virtual world. Thankfully, many people are now slowly realising the importance of positive relationships. "Through the last year, a lot of people have rediscovered their relationships and the joy it brings to their lives," says Sneha George. "Humans are not made to live alone. We need support from each other, which helps us feel warm and protected. Giving help and support to others is as important as receiving it. Through the pandemic, a lot of people have altered their family dynamics. And many have started actively trying to improve their relationships."

## Stress management



**S**tress is today an omnipresent phenomenon that seems to be impacting everyone's life. And the pandemic which brought with it uncertainty of the future, uncertainty of kids' education, work stress, loneliness and more, has definitely added to the feeling of stress. "When dealing with stress, the first thing one should do is to pinpoint the actual cause of stress. If work is causing you stress then may be take a day or two off. If the work load is too much, communicate it to your superiors. Also, take breaks, studies have proved that it can actually increase productivity. Once you are aware of what is causing the stress, you can handle it effectively. There needs to be an awareness of the stressor and you can then reprioritise your goals to cut down stress," explains Sneha George. "Living in the present will help handle stress a lot better. If you constantly live in the past, it drains your energy," adds Sumalatha. Breathing exercises and meditation are also excellent ways to combat stress.

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