This guide explains how to counteract the pressures of everyday life, to deal with ill-health and to cope in a crisis.

How to look after yourself

What does it mean to look after yourself?
Life can be draining and stressful. Whether you’re at home or at work it’s important to take care of your emotional and physical health. If you look after yourself on a day to day basis you will be better equipped to deal with a crisis.

How can I make a start?
Think about whether you’ve got the right balance between work, social life and any other pursuits. From there, you can begin to work out what you want to achieve and how you can go about it.

How can I improve my ability to cope?
Expressing how you feel is an important part of remaining mentally healthy. Crying, when someone close to us dies, for example, is part of the body’s natural way of allowing our feelings of grief to leave us.

How can exercise make me feel better?
Exercise can help you feel relaxed, stretched and energised. It is good for your heart, helps you to reduce anxiety and depression, lose weight and feel fitter. Exercise doesn’t have to be hard to be good for you. Build up slowly and don’t be over-ambitious to begin with.

How can I learn to relax?
The body and mind need time to relax and recover from the effects of everyday life and stress. Taking time to soak in a warm bath, listening to music, walking in the park, spending time with your favourite hobby can all help you to unwind and recover from the day.

Who can I talk to?
Talking to someone you trust about what upsets you or makes you feel stressed is a useful way to let off steam. You might feel tempted to keep your feelings to yourself for fear of what others might think, but if you trust the person it’s likely to be a chance to give and get mutual support.

Counselling and psychotherapy
For anyone who finds it difficult to talk to friends or family, a more structured form of talking could be helpful. Talking treatments offer people a chance to go over current or past difficulties, problems and emotions.

Support groups
Support groups give people with similar problems the opportunity to get together regularly to talk about the issues that affect them.

How can I look after myself in a crisis?
Looking after yourself when you’re going through a crisis will help you be strong enough to weather the storm. Treat yourself kindly. Try to rest, even if you can’t sleep. Take care of your physical needs and talk things over with someone.

How to rebuild your life after a breakdown
A ‘nervous breakdown’ is when someone becomes unable to cope with everyday life, perhaps following a trauma or, perhaps, apparently out of the blue. A breakdown of your mental health can be a shattering experience, but the good news is that most people do recover.

What causes a mental breakdown?
The following factors might contribute to a breakdown:
- A traumatic, or near-death experience
- Newly diagnosed illness
- Serious illness of a family member
- Death of a family member
- Unresolved grief
- Post-war trauma
- Relationship break-up
- Social stress
- Career burnout
- Unemployment
How do you know that you are having a breakdown?
Some people will experience one or two symptoms but others might experience a lot more. Things to look out for are:
- Sleep disruption
- Change in appetite, eating too little or too much
- Feelings of persistent anxiety and panic attacks
- Hearing voices
- Having flashbacks
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts
- Lack of interest in social, work and family life
- Overuse of alcohol and drugs
- Inability to function normally

What should you do if you experience any of these symptoms?
You should immediately seek professional advice. Consult your GP who may refer you to an expert/therapist to talk over your feelings with and help you overcome your difficulties.

How can I start to regain my confidence?

Be kind to yourself
Recovery is rarely a smooth path. Don’t condemn yourself or feel a failure, just think about what you can learn from what has happened and continue to plan for the future. Watch out for perfectionism, and try to be realistic – set reasonable goals and reward yourself for achieving them.

Do something physical
Tension can accumulate if we are inactive, so regular exercise can help. Try aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, yoga – or an outdoor activity, such as gardening or fishing.

Reduce your stress level
- If you tend to put too much pressure on yourself, learn to slow things down. Try to balance your daily routine so it includes time for work, sleep, relationships and fun.
- Use a daily ‘things to do’ list.
- Find a form of regular relaxation that you enjoy, such as taking a quiet stroll, soaking in a hot bath or listening to calming music.
- Be sure to get enough rest at night.
- What you eat and drink can have an effect on your mood. Try to eat healthily and avoid too much alcohol, caffeine or tobacco.

Find your own coping strategy
Many people have found that they can help themselves recover by getting to know more about their problems and discovering ways to overcome them. One helpful technique is to keep a mood diary. This enables you to keep track of changes in emotions, to learn what triggers them and what helps the most.

Doing part-time or voluntary work may be a useful way to get started again, if you feel you need to take things slowly or want to change direction. Flexible working arrangements can be very helpful, but for some, this is not possible or desirable. Some people find that getting back to their normal way of life, quickly, actually helps them recover.

If you have friends or family who understand you, ask them to support you through your recovery. A regular, friendly chat with someone can be an important healing medicine.

Where can I go for further sources of information?
If you are worried about your drinking, contact your GP.

Addaction
Drug and alcohol treatment charity with projects and services across the UK.
www.addaction.org.uk

Drinkline
Free confidential helpline for those worried about their drinking and their friends and family.
0800 917 82 82

Mental Health Foundation
A leading UK charity that provides information, carries out research, campaigns and works to improve services for anyone affected by mental health problems.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind
A leading mental health charity in England and Wales. The MindInfoLine offers confidential help Monday to Friday between 9.00am - 5.00pm.
0845 766 0163
www.mind.org.uk

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