

Re-energizing Yourself For The New Year



Congratulations! You made it through the holiday season. Now, after the parties, events and shopping frenzy, a new year of opportunity has arrived. Packed full of expectations, you may look to new goals and in some scenarios place more pressure on yourself to “do better” and likely, a new set of resolutions.

Remember, set realistic and attainable goals, stay excited, optimistic and re-energize yourself for a brand new year!

Minimizing anxiety

25% of adults in Canada say they feel stress or anxiety, daily.¹

Anxiety is apprehension over an upcoming event², and its symptoms – raised heart rate, difficulty sleeping and poor concentration to name a few – can be downright debilitating. However, getting a handle on anxiety is possible. Committing to the following strategies for as little as 15 minutes, daily, can decrease anxiety, and give you an energizing boost in the process.

Manage your time. Set a schedule that allows for adequate and restful sleep, take time to relax, introduce healthy meals and snacks into your diet, and begin or continue an exercise routine with gradual progression ... putting your time and energy into what is manageable and matters is easier when you prioritize and organize your time. Try waking up 15 minutes early for extra you-time. Create a detailed to-do list, or establish firm deadlines to avoid stress-inducing procrastination.

Practice deep breathing. Short, shallow breaths signify stress and anxiety in your body.² Calm yourself with slow, deep breathing: Inhale to a four-count, hold for three, then exhale for another four-count.

Meditate. Meditation lowers anxiety and increases grey matter in the brain, thus “re-wiring” the body to stress less!² Take time – even a few short minutes – each day to engage in some solitude and calming energy.

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Embrace silence. Too much noise can be over-stimulating. Unplug and schedule some quality quiet time.

Practice self-care. Indulge in a massage, mani-pedi or long bath with some essential oils (lavender, basil, anise and chamomile all reduce tension in the body and increase mental clarity²). Consider adding supplements into your routine; lemon balm, omega-3s and even green tea are just a few that help control anxiety.³

Cut clutter. Donate or eliminate what you don't need, keep what you have organized and tidy.

Make sleep a priority. Sleep deprivation feeds anxiety (and a host of other physical ailments) so try to get seven to nine hours, nightly.

Cue the tunes! Music, particularly slow-paced nature sounds or instrumental, Celtic, Native American and Indian music have been shown to have relaxing effects on the body by helping to lower blood pressure, heart rate and stress hormones.³ Find the music that works for you.

Spend time with loved ones (and pets!) Connecting with people and animals near and dear to you helps your brain release oxytocin, promoting happiness and reducing anxiety.

Cut the bad food, add the good. Caffeine, sugar, and processed foods can trigger everything from heart palpitations, inflammation, panic and anxiety attacks. Opt for healthier options, especially those high in vitamin B, omega 3s and whole grain carbohydrates.²

Exercise. It gets the endorphins flowing and builds confidence, making it a super anxiety buster.

Minimizing depression

Some of the same techniques for minimizing anxiety can be readily applied to minimizing depression. Lay a strong foundation with the basics like sleep, connecting with others, eating right and exercise. Then add on others that resonate with you.

No matter which methods you choose, the key is taking that first step. Try one (or more!) of these:

Yoga. Its emphasis on body and breath awareness enhances mood and may be a good complement to existing practices to manage depression. It may also lower blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels.³

Laugh. A good chuckle brings extra oxygen to your body, relieving stress and tension.

Get support. You're not alone and you're not a burden. Find encouragement and advice with family, friends, or a formal support group. If you need to, reach out to a qualified medical professional or organization for help.

Support others. Studies have found that giving support provides an even bigger mood boost than getting it⁴, with volunteering sometimes resulting in a reduction of the symptoms of depression.⁵

Boost your B and D vitamins. Deficiencies in B vitamins such as folic acid and B-12 may trigger or contribute to depression. Reach for vitamin supplements, citrus fruits, green veggies and good proteins. Get outside (or in front of a sunny window) for at least 15 minutes a day to raise your vitamin D and give those mood-improving serotonin levels a natural lift.

Respect your limits. According to Nancy Irwin, PsyD, being stressed and overwhelmed are major risk factors and exacerbators of depression.⁵ Take on only what you can handle and don't be afraid to say no when you need to.

Know your personal risk. Certain factors, genetic and circumstantial, can predispose you to develop depression. These include, but aren't limited to, previous depression, major life events (i.e., birth, death, marriage), family history, chronic illness, low self-esteem, hormonal changes, anxiety or even medications. Recognizing your own risk for depression can be helpful in creating specific strategies that may work best for you. Remember, seek professional medical advice if you are concerned about your well-being.

Customize an activities "toolbox". Create your kit with items and processes proven to lift your spirits. Consider:

- Items to creatively express yourself, like adult colouring books, paints, notebooks, journals and pens
- A list of activities you enjoy, things you like about yourself or affirmations
- Inspiring quotes
- Relaxing or "feel good" music or a favourite book

Positive thinking and mindfulness

This dynamic duo help to minimize anxiety and depression and warrant special mention for their impressive ability to re-energize the mind and body.

**"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."
~ Winston Churchill**

Looking on the bright side is a powerful mindset. Simply put, optimism can be thought of as reacting to problems with a sense of confidence and high personal ability. Optimists see the temporality and limited scope of the challenges ahead.⁷

Why cultivate positive thinking?

The benefits of optimism are well documented and many. Among them:

- Improved immune system
- Prevention of chronic disease
- Protection against depression and coronary heart disease
- Increased longevity
- Better sleep quality
- Higher overall life satisfaction
- Improved self-esteem
- Increased ability to cope with challenging news or circumstances.

In fact, beyond the obvious emotional and mental benefits, optimism may be one of the most important predictors of physical health.⁶

We can actually be happier people. We can suffer less if we take responsibility for our own mind.⁷

Mindfulness is a growing practice. Done right, it's best described as a practice anchoring yourself to the present moment³, and being consciously aware of your thoughts and emotions, mindfulness is a state characterized by introspection, openness, reflection and acceptance of oneself.⁶

Why cultivate mindfulness?

Like positive thinking, mindfulness is a valuable tool in lessening the symptoms of anxiety and depression while enriching your mental and physical health. Some of the most notable positive effects of a conscious mindfulness practice:

- An improved ability to self-regulate
- Increased self-esteem
- Higher life satisfaction
- Diminished stress
- Lowered anxiety
- More resiliency
- Better working memory
- Increased happiness
- Cultivation of compassion

Cultivating positive thinking and mindfulness

Fortunately, there are a multitude of ways to nurture optimism and mindfulness, so finding what works for you is well within reach. You can try journaling or deep breathing, yoga or meditation,

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or even mindfulness-based cognitive therapies or exercises. Give these three cost-effective and simple favourites a try:

Be consciously curious. Think outside the box! Seek out new, positive perspectives and different ways to apply your own optimistic view to the world. Try out different hobbies, dive into new subjects or causes...whatever piques your interest! Research shows that maintaining curiosity is directly correlated to living a satisfied, meaningful and engaged life.⁶

Train your brain. Neuroplasticity refers to the structural and functional changes in the brain related to experience⁶ – in essence, it's the "muscle memory" between your ears and it's eager to grasp all the conscious positive thinking and mindfulness practice you can throw at it. Every bit of attention to the present moment and connection to the positive helps grow your brain's ability to do it more easily and efficiently the next time.

Practice gratitude. A perfect blend of positive thinking and mindfulness, consciously practising gratitude is associated with a feeling of belonging, optimism and happiness, and decreases stress, depression, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed.^{3,5} A single gratitude-enhancing activity substantially increases happiness, so, start a gratitude journal, or set a daily reminder to take note of what you appreciate.

A new year can mark new beginnings, new behaviours and practices and, with a little forethought, a sustainable, healthy and energetic outlook. Happy new year!

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