

Lifestyle changes can be as effective as medication, counseling

Lifestyle changes—such as getting more exercise, time in nature, or helping others—can be as effective as drugs or counseling to treat an array of mental illnesses, according to the American Psychological Association.

Dr. Roger Walsh of the University of California, Irvine’s College of Medicine said helpful “therapeutic lifestyle changes,” or TLCs, include exercise, nutrition and diet, relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religious or spiritual involvement, spending time in nature, and service to others.

Many often unrecognized TLC benefits include these:

- Exercise not only helps people feel better by reducing anxiety and depression. It can help children do better in school, improve mental performance in adults, reduce age-related memory loss in the elderly, and increase new neuron formation in the brain.
- Diets rich in vegetables, fruits, and fish may help school performance in children, maintain mental functions in adults, as well as reduce symptoms in certain mental disorders.
- Spending time in nature can promote brain health and overall well-being.
- Good relationships can reduce health risks ranging from the common cold to strokes as well as multiple mental illnesses and can enhance well-being.
- Recreation and fun can reduce defensiveness and foster social skills.
- Relaxation and stress management can treat a variety of anxiety, insomnia, and panic disorders.
- Meditation can improve empathy, sensitivity and emotional stability, reduce stress and burnout, and enhance brain health and even brain size.
- Religious and spiritual involvement that focuses on love and forgiveness can reduce anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, and foster well-being.
- Contribution and service such as doing volunteer work can enhance joy and generosity by producing a “helper’s high.” Such activity also benefits both physical and mental health, and perhaps even extends lifespan.

