

10 FOUNDATIONS

Lifestyle Medicine for Mental Health & Well-being



Dr. Katie McNichol
@DrKatieMcNichol

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm your coach Dr. Katie McNichol.

I'm Dr. Katie McNichol a professional mental health counselor who specializes in something called Lifestyle Medicine. You may be wondering what the heck is Lifestyle Medicine?! Basically, it's an awareness of your daily environments, your day-to-day habits/patterns and what you do/don't do or the actions you take that influence your mental health and well-being. Your everyday life impacts your mental health. Who you hang out with, where you go and what you allow into your life has influence.



It sounds simple, but we often take for granted that maybe we are struggling with our mental health not just because of our emotions or thoughts, but also because of how we are living our daily lives. I truly believe that a less cluttered life can be a catalyst for positive change, and I'm eager to help others find the peace and contentment that comes with simple living.

Let's consider a few lifestyle factors that might be impacting you more than you think. Take an honest inventory as you read through the lists and see if any of them resonate with you...

Living Conditions

- Sedentary
- Cluttered
- Fast-paced
- Stressed out
- Burned out
- Overextended
- Just plain bored
- Consuming “junk food” media = music & content that is depressing, violent, gory, overly sexual or destructive

Behaviors

- Over/undereating
- Consuming too much alcohol, cannabis or other medications
- Over/under sleeping
- Sitting all day
- Chugging caffeine
- Eating in the car
- No quality time with people we love
- No rest
- No fun
- Don't know how to relax or slow down

Habits

- No movement, exercise or activity
- Poor diet
- Eating every meal out
- Prepackaged food, no real cooking
- No routine or structure in your day
- No time for reflection
- Poor stress management
- Poor emotional coping
- Planting your booty in front of a screen the second you get home
- Trolling people online
- No creative outlet

These living conditions, behaviors and habits are just some of the choices we make that can influence your mental health and wellbeing.

If you read any of these and felt your intuition tapping you, that is a good thing! Take note and begin to create awareness around that choice. I've been a mental health counselor for over 15 years specializing in the unique needs of teen girls and young women. This has taught me SO much.



I have always believed if you could start new habits and behaviors young, it would set you up for success later. But remember... it's never too late! When I began my journey, I knew there was more to mental health than simply emotions and thoughts. I knew instinctively that diet, exercise, sleep and relationships played a big role. Over the years, I have helped young women navigate a variety of lifestyle factors that play a direct role in their mental wellness.

I have seen real change for a lot of clients when they paid more attention to what they were eating, digitally consuming, moving more, fixing their sleep schedule, learning stress management and healing relationship problems.

Stress management is one of those concepts we hear about a lot. I don't know about you but I had a hard time understanding how the heck was I supposed to manage my stress?!



"Mental Health is Health"

I would go to the doctor and they would tell me my cortisol levels were out of control or that my hormones were out of balance and I had to figure out how to manage my stress better. Now, I am a Type-A personality and a recovering perfectionist which makes for a pretty nasty combination when trying to relax and deal with stress. It took a lot of trial and error to understand what stress management looks like for me. Stress management is unique to each person and requires a lot of experimenting. You will learn that at the core of Lifestyle Medicine is stress medicine. I have broken it down into different elements such as relaxation, fun and oddly serving others.

I encourage all of my clients to treat their mental health journey as one giant science experiment. When you look at it as trial/error and testing, it takes some of the pressure off. You're learning more about yourself along that journey. This is a *growth* mindset. It allows you to experiment with ideas to see what works for you. You will also learn from any mistakes. We get stuck when we believe there is only one way. Mistakes can be the greatest learning tool.

I am excited to share with you the foundations of mental health and Lifestyle Medicine. I hope it inspires you to find alternative ways to support your mental health.

Therapy is amazing! Obviously, I'm very passionate about it, but some people struggle to find a good therapist and it can be expensive. If you are in therapy you know that the real work is done outside the therapy office. We all need to work on our mental health. *Mental health is health*. There are many many things that you can do to shift your own well-being to improve your mental health.

There's a sign in my office that says **a life worth living...** I use this motto with clients, helping them understand the power they have to *create* a life truly worth living. Yes, we have tons of adversity in life, but also there are many things we do or don't do that make the journey better or worse.

You will learn that your physical health is intimately connected to your mental health. Your relational health is intimately connected to your mental health. Your spiritual health is intimately connected to your mental health. And your emotional health is intimately connected to your mental health.

I wish there was a magic pill for mental health, but sadly there isn't. Yes medication can be useful and therapy too, however often we overlook some of the obvious, everyday actions that would also be helpful. For example, maybe you are in an unhealthy romantic relationship and part of you instinctively knows it's the problem. If you would have the courage to walk away you may find that 95% of your anxiety goes away. I have literally experienced this myself and helped many clients walk through this hard decision. Or maybe you haven't taken a break in a long time. You have no clue how to unwind. Learning what helps you might change your life for the good.



In the following pages you will find an overview of **the 10 foundations of lifestyle medicine** for mental health:

- Sleep
- Fitness
- Nutrition
- Substance Use
- Time in Nature
- Fun
- Relaxation
- Serving Others
- Social
- Faith

My hope is to give you some ideas and inspiration as you look at how you are living your everyday life and then consider how those choices are ultimately impacting your mental health.

Santé!!

Cheers to good health

Dr. Katie McMichol

Sleep

A good laugh and a long sleep are the two best cures ~ irish proverb

After years of working with clients, sleep is one of the most critical factors for mental health. It is the cornerstone of wellness. When I do assessments with clients it's the first thing I ask. I want to know how someone is sleeping and you would be surprised at how often they are not sleeping well.

Depression by nature puts people into a lethargic state which will typically cause oversleeping. Anxiety pumps adrenaline through our system and keeps us on high alert so the result of someone highly anxious is typically poor sleep. So when I talk to clients I ask questions...

- How difficult is it to fall asleep?
- What time do you typically go to bed?
- How many hours at night do you sleep?
- Do you wake up or toss and turn in the middle of the night?
- Do you dread waking up?
- Do you feel rested?

As we explore these questions, we get a clearer picture on what might be happening. Your first step is to always do a sleep assessment.

I actually like to use trackers for this, but it's not necessary. If you do have one like Fitbit, Apple Watch, Oura or Whoop then definitely use them so that you can get a clearer picture as to what might be happening in your sleep. I personally struggle with restorative sleep. I usually don't have a problem falling asleep and truly staying asleep, but my restorative numbers are a problem. I also have some heart disease issues that I continuously work on with professionals. These things all impact my sleep, which ultimately can impact my mental health and well-being for the day.

Did you automatically have a negative reaction when I said how was your sleep? You may already know that your sleep is terrible. I've worked with clients who have completely reversed their sleep schedule going to bed at 5am and waking at 3pm. Typically this is on summer breaks, but it can be a nightmare to try to get their circadian rhythm back in alignment. Not impossible, but definitely a challenge!

Good sleep hygiene is crucial to a good night's sleep. Here are the 5 R's of good sleep hygiene...



Room Temperature. This is often a battle at home, but the reality is our best sleep is between 65 and 72°. Every person is a little different, but we need the cold to get our core body temperatures lowered. That gives us the most restorative, restful sleep. I've met people who have put in separate AC units just to keep their room cool enough without the expense of cooling the entire house. Fans can help and there are now all sorts of ways to alter your bed (some are very pricey but effective). For sleep, cooler is better.

Reducing or eliminating caffeine. Even kiddos are affected by this. If you're drinking tons of coffee, energy drinks, or other things filled with sugar and caffeine you are not going to sleep well. Again, there's always exceptions to the rule, but in general caffeine consumption is a bigger problem than we think.

It can take 10+ hours to get it out of your body. Stopping by lunch isn't always the most helpful. Some people are much more sensitive to caffeine. Oh and BTW... it really negatively impacts anxiety. If you have anxiety and you drink a lot of caffeine I would bet that it is also affecting your sleep.

Rumination. This is probably the #1 complaint that I hear. You are ready for bed and yet the second you lay down your mind is just going going going. This can be from overstimulation, a health issue like a hormone imbalance or Thyroid problem and/or anxiety. I encourage clients to keep a notebook (not the phone) by the bed to write down any distressing thoughts that might come up or any upcoming task they keep thinking about. The brain can get hung up on things we don't want to forget. Writing it down helps.

People who are highly anxious, will have difficulty with rumination. For many, their thoughts are constantly racing or they are dealing with an intrusive thought that doesn't seem to go away. What I have discovered that is true for most suffering, is an underlying negative belief about themselves. It could be a body image issue, relationship conflict or a general negative belief such as "not good enough", "never be successful", "I will fail", "people don't really like me", "people are judging me", etc...



It may be the type of thing that it's so bad that you do need some medication and help. There's no shame in it. Everybody's hardwired differently. When you've done all of the things that you can do, it's OK to ask for help because you may have body chemistry that is off. If you have chronic negative beliefs it will take a therapist to help you work through them so you have more peace.

Restrict your bed for sleep only. I really tell my clients "*do not do anything in bed but sleep*". That can be a challenge for teens and young adults, but I encourage creating a separate area of their home or area in their room to watch TV, be on the phone, do homework or read. The brain is like a puppy, and it has to be trained on what it's doing.

None of this happens overnight and will take time but your brain should correlate you getting in bed with going to sleep. If you are eating, talking, hanging out and basically doing everything in bed, then your brain will not be conditioned to sleep. The goal is to train your brain that when it gets into bed you are going to sleep. It needs to create an association between the bed and sleep.

Replace technology with a night-time routine that promotes sleep. And I know it's really hard... I have to challenge myself to not use the phone at night. I love me some TikTok, but it will absolutely stimulate my brain. I actually have a rule at home that I don't do any type of work past 8 PM. If my creative brain gets turned on, it will be very difficult for me to try to go to sleep.

Blue light is a legit thing and affects us all in different ways. Some are more sensitive than others. A good practice is to use the light settings on your phone to filter the light or blue blocking glasses. The best is to keep your face out of a screen at night. Blue light can be very stimulating so playing games, watching TikTok or YouTube can all keep you up late. You'll start to realize how dependent on technology you really are when you try to limit its use at night.

You're probably wondering what the heck are you going to do?! Listening to soothing music, doing your skin care or hair care, talking to a friend or partner, picking up around your house or light cleaning, etc.... Find relaxation practices that work for you.

The 1st foundation of lifestyle medicine and mental health is sleep. We do not value sleep in our culture. Many things will work against you, however when you make sleep a priority you will see results.

Fitness

True enjoyment is from the activity of the mind and exercise of the body; the two are ever united – Wilhelm Von Humboldt

It can be really hard to choose an order for these foundations because they're all equally important, but I think a natural influence of sleep is fitness. I am finding that more and more of my clients are sedentary. They sit in classes all day, then go home and sit in front of computers, laptops, phones, and screens. Some work all day and then go home to "veg" on the couch, go to bed and repeat the next day. Unless they play a sport, they are not getting much movement and they are suffering mentally because of it.

In fact 40% of Americans say they never exercise. That is a problem. I prefer the term movement to exercise because moving around your house or walking in a mall is better than sitting.

I think a major misconception about fitness is that you have to do some crazy CrossFit workout to have health benefits. That type of exercise is helpful for some, but not everyone. The goal should be to move. Get off your booty and do something. At a minimum go for a walk. Walking outside is one of the best things you can do for your mental health. Fitness doesn't have to be a negative thing. We often overlook how important our level of fitness is to our physical and mental health. We can't be sedentary and expect to "feel" good.

Ultimately you want to find movement that you enjoy. It could be a sport. Things like tennis, golf, biking, pickleball are all activities that people do throughout their lifetime. Running if your body is in OK enough shape, is excellent because it causes you to get a rhythmic breathing pattern. This helps especially with anxiety. Swimming is so underrated, but the deep breath work involved in swimming really helps with anxiety and has a low impact on your joints.

Pretty much all of my clients that have more severe mental health issues, particularly depression, struggle to get any kind of movement. And I get it because most likely you're never going to *feel* like doing it.

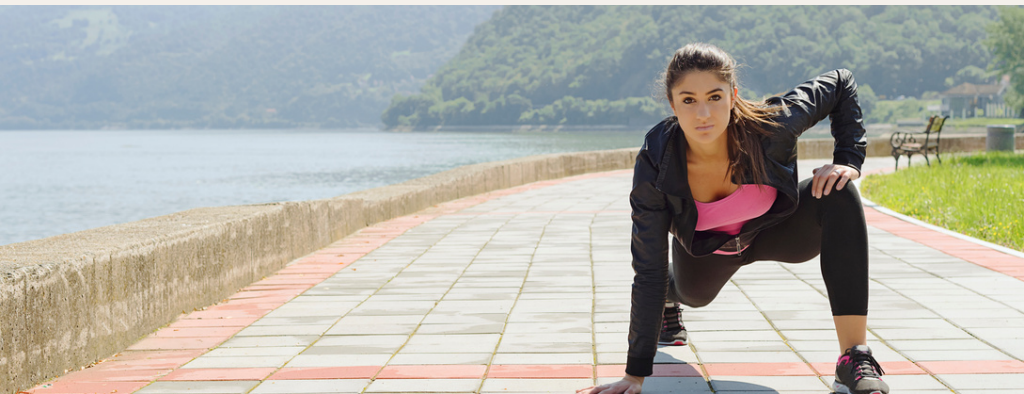
That is a myth. If you haven't read Mel Robbins book "*the five second rule*" I encourage you to grab it if you struggle with motivation. She explains that motivation is a myth and as a professional therapist, I would absolutely agree with that statement.

Ultimately, you have to develop discipline which people don't like to do. Her book gives some practical advice on learning to do despite how you feel.



Eventually, it gets easier but you may never necessarily like it. I used to run half marathons before my hips couldn't take it anymore and I can tell you in the 10 years that I ran, I never *wanted* to get up in the morning to run. I only did it because I had to. Training for the races gave me accountability. But I never ever *wanted* to get up at 5:30am. I didn't *feel* like getting up at 5:30am but I live in Florida and if I didn't want to melt, that was my option. I wanted the result that came from the sacrifice, but I was still never motivated to do it. I was disciplined. This came after repetition. Maybe you live in the cold weather and it can be a real challenge to get outside and move. Even if it's indoors it's fine. The key is moving... just move!

The 2nd foundation of lifestyle, medicine and mental health is Fitness. Find a way to move every day. Try new things. Take a class, get an accountability partner, and find someone who is willing to move with you. I'm a walker at this point in my life and I love quality time with friends. I spend time with friends every week catching up and walking. Easy, simple and free.



Time in Nature

There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story ~ Linda Hogan

This is one of my favorite foundations and highly underrated. Most people automatically assume this means “go camping”, however that is not it at all. This is simply about being outside, in the sunshine, breathing fresh air and being stimulated by creation. It could be sitting on your porch watching birds, walking your neighborhood or park or planning a killer trip that involves tons of hiking. Whatever you choose, take time to get to know your community and find activities that you can do outside.



I live in Florida... the sunshine state... so I try to get outside as much as I can. Combining a walk in nature as part of movement is typically very accessible and a huge mood booster. Investigate botanical gardens in your community. Putting more plants in your house can also add to your mood. Being in nature has an inherent calming effect. There is lots of evidence to suggest that spending about 30 min per day outside can reduce anxiety and depression.

Maybe it's time to take up gardening, map out some state parks to visit, grab a book and find a quiet spot, practice meditation, or put together a picnic. Getting outside, slowing down and taking time to pause your life may be exactly what you need to improve your mental wellness. When is the last time you went to the beach? The mountains? Your local park? We can make up a ton of excuses as to why we don't go outside, but the reality is that it could be exactly what you need to improve your mood. Sunshine alone boosts your vitamin D and melatonin production which directly impacts serotonin. Instant mood booster.



The 3rd foundation of lifestyle medicine for mental health is spending time in nature. Start weekly if you can't make daily time. You will see that the more time you get outdoors and explore, the more your body and mind will crave it. We came from the dust of the ground and God breathed life into us. Our souls are connected to the earth and you will feel that identity when you get outside and breathe in fresh air.

Nutrition

Food should be our medicine and our medicine should be our food ~ Hippocrates

It's hard to catch a break with nutrition these days. It seems like culture sends us a lot of conflicting messages. I do not promote any type of diet, but what I do promote is intuitive eating. This is learning how foods affect your body and learning to eat for health. Intuitive eating is becoming educated on your body's particular needs and learning how to have a healthy relationship with food. Too often people abuse food like any other substance and it impacts their mental health.

My nutrition journey started while watching Oprah one afternoon in college. I was a huge consumer of lemonade and sweet tea. My grandmother taught me how to brew tea and add 1 cup of sugar to it. It was delicious. Until I watched Oprah. She had a nutrition expert talking about consuming calories in our drinks. I already knew that pizza or cheese steaks would be high calorie, but had no clue that you could drink calories?! I ran to the fridge and checked the label on my lemonade... what? I was drinking so many extra calories a day and completely unaware. Now remember this is before the internet, social media, etc... We did not have access to information like we do now. That day I switched to water and for the most part, that is the majority of what I drink to this day. It totally changed my life for the better.

Since then I started to study nutrition. As a therapist I have taken several courses on nutrition and mental health. It's often an overlooked aspect of our mental health. We know that food brings comfort so that tells me that we instinctively know food affects mood. Think about the food you have eaten in the last 24 hours. Did your mood or emotions impact what you chose to eat? Most likely it did. We are conditioned to eat what we "feel like" eating. The problem is that most of the time we "feel like" eating cheeseburgers with fries, NOT roasted vegetables or fish.

Think of your body like a car. You wouldn't put sugar in your tank instead of gasoline and expect the car to run properly. Your body is the same way. There are nutrients you need for your body and brain to function well. For instance, your brain alone uses about 20% of the calories you consume. Healthy brain function also requires Omega-3's found in healthy fat such as olive oil, salmon, nuts and avocados.

You have probably heard of antidepressants, but do you know what they actually do? The short version is they increase serotonin production in your body which is a critical neurotransmitter which carries messages between your brain and body. Every person produces serotonin, but for a host of reasons sometimes the body has a problem with its production. What you probably didn't know is that MOST of your serotonin is produced in your gut, not your brain.



Your gut is one of the most important mental health aspects of your body. Everything you eat goes through your gut. Your gut helps break it down and decide where the nutrients go. The problem is that if you are eating junk all the time, your gut can't break it down and ultimately you are not getting the nutrients you need for good mental health.

Taking care of your gut will positively affect your mental health. I encourage clients to meet with a naturopathic DR or primary care physician to make sure their vitamin and nutrient levels are stable and to make sure their gut health is where it needs to be. I ask a lot of questions about their gut and digestion and often I find clients have issues they didn't know were connected to the anxiety or depression they are experiencing.

I have worked with clients that were suffering with major depression due to a severe vitamin deficiency. It wasn't until they were hospitalized and had tests run that it was discovered. Vitamins and minerals matter. Almost everyone is deficient in magnesium. Magnesium alone helps with anxiety and depression symptoms and keeps you regular. I passionately believe that what we put into our bodies or don't will directly impact our mental health.

The 4th foundation of lifestyle medicine and mental health is nutrition. You may know that eating fruits, vegetables and lean meats is "healthy" but it is vital to your mental well-being. Food affects mood so I encourage you to pay attention to your mood and what you are consuming. What you eat has the power to heal.



Substance Use

Although no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending ~ Carl Bard

Ok don't shoot the messenger... but the substances you are using such as alcohol, cannabis, caffeine and/or other recreational drugs may have a significant effect on your mental health. No one likes to talk about this, but many people today are consuming these substances thinking it is harmless. The evidence is becoming clear that chronic, daily use of these substances is wrecking our health and our mental well-being.

Our culture is consumed with alcohol use. It's everywhere. You can't watch a show any more without the main characters drinking. We are marketed to constantly and normalizing the daily use of alcohol. But are we considering the consequences? Many people, if given the challenge to go 30 days without alcohol, simply can't or won't do it. Therapists previously used that as a barometer for substance abuse. If you could go 30 days with no drugs or alcohol then you most likely do not have an abuse or dependence problem.



If you struggle with anxiety and depression pay attention to your alcohol consumption. Many people are unaware of hangxiety. **Hangxiety** is the emotional effect after a night of drinking. In simplistic terms, 2 neurotransmitters – GABA (chill out) and Glutamate (amp up) are highly impacted. When you add alcohol to the mix, The GABA goes way up, and the glutamate goes way down which is partly why inhibitions get lowered and why alcohol is actually considered a depressant. The day after a night of drinking everything gets reversed... (for some people even just a low-key night) these chemicals get all out of whack and often the next day your GABA is way too low and your Glutamate is way too high leaving you with a “keyed-up”, “on edge” feeling after a night of drinking.

Ultimately you want to take an honest inventory of your relationship with alcohol.

- How does it truly affect you?
- How is it impacting your eating habits?
- How is it affecting your relationships?
- What do you notice about your behavior when you drink? The next day?
- What happens to your emotions?
- How does it affect you financially? Productivity at work?

I encourage you to get quiet and be honest with yourself when it comes to your relationship with alcohol. It's not a shame thing. It's about your mental health. If you are struggling emotionally and drinking all the time I would bet if you challenged yourself to stop drinking for a few weeks you would notice a difference in your mood. If you drink everyday, heavily (3+ drinks) it is not safe to just stop. Seek medical assistance to make sure someone is monitoring you. They can tell you how to taper off. Serious withdrawal symptoms include nausea, tremors, hallucinations or stroke.



Caffeine is another substance that we often don't think of as having any negative health benefits but just like any substance, it can be abused and/or cause negative side effects. I know... no one wants to give up their coffee. I was that person until I realized it was making me sick and causing more anxiety. There are real negative impacts.

It's highly addictive, can spike cortisol levels if taken on an empty stomach, can increase anxiety symptoms, can cause fatigue and dehydration, can make you very cranky and irritable. Many people who struggle with anxiety find that stopping caffeine has a significant impact on their physical symptoms of anxiety. I have had clients stop coffee and/or energy drinks and be stunned at how much better they feel. The jittery, keyed up feeling goes away.

I see more problems with energy drinks than any other caffeine source. These alone cause many ill side effects related to mental health, especially due to insomnia, anxiety and the crash/withdrawal.

Cannabis is an interesting story. There are some benefits to cannabis use but let's be clear... I am talking about medicinal cannabis that is dosed properly. And just like any other prescribed drug it can be abused. I am not talking about getting high. I work with youth so I am dealing with cannabis use frequently. Most believe it is harmless but that is a myth. It is true that there is no lethal dose (unlike all other substances), but there are still lots of physical, emotional and relational problems that can come from its use. Many of my clients who use weed are surprised to learn that they meet the criteria for something called Cannabis Use Disorder.

According to the DSM-5, (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) the criteria for CUD is defined as the use of cannabis for at least 1 year, either mild (2 to 3 symptoms present), moderate (4 to 5 symptoms present) or severe (6 or more symptoms present). The symptoms include:

- Difficulty constraining the use of cannabis- the drug is used in larger amounts and over a longer period than intended.
- Repeated failed attempts to discontinue or reduce the amount of cannabis that is used
- An inordinate amount of time is occupied acquiring, using, or recovering from the effects of cannabis. Your life starts to revolve around it... friends, activity, media, etc...
- Cravings or desires to use cannabis. This can include intrusive thoughts and images, and dreams about cannabis, or preoccupation with cannabis.
- Continued use of cannabis despite adverse consequences from its use, such as criminal charges, ultimatums of abandonment from spouse/partner/friends, and poor productivity.
- Other important activities in life, such as work, school, hygiene, and responsibility to family and friends are superseded by the desire to use cannabis.
- Cannabis is used in contexts that are potentially dangerous or hazardous, such as operating a motor vehicle.
- Use of cannabis continues despite awareness of physical or psychological problems attributed to use- e.g., loss of energy, loss of motivation or direction, chronic cough.
- Tolerance to Cannabis, as defined by progressively larger amounts of cannabis are needed to obtain the psychoactive effect experienced when first used, or, noticeably reduced effect of use of the same amount of cannabis
- Withdrawal, defined as the typical withdrawal syndrome associated with cannabis, or a similar substance is used to prevent withdrawal symptoms.



Maybe this isn't you but it could be a friend or family member. The point is that all substances can become a problem and have negative consequences on your mental health. It's important to know the signs so that you have control over your choices.

Other substances that are used that affect mental health could include psychedelics, opioids or benzodiazepines. These drugs can be prescribed or used in treatment for a variety of health issues, but that is not the same as the street use or abuse of these medications. I have clients that are given Ketamine (by a psychiatrist) for severe depression and find it helpful but that is NOT the same as street Ketamine. The street version of ANY medication (i.e Xanax or Adderall) is most likely NOT what you think. And again, just because something is prescribed doesn't mean it can't be abused. Talk to most people who have a pain pill addiction and it started when they were prescribed it after a medical procedure.

The 5th foundation of lifestyle medicine for mental health is substance use. If you find yourself struggling with the misuse of any of these substances it is important to ask for help. Often there are underlying mental and emotional issues. For example, ADHD is often correlated with cannabis use. Anxiety and/or depression are often underlying increased alcohol consumption. Learning new ways to cope without the substance will improve your well-being.

Fun

There's no fun in a perfect life. So take a risk. Take a chance. Go where the wind takes you. Have fun ~ Jenny C.

When I think of fun I think of laughter and adventure. I think of the curiosity of childhood, creativity and getting out of my comfort zone. It seems like in our culture today we have really forgotten the true meaning of fun and have totally forgotten how to have fun without alcohol or food. I get asked all the time "how do I have fun without drinking?!" It's a great question but a better question is "why do I need alcohol to have fun"?

The reality is that any event or activity that you go to or enjoy can be just as fun, probably more fun without a substance. On a deeper level if you are unable to enjoy life without a substance, including food than there is an emotional and/or thought problem going on. I would venture to say there is probably a fundamental relationship with yourself problem. It's always good to take a step back and question your why.

We need to have fun. A life that is too serious all the time is actually really bad for our health. Proverbs 17:22 tells us that laughter is good medicine. When is the last time you had a good belly laugh or cried from laughing? If it's been awhile I'd suggest you figure out who or what makes you laugh. I hope and pray you have some funny people in your life. They make life much more entertaining and bearable.

One of my brother's best friends is a stand up comedian who travels around the world making people laugh. His humor is clean and family friendly. Going to one of his shows and listening to the stories is one of my favorite "fun" activities.



Also, my family is hilarious. If I need a good laugh I just need to take my mom out shopping for the day and wait for the good stuff to emerge. I am guaranteed to cry laughing. Laughter is almost always involved with fun.

You can literally search *how to have fun* and a list of ideas pops up. The overall themes include:

- Laughter
- Adventure
- Spontaneous
- Be in the present moment
- Try new things
- Learn something new
- Creativity

Do not underestimate the power of having some fun. Yes there is a time and place to work, be productive and be serious but certainly not all the time.

The 6th foundation of lifestyle medicine and mental health is Fun. You can start this week. Schedule if you have to (but remember sometimes spontaneity is the most fun!)... just get started. Having fun will probably combine several of the foundations like social, time in nature, fitness, nutrition, faith or serving others.

Relaxation

Sometimes the most productive thing you can do is relax ~ Mark Black

Where are all my high productivity peeps?! I have met people over the years who absolutely resist and struggle with the idea of relaxation. Maybe even despise it. That is really sad because once you understand the value of relaxation you will learn it might be THE most productive thing you truly do.

I was one of those people. As Taylor Swift says "It's me, hi. I'm the problem, it's me" It has taken me a lifetime to figure out how to relax and what that looks like for me. I tried soooo many things until I found the daily, weekly and annual activities that really refresh my soul. Personally NOTHING has helped as much as practicing Sabbath. I'll talk more about that at a later time, but it is critical to figure out what works for you.

Relaxation can be a bubble bath, a cup of tea, watching a show, sitting on a porch, reading a book, baking, etc.. There are lots of activities to choose from when it comes to learning how to relax. However in the therapy world we have some additional, structured techniques that are highly effective in regulating your fight or flight response. People who are chronically over-stressed, over-whelmed and riddled with anxiety and worry will have an Autonomic Nervous System that needs help. This is much different then a time out and chill.

There are tons of books and courses you can find to learn the following techniques but here is a brief overview to get you started.

Diaphragmatic Breathing – This is a very basic one you can use anywhere and it truly helps. Problem is most people will not actually do it the proper way nor will they practice. Like everything we want quick fixes. A damaged fight or flight response will take time to heal.

There are several different ways to do this. So it is best to look it up and really learn the technique of choice. It is not simply breathing. It requires deep breaths you feel in your stomach to get the full benefit. In your nose and out your mouth, focused.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) – I used to think this was hocus-pocus until I took it seriously and tried it. Afterwards I felt like I had a massage. I felt almost drugged I was so calm. I encourage my clients to try this at home. Youtube has so many great videos and different lengths of time. Try a few and see which ones work best.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) – This is one of the best techniques however it does require taking some classes to learn how to do it. It's a mindfulness, meditative practice. It's not a cult. It's very practical stretches, breathing, meditations and awareness of your mind and body as it responds to stress. Many hospitals or other medical facilities offer free or paid classes. You can find classes on youtube and with certified practitioners.

The 7th foundation of lifestyle medicine and mental health is Relaxation. Learn your body and what works to quiet your mind and soul.

Serving Others

The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

This foundation is by far the most overlooked. Taking time out of your day, week or month to serve someone else is rarely associated with better mental health, but the reality is that some of the most well-adjusted, content people are the one who give to others. Yes, you can earn a living doing this. I am a professional therapist and I help young women everyday. I truly believe it is my highest calling and in 15 yrs I have never dreaded a day of "work". This is rare for a profession. Not all people in the helping world feel like this, but when you are helping in ways that really matter to your heart and calling you too will find a wellness within yourself that is unexpected. On the flip side you don't have to earn a living helping. MANY people serve their community and church, finding great fulfillment.

Community service is often given as a punishment to try and teach selfish people how to care for something or someone outside themselves. It only works for those who have the right attitude. Serving others is a heart issue. Truth is you can serve in your family. It's the best place to start. What a different world we would live in if we'd start there.

I work with college bound youth all the time who volunteer to get their hours for high school graduation and to put on their college resume. I encourage them to choose meaningful service, not just a resume filler.

People who are struggling with higher levels of anxiety or depression struggle to help others. Not because they don't want to but because the internal negative voices is so loud they can't get past it. I encourage them to try to find something they can do and start small. Just because we are struggling with mental health doesn't mean we can't help someone else. In fact in may be the thing that pulls us up and out of whatever episode we may be dealing with mentally.

It's easy to get stuck in your head and caught up in everyday life without thinking about others. Again, I encourage you to serve in your existing community. Sure it's great to go serve in a soup kitchen or play with kids in a group home, but when is the last time you were helpful to your parent or reached out to your sibling to see if they needed anything? Your neighbor or grandparent? Lots of older relatives need our help. You may discover real purpose in driving your aunt to her Dr. Appt or cooking meals for a neighbor. Heck I remember my grandmother being so thrilled when I call her each week just to talk about life and faith. It was uplifting to her but maybe even more to me. I will cherish those calls.





There are a ridiculous amount of mental health benefits from serving or helping others:

- a sense of meaning, purpose or belonging
- healthy distraction from your problems
- social support and connection
- more physical activity
- a new perspective
- increased confidence and self-esteem
- a literal neurochemical boost of dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin
- lowered blood pressure
- stress reduction
- boosts mood

I don't know about you, but that is a pretty solid list of mental health benefits that doesn't require seeing a Dr, taking a pill or costing you money outside of your time. To me that seems pretty worth giving it a try.

The 8th foundation of lifestyle medicine is Serving Others. I can't stress enough how much this is a game changer. Volunteers are needed in almost every non-profit. Just ask. Find something of interest and go from there. Commit to a season, not forever. Just think, your life might change forever and you might just change someone else's in the process.

Social

A good companion shortens the longest road ~ Turkish Proverb

In all my years as a therapist, I have noticed that relationships cause the greatest distress for people. Family, friendships, coworkers, classmates, and most importantly...romantic. Show me who you hang out with and I will tell you the level of your mental health and well-being.

Take a step back and do an honest inventory of your core relationships. If you are having conflict or problems with any of them, most likely you are experiencing greater amounts of anxiety, depression, stress, frustration, or a range of other emotions. People have the greatest impact on our emotions and mental health.

I have yet to encounter someone in a dysfunctional relationship, who is relaxed, peaceful, and happy. Romantic relationships are some of the worst offenders. I have observed young women with significant health issues, get out of toxic dating relationships, only to find most, if not all of their symptoms go away. I have also observed many who are doing well get into a dating relationship only to find themselves stressed, overwhelmed, not sleeping, not eating, and watching all areas of their life suffer.



I have a doctorate in marriage and family therapy and we are taught that in a family system, the parental relationship sets the tone for the family. I work specifically with middle school, high school, and college girls. Just like any organization, it's usually a top down problem. Rarely do I find a young woman who is struggling with her mental health in a family that is not having some level of marital/parent relationship problems. Relationships are the core of who we are. We were designed for connection so when there are problems and disconnection, it's impossible to not have mental health affects. Your social life matters.

Lifestyle Medicine recognizes how significant relationships are to our physical and mental well-being. Many of our common health issues today are due to stress related circumstances. Typically our number one stressor is a relationship.

The opposite is also true. When we are in healthy, constructive, flourishing relationships, the rest of our life tends to follow. Think of how many times you have encountered someone in a romantic relationship that is going really well. Often we comment on how great they look... they're glowing, they seem generally happy. How many times have you observed a friend or family member who is in a toxic, dysfunctional relationship appear like they are physically suffering. Suffering is a good word... Typically when we're suffering, we are trying to power through something that is highly unpleasant and just not working for us. Most of the time we are suffering unnecessarily.

Relationships will always have their challenges. The keys (3 C's) to healthy relationships are communication, connection and confrontation.

We often think **confrontation** must be aggressive, mean or scary, but really it's asking hard questions. Confrontation causes a lot of anxiety for people. We are usually fearful of the possible consequences of confrontation... abandonment, rejection, emotions, disappointment, etc... but the reality is that leaving key issues unaddressed just creates bigger headaches. You can learn how to confront others in ways that are helpful, not harmful. It is a skill and it takes understanding what truly needs to be confronted. Confrontation is a key skill in communication.

Communication is at the core of relationships. You can't even confront somebody if you don't know how to communicate. Often I have clients who will tell me everything that they're thinking and feeling, and the goal is to translate that into the real world. Trust is a huge factor. I have noticed that many people do not trust anymore. And it's understandable. We live in a world that gives up on people and relationships quickly. Onto the next. Therapeutic relationships can teach a person how to be vulnerable and ultimately trust.

Almost every parent that comes to me wants to know how to improve communication with their daughter and almost every client wants to work on communication with someone... family, friends and romantic relationships. Technology has many benefits, but my observation is that it has been a huge factor in people's inability to communicate. Texting is not the best way to talk to someone, especially about something important. Hiding behind screens diminishes our humanity and makes it easier to be harsh, rude and mean. I often work on basic communication skills with clients... eye contact, speaking up, not interrupting, slowing down, etc...



"Texting is a brilliant way to miscommunicate how you feel and misinterpret what other people mean"

Many don't know how to build true **connections** anymore. In a world that gives us so many ways to connect we are actually feeling more disconnected than ever. We are so focused on our phones and technology that we don't even know how to have a face-to-face conversation with someone. One of the best aspects of therapy in today's world is face-to-face interaction. Clients learn how to talk.

I love this quote "texting is a brilliant way to miscommunicate how you feel and misinterpret what other people mean". I am not a fan of text therapy or any real conversation via text. You will waste time trying to accurately communicate what could be said in a 2 min conversation. Technology can be great when used properly, but true human connection comes from direct human interaction. I am often helping clients learn how to assert themselves and speak up. One of the best ways to reduce stress in your life is to learn how to build healthy relationships.

The 9th foundation for lifestyle medicine for mental health is Social. You need people. You are influenced by the people closest to you. If you are struggling with your mental health, it is critical to look at who you are surrounding yourself with and how that might be impacting your life.

Faith

But when I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous ~ Maya Angelou

Faith seems to be a controversial issue in our culture and yet the science tells us that people who have active faith in God (participate, believe and engage in a relationship with God) tend to have lower rates of depression symptoms. Believe in God is found to help with emotional suffering. Now none of this means if you believe in God you will magically get rid of depression or other mental issues but it does offer hope and strength to deal with the issues.

The National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) shares that religion and spirituality offer MANY mental health benefits including:

- hope
- community
- rituals, structure, predictability
- life guidelines
- gratitude
- compassion
- sense of belonging
- purpose
- support
- personal growth

In my world I don't tell clients what to believe. Relationship with God is a very personal experience. What I do encourage is to 1) don't stop seeking and 2) learn who God really is not just through what other people have told you. I encounter girls all the time who have been deeply wounded by the church, more accurately PEOPLE in the church. It distorts their perspective, understandably. They often feel that if they believe in God then they are agreeing with everything they have been taught or what was done to them. That is a lie.



I often explain a relationship with God like this... Say your friend Jennifer is really close with Rick. She tells you all about Rick to the point that you have listened so much that you believe you know Rick. But in reality, you have never met Rick. You only know Jennifer's relationship. Until you meet Rick and get to know him you really don't know him. You know of him. Your relationship with Rick might look different. You may learn new things about him from Jennifer but it's really up to you to build relationship with him. That personal time directly with him will teach you the most. Rick is solid and doesn't waver on who he is but he may interact with each person he meets a little different so the key is to meet him yourself and discover who he really is.

When clients are seeking and genuinely wanting to know more, I encourage them to just focus on who God is. Learn his identity. Learn his attributes. Just focus on that and so much understanding will follow. Keep it simple. Stop with all the rules and just build relationship. The 10th foundation for lifestyle medicine and mental health is Faith. Matthew 6:33 tells us, "But **seek first the kingdom of God** and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"

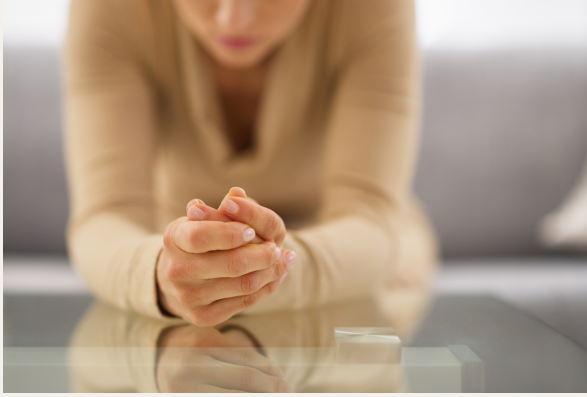
CONCLUSION

Final Thoughts

Set peace of mind as your highest goal, and organize your life around it ~ Brian Tracy

The American Psychological Association publishes annual research on stress in America. According to its most recent review finances, legal, political and crime leave many feeling significant stress. In fact 27% of the US population is reporting stress so high they can't function. The APA (2022) states, "results from this poll revealed that when adults are feeling stressed, around three-quarters (76%) reported there are aspects of their lives that were negatively impacted. Specifically, their mental health (36%), eating habits (33%), physical health (32%), and interest in hobbies/activities (30%) were among the top aspects negatively impacted by stress".

It's no wonder we have so many physical and mental health issues. Our lifestyle is often centered around stress. Stress touches every aspect of our lives. If you really look at the foundations of lifestyle medicine for mental health, you'll notice that all of them are designed to help with stress management. Stress will always be a factor in our lives and some stress can be a good thing. It can keep us moving forward. However, most of us are living a stress filled life that we can do something about with a few tweaks. Simplifying your life is one of the greatest mental gifts you can give yourself. The more physical clutter, emotional clutter and task clutter, the greater the stress.



Sometimes it means a hard decision for the season of life you are in. For example, financial stress is widespread. It may require a radical shift in your lifestyle to find financial freedom. It's worth it. Maybe you're finishing up your academic career and you just can't say yes to everything because you need to finish the project, test or class. People might be upset but it's just the season.

Change is a natural part of life and something all of us have to face. Your body reacts to change through physical and mental responses. The result of facing change is typically stress. Stress management is learning to use a variety of coping skills to handle the changes of life better. Life is full of adversity and challenge. How you respond to the adversity, challenge and change will depend on your stress management skills.

Stress management is unique to each person. It takes trial/error, time and consistency. Pretty much nothing instantly relieves stress. We want instant, but that's not how it works. Sure, you could do 4 shots of tequila when you're stressed and for a few minutes you will feel better until that turns into literally a bigger headache and doesn't actually solve the problem = more stress. True stress management requires a change in *lifestyle*, which means implementing new habits and behaviors, as well as adjustments to your environment to reduce, eliminate and/or manage stress.

Stress management is a practice that you develop based on your needs. What works for you may not work for somebody else. We are not to look at other people as comparison, but inspiration. Many of our common health issues today are rooted in stress. The body is sensitive to all kinds of stress. Managing stress requires mind, body and spirit.

A quick Google search of the top stress management tips tells me that lifestyle medicine is EVERYTHING...

- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including those on social media
- Take care of yourself
- Take care of your body
- Make time to unwind
- Talk to others
- Connect with your community- or faith-based organizations
- Avoid drugs and alcohol
- Recognize when you need more help

Now, my hope is not to stress you out more as you reflect on the stress in your life. Remember some stress is helpful and necessary. If we let stress go without paying attention to our personal stress threshold we risk many illnesses, weakened immune systems, poor mental health and loss of important relationships and roles.

Everyone needs to learn their **stress threshold**. This is the amount of stress you can reasonably withstand. It will vary for everyone and it can be improved with work. Comparing yours to others just adds more stress so keep the focus on yourself. Your stress threshold will teach you the early signs of overload and burnout. Learn to listen to your body. It is one of your greatest indicators of stress. Often your body will speak before your mind registers. By then it is often too late and a lot more work is involved.

We are emotional beings. Some of us more than others, but we are ALL emotional to a degree. This makes us beautiful in so many ways and one of the true ways we connect to others. Our mental health is often judged by our emotional health, but that can be highly misunderstood. Emotions often drive our impulses and actions which can be dangerous.

When I work with a client I am always assessing their lifestyle not just for what is going wrong, but what might be going right. Often my clients are unaware that how they live their everyday life and who they surround themselves with is impacting their mental health at the level it is.

Mental health is finally getting some credit and we are just beginning to understand the intricacies of the brain. Several years ago we didn't understand or appreciate how much diet and exercise play a role in our physical health let alone our mental health. Most likely you have had a relationship at some point that created a lot of anxious energy for you. It could be a parent, friend, professor, romantic partner or co-worker. Usually it's not until we get away from that person that we truly see the negative impact that person was having on our mental health.

If you care about your mental health and genuinely want to learn ways that specifically help you, than this is the place for you.

Welcome!

I am happy to help guide you and inspire you to advocate for yourself when it comes to mental health. In this community you will find others who are looking to prevent, help and maintain their well-being. There is no judgement here. Only encouragement. Maybe some hard truths, but always wrapped in love and kindness.

I hope to introduce you to **therapeutic lifestyle changes** (TLCs) that add up to real change for you. Remember there is no perfect. You just want to experiment and keep moving forward.

There is a Japanese philosophy that I LOVE called Kaizen... ongoing, continuous, incremental changes that add up and move you forward. I use this philosophy in Lifestyle Medicine because trying to take big, giant leaps can be overwhelming. Sometimes it is necessary to make a radical change and I am all for it, but often it's the smaller, day-by-day, consistent tweaks that do the best and most sustainable good. I teach clients how to create awareness and then start moving forward.

Thank you for taking the time to get introduced to this new concept. It's your first step in making real change. Remember, you can't change what you don't know

Wellness, I came to realize, will not happen by accident. It must be a daily practice, especially for those of us who are more susceptible to the oppressiveness of the world
~ Jenna Wortham

