

# stress reduction



## PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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# introduction

**A**s a parent, you can be guaranteed a certain amount of stress. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you experience even greater stress sometimes. This is because you must deal with managing your psychiatric disability while you are parenting. You might have to juggle child care so you can attend to treatment or manage the symptoms of your psychiatric disability, such as feeling low energy or hearing voices, while being responsive to your children's needs.

It is imperative that you take care of yourself both physically and emotionally so you can reduce the amount of stress in your life and ultimately be a better parent. While it may sometimes be a challenge to focus on physical health when dealing with a psychiatric disability, it is very important to do so. Taking care of your physical health can actually make your psychiatric disability easier to manage by preventing the stress of physical problems, which can contribute to episodes of your psychiatric disability. In addition, reducing stress and feeling physically well will make for a much more enjoyable parenting experience.

This module will focus on maintaining your physical health and wellness. We will discuss how good nutrition, exercise and healthy sleep habits will positively affect your physical wellness and lower your stress. Other aspects of maintaining your physical health, such as making regular doctor visits and handling medication issues, will also be discussed.



# nutrition and diet

**W**hile genetics and environment are thought to play the most important roles in the development of mental health difficulties, your diet may also have an enormous impact on your emotional wellness.<sup>1</sup> The food you eat has an impact on your mood, your sleep habits, your energy, and the amount of stress you feel.<sup>2</sup> This is because food contains complex nutrients, such as proteins, fats and carbohydrates, in addition to vitamins and minerals. All of these nutrients affect the various chemicals in the brain.<sup>3</sup> As one nutrition scientist noted, “The new research shows that the effect of food can be direct on the brain, and that it can be directly related to mood and behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to psychiatric disabilities, research tends to focus on how the brain is affected by nutritional deficiencies.<sup>5</sup> One common example is that people with psychiatric disabilities often have lower levels of the essential fatty acid omega-3. Omega-3 is often found in fish such as salmon or trout. Evidence seems to show that these fish oils prevent and treat depression much like common anti-depressant medication, by increasing serotonin levels in the brain.<sup>6</sup> One study involving people diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia showed that supplementing diets with omega-3 fatty acids improved symptoms in up to 64% of patients.<sup>7</sup> While more research on omega-3 fatty acids still needs to be done, eating a diet rich in omega-3 is likely to benefit you if you have a psychiatric disability.<sup>8</sup>

## Other recommendations for healthy eating include:<sup>9</sup>

- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables (4 to 5 portions a day).
- Consume carbohydrates that offer greater nutritional value, such as whole grain bread, whole wheat pasta and brown rice.
- Proteins (fish, lean meat, cheese, eggs and nuts), calcium (broccoli and dairy products, such as milk) and fats (unsaturated) are all important to consume daily.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol because these substances cause the body to lose nutrients.
- Take vitamin and mineral supplements, but only after consulting with your doctor.



# exercise

## It is not known why exercise helps reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety, but some theories are that exercise:

- Releases neurotransmitters and endorphins (substances that affect the brain in positive ways).
- Helps provide a distraction from life's problems.
- Can improve a person's mood by increasing social interaction.
- Can increase self-esteem and confidence because body image and stamina are improved.<sup>15</sup>

## So how do you start an exercise plan and stay motivated?

- The first step is to talk to your doctor and get a physical so you know the types of exercise that are safe for you.
- Next, you should decide what kind of exercise is best for you to do. Think about what you enjoy doing because those are the activities you are most likely to follow through on. Think about what time of day is best for you to exercise. Remember that there are a lot of options for activities, such as exercise classes at a gym, swimming at a local pool, gardening, using home fitness equipment, or going on walks with your children. Try different activities until you find one you enjoy.<sup>16</sup>
- Start slowly and break up exercise activities. Remember that when you begin your exercise program, you should start by exercising for shorter intervals and gradually work your way up to longer, more strenuous periods of activity. Even after you have built up some stamina, you can still break up your periods of exercise if you want to. Three 15-minute walks are just as good as one 45-minute walk.<sup>17</sup>
- Find a friend to exercise with, because exercising with other people can help you stay motivated. In addition, it reduces the social isolation you might sometimes feel.<sup>18</sup>
- Get more physical activity in small ways. Add physical activity to your everyday routine. For instance, park farther from the store than you otherwise would, and take the stairs instead of the elevator.<sup>19</sup>



**L**ike nutrition, exercise is an important component to staying healthy both physically and mentally. Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American College of Sports Medicine state that every adult in North America should exercise 30 minutes on most days of the week, preferably every day.<sup>10</sup> Exercise has been proven to prevent and treat many types of physical illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and osteoporosis, and has been known to help in dealing with conditions such as menopause and nicotine abstinence.<sup>11</sup>

Studies have also consistently shown that people with depression and anxiety benefit from routine exercise.<sup>12</sup> One study from the United Kingdom showed that 83% of people with psychiatric disabilities surveyed stated that exercise put them in a better mood and helped reduce their stress.<sup>13</sup> Other studies have shown that “moderate aerobic workouts, done three to five times weekly, cut mild to moderate depression symptoms nearly in half.”<sup>14</sup>

# sleep

**O**n average, people need approximately eight hours of sleep a night. A recent poll conducted in America revealed that almost 1 in 5 people get only about six hours of sleep per night.<sup>20</sup> In order to reduce the stress you feel as a parent with a psychiatric disability, it is critical that you try to sleep at least eight hours per night as often as possible.

**This poll also found that nearly 7 in 10 people experience sleep problems.<sup>21</sup> Sleep problems can include:<sup>22</sup>**

- Snoring and sleep apnea — reawakening during the night because of obstructed breathing.
- Insomnia — the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep.
- Hypersomnia — sleeping too much.
- Parasomnias — for instance, sleepwalking, sleep terrors, and sleep eating.
- Sleep paralysis — during the transition from sleep to waking, the person may find that his or her body seems paralyzed.

- Circadian rhythm disorders — the natural body clock gets out of sync.
- Narcolepsy — excessive daytime sleepiness.

While the connection between mental health and sleep is not entirely clear, sleep disorders such as those listed above (especially insomnia) have been commonly associated with conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and drug and alcohol use.<sup>23</sup> For example, people with depression often experience insomnia. This lack of sleep inevitably exacerbates the symptoms of their depression. This negative interaction between the sleep disorder and the depression can be alleviated only by taking proactive steps to follow healthy sleep habits.

No matter what kind of psychiatric disability you have been diagnosed with, it is important to practice healthy sleep habits in order to reduce your stress. Here are some healthy sleep habits you can try:<sup>24</sup>

- Develop a consistent sleep pattern. Go to sleep at the same time every night, and wake up at the same time every day.
- Keep your sleep environment quiet, dark, cool, and comfortable.
- Do not use your bedroom for doing work, reading, or watching TV. Use it only for sleep and sex.
- Don't nap because this can interfere with your sleep cycle.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid eating or drinking right before bedtime — so if you go to bed at 10 p.m., plan to stop eating at 8 p.m.
  - Follow an exercise routine (though you should try to exercise early in the day because exercising before bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep).
  - If you have been unable to sleep for 15 minutes, get up and try a quiet activity for 15 minutes.



# choosing a primary care provider (pcp)

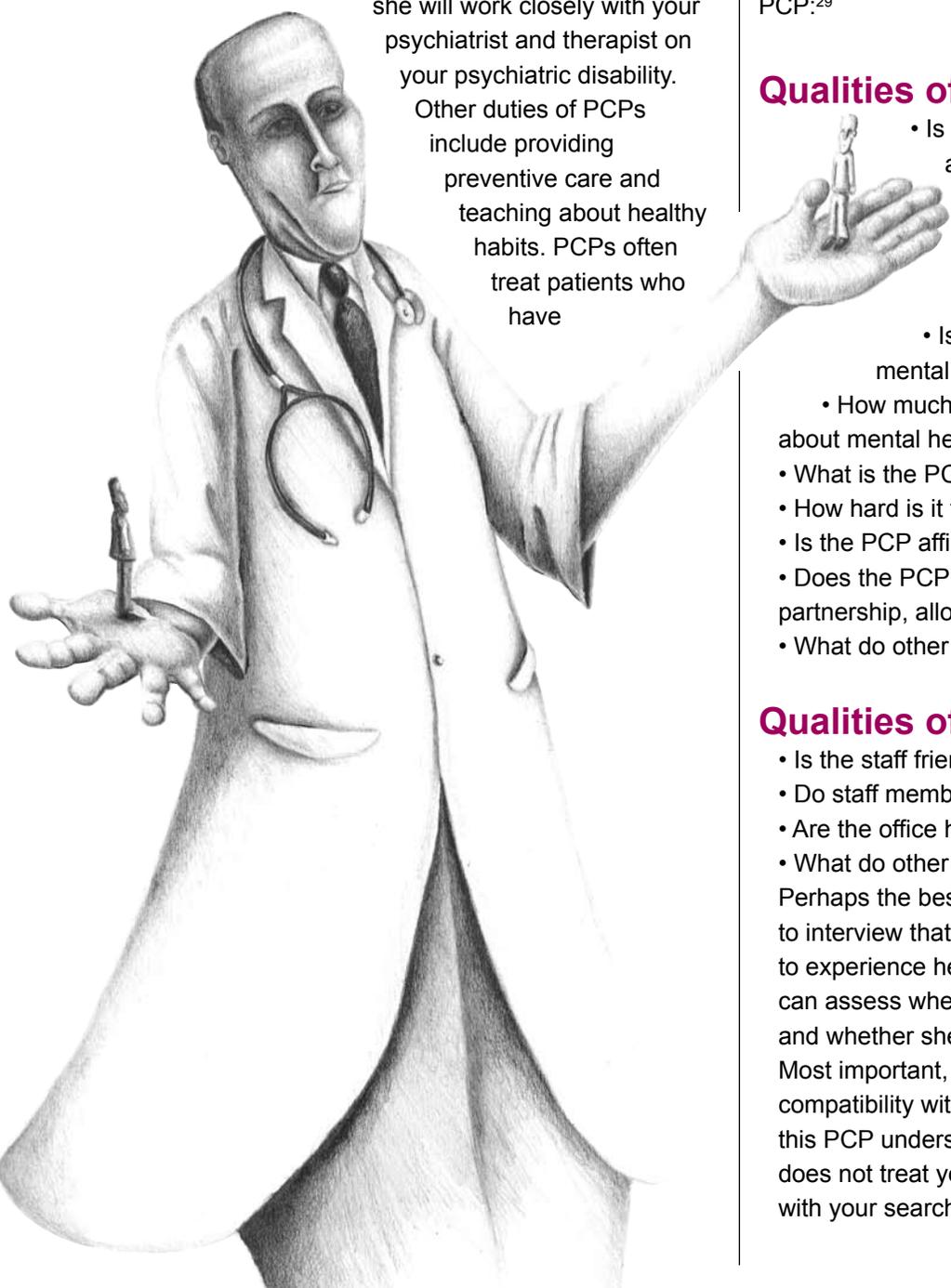
**A** primary care provider is a medical professional whose job it is to see you in non-emergency situations. Usually this person is a doctor, but a PCP can be a physician assistant or nurse practitioner.<sup>25</sup> A PCP can also be a doctor certified in family medicine, a pediatrician, an internist, or an obstetrician/gynecologist.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the PCP's background, ideally, he or she will work closely with your psychiatrist and therapist on your psychiatric disability. Other duties of PCPs include providing preventive care and teaching about healthy habits. PCPs often treat patients who have

common medical problems, and if problems require specialists, they will provide referrals.<sup>27</sup> While your PCP may see you only on an outpatient basis, he or she may assist in your care if you need to be admitted to a hospital.<sup>28</sup>

Since you will be relying on this individual to help you make decisions about your health, it is important to choose someone you trust. Listed below are some considerations to take into account when choosing a PCP:<sup>29</sup>

## Qualities of the PCP

- 
- Is the PCP's communication style warm and friendly?
  - Does the PCP get back to you when you call?
  - Does the PCP use e-mail to communicate with patients?
  - Is the PCP willing to work with your mental health care providers?
  - How much knowledge does the PCP have about mental health issues?
  - What is the PCP's approach to treatment?
  - How hard is it to get a referral to a specialist?
  - Is the PCP affiliated with a hospital that you prefer?
  - Does the PCP view your relationship as a partnership, allowing you to be involved in your care?
  - What do other people say about this PCP?

## Qualities of the office

- Is the staff friendly and helpful?
- Do staff members return calls in a timely manner?
- Are the office hours convenient to your schedule?
- What do other people say about this office?

Perhaps the best method for choosing a PCP is to interview that PCP in person. This allows you to experience her or his communication style. You can assess whether the PCP has time for you and whether she or he seems interested in you. Most important, you will be able to determine your compatibility with this PCP.<sup>30</sup> If you do not feel that this PCP understands your concerns or if she or he does not treat you with respect, it is time to move on with your search for a PCP.<sup>31</sup>

# getting regular physical health check-ups

**R**egular physical exams with your PCP are important to maintaining your health and lowering your stress. If you have regular health screenings, the doctor might be able to detect problems before they become more difficult to handle.

Finding problems early means that your chance for treatment and for a cure is greater and that you are likely to live longer.<sup>32</sup>



## A routine physical exam involves:<sup>33</sup>

**MEDICAL HISTORY** — telling your PCP about any medications you are on, diet, exercise, sexual behavior, alcohol and tobacco use, family history of diseases, immunizations, and symptoms you are feeling.

**PHYSICAL EXAM** — your PCP should check your height, weight and blood pressure and examine your body.

**COUNSELING** — your PCP should go over any risk factors you have and any habits you should work on to promote your health and decrease stress.

**LAB TESTS** — some PCPs will order lab tests as a routine or in response to symptoms.

It is important before you see your doctor to write a list of questions you want to ask him or her. In general, you will want to go over any health problems you have and any changes you have experienced. Be sure to be honest with your doctor about everything — even if you have not been taking medications as prescribed — so he or she can plan the best course of action for your circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

For a comprehensive list of questions you can take to your doctor appointments, please see [www.ahrq.gov/qual/beprepared.htm](http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/beprepared.htm) or [www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer](http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer).

# medication

**O**ne way to keep your stress in check is to take all of your medications as they are prescribed. This applies to medications for conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes or high cholesterol. If you are taking psychotropic medication for your psychiatric disability, it is important to advocate for yourself so you are taking the best combination that works for you. If you have a question about whether you should be taking a certain medication or if you are frustrated with the side effects of a medication, the best course of action is to express your concerns to your doctor. It is not wise to discontinue medication without your doctor's knowledge. This often puts your body under greater stress, and as a result, your quality of life diminishes.

If you are taking medication for a psychiatric disability, you might be taking more than one pill. In addition, many psychotropic medications have side effects that you might want to counteract by taking additional medication. If this is the case, you need to be sure you are taking the correct dosage of medications throughout the day. An easy way to do this is to use a seven-day pill box and fill the boxes with the appropriate medication at the beginning of the week.<sup>35</sup>

**Here are some recommended questions, developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, to ask your doctor when he or she prescribes you a new medication:<sup>36</sup>**

- What is the name of the medication, and what is it supposed to do?
- How and when do I take it, and when do I stop taking it?
- What foods, drinks, other medications or activities should I avoid while taking this medication?
- What are the side effects of the medication, and how should I deal with them?
- Is there any written information about the medication that I can have?

# dental care

**W**hile the connection between dental health and stress might not be readily apparent, if you have a toothache, you are almost guaranteed to be feeling stress. Preventing tooth pain by maintaining your dental health and visiting your dentist for regular check-ups is good for your physical well-being.

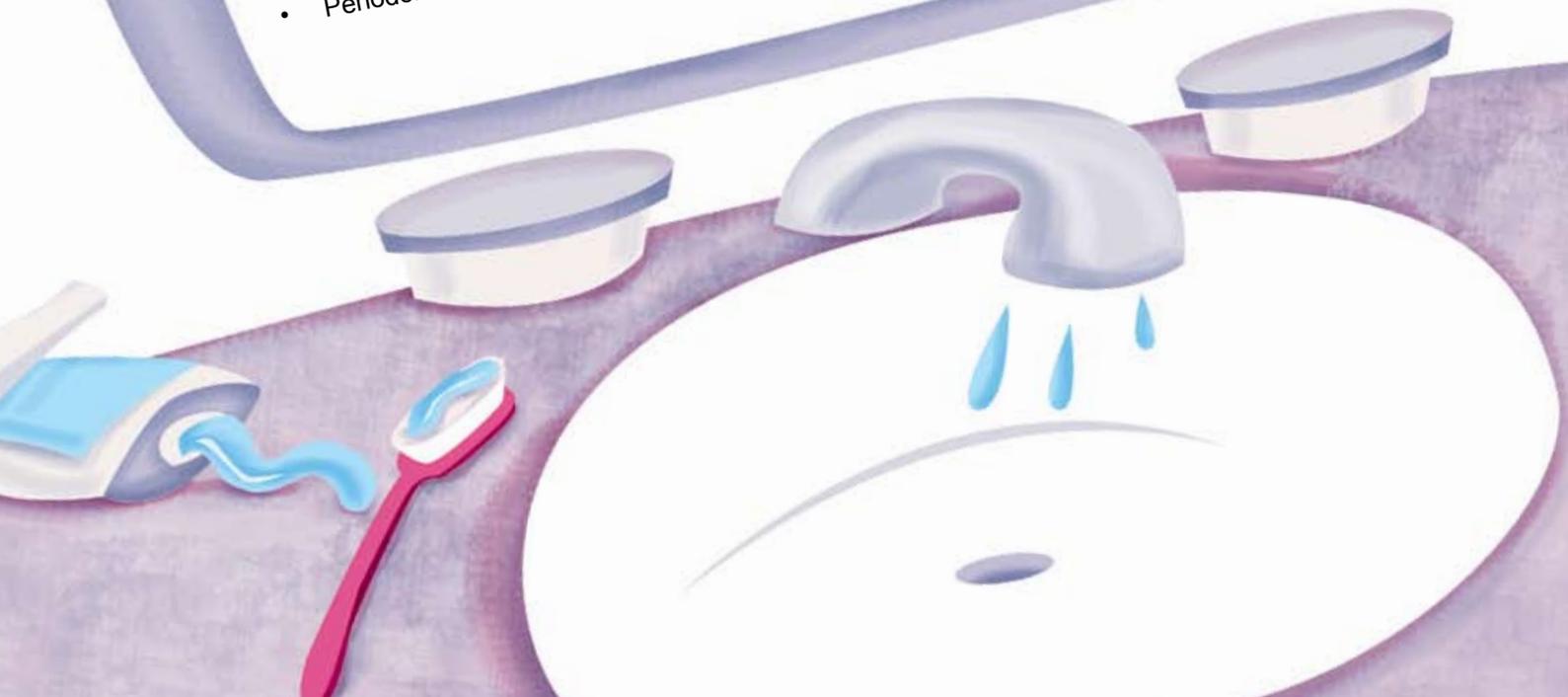
Most adults (and children) should see a dentist for regular cleanings and check-ups every six months.<sup>37</sup> But there are some instances when you should see your dentist more than twice a year.

## **The following conditions put you at greater risk for oral diseases and warrant more frequent check-ups:<sup>38</sup>**

- Regular tobacco use.
- Regular alcohol use.
- Diabetes.
- Pregnancy.
- Periodontal, or gum, disease.

## **Some dental facts to consider:<sup>39</sup>**

- Seeing the dentist for regular check-ups can prevent problems such as cavities, root canals, gum disease and oral cancer.
- Brush your teeth twice a day to remove the plaque that causes cavities. Floss your teeth as well to remove the plaque that develops between teeth.
- Healthy eating will help prevent cavities. Stay away from soft drinks and food that is high in sugar.
- Change your toothbrush every three months or so because it becomes less effective as it wears out.
- Make sure to address dental problems right away. Cavities will only get bigger over time, and if they are not filled, they can result in root canal or extraction.
- If you don't have dental insurance, you might be able to receive low-cost care at a local dental school's clinic.



# alcohol and illegal drugs

**STRESSFUL SITUATIONS CAN EASILY RESULT IN INCREASED ALCOHOL USE OR THE USE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS, ESPECIALLY IF YOU HAVE A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY.** Having a psychiatric disability puts you at increased risk for substance dependence. Of the adults who were diagnosed with a psychiatric disability in the last year, almost 20% met criteria for substance dependence or abuse, compared with 7% of those who did not have a psychiatric disability, according to a recent report by the federal government.<sup>40</sup> In addition, stressful experiences make it more likely that people will relapse into drug or alcohol use, even if they have abstained for a long time.<sup>41</sup>

It is important for you as a parent with a psychiatric disability to keep your stress level manageable by engaging in mental health treatment and practicing some of the techniques mentioned in the other sections of this material, rather than using alcohol or

illegal drugs. When you are abusing substances, you are more likely to take risks such as engaging in high-risk sexual behavior and operating a motor vehicle while impaired. Also, you are more likely to have poor grades or poor job performance.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, substance abuse takes its toll on your body. Long-term substance abuse can damage the liver, heart, nervous system and brain, as well as lead to high blood pressure, stomach problems, medicine interactions, sexual problems, osteoporosis and cancer.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, research has shown that children exposed to drug abuse in the home have higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, anger and substance abuse.<sup>44</sup> Thus, when you abuse substances, not only are you setting a poor example for your child regarding how to handle stress, but you are increasing the likelihood that your child will experience mental health and substance abuse issues as well.

# tobacco use

**L**ike alcohol and drug use/abuse, tobacco use is a way people cope with stress. As a smoker, you might understand that smoking is bad for your health but at the same time believe that it helps you feel calmer when you are under stress.<sup>45</sup> Nicotine can have mood-altering effects on the body, making the subjective aspects of stress (such as anger, frustration and anxiety) feel less overwhelming. But smoking is a “cruel illusion,” according to the Cleveland Clinic. While people may feel calmer when they smoke, the systems in their bodies are on overload. Blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, muscles tense, blood vessels constrict, and less oxygen is available to the brain and the rest of the body.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it is imperative for your physical health and well-being that you do not use tobacco and that you are not exposed to nicotine.

## **Tips for quitting smoking:<sup>47</sup>**

- Pick a quitting day that is one to three weeks in the future, and slowly cut down on your smoking.
- On your quitting day, rid yourself of your cigarettes, and keep occupied with smoke-free activities.
- Make a clean break. Do not smoke occasionally, because an addiction to nicotine can be reignited anytime.
- Get help quitting from a smoking-cessation program if you need it.
- Ask your doctor about a recommendation for a nicotine patch.

## **How to deal with stress without smoking or using drugs or alcohol:<sup>48</sup>**

- Deal with your problems directly, and use mental health treatment to help you do that.
- Distract yourself with other activities that reduce stress (see Emotional Health and Wellness lesson).
- Seek support from other people, especially people who have been through addiction.
- Accept temporary stress, and learn healthy tolerance skills.

# disease prevention

**C**hronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and arthritis, while common, are preventable with diet, exercise and healthy habits, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The four most common causes of chronic disease are lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, tobacco use and excessive use of alcohol, all of which you can control.<sup>49</sup> So why is there so much chronic disease if so much of it is preventable? It is not always easy to choose a healthy lifestyle, especially when you have the stress of managing a psychiatric disability.

## How to live healthier and prevent chronic diseases:<sup>50</sup>

- Make small changes to your daily living, such as adding walking into your routine, eating a piece of fruit instead of a cookie, or having a glass of water instead of a soda.
- Try the “stealth health approach” created by Dr. David Katz, the director of the Yale Preventive Medicine Center and the author of “Stealth Health: How to Sneak Age-Defying, Disease-Fighting Habits Into Your Life Without Really Trying.” Adopt three small changes to your lifestyle for four days. When you have mastered those changes, add more. These changes can include buying whole foods in place of processed foods, starting each dinner with a salad, and raising one foot off the ground when you are standing in line.
- Do not forget the importance of sleep. Katz’s recommendations regarding sleep include using a lavender scent to promote relaxation, buying a new pillow and eating walnuts before sleep because they are a natural sleep-inducer.



# conclusion

**B**eing proactive about your health has a multitude of benefits. One of these benefits is that being healthy will make you better able to manage stress. Getting enough sleep and eating nutritious foods keeps your body strong. By regularly going to the doctor for checkups, you will be able to catch problems early, and you will be less likely to get seriously ill. Going to the dentist regularly will keep cavities and gum disease at bay so you have less pain — and less stress. And keeping your stress level low improves your mental state, whether you have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disability or not. Following these recommendations regarding physical health care will hopefully help you to be a better you, and a better parent.



# homework

- 1. Name one healthy change you can make in your diet.**
- 2. List the types of physical activity you could see yourself doing consistently.**
- 3. Sleep problems often accompany psychiatric disabilities. What can you do to help improve your sleep routine?**
- 4. What are some ways you can deal with stress that do not involve using tobacco, alcohol or drugs?**
- 5. What are some advantages to having routine physical check-ups?**

# endnotes

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