

Boost your mental immune system

Canadian Mental Health Association offers 6 tips to help winter-proof your mental health

As the leaves and thermostats fall, people's moods can too. That's why October is good timing for mental illness awareness activities like Beyond the Blues: Education and Screening Days in order to recognize and help prevent mental health problems like depression and anxiety.

"People seem more ready to think about and talk about mental health in the fall," says Sarah Hamid-Balma, Director of Mental Health Promotion for the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division (CMHA BC) and Beyond the Blues provincial coordinator. "Families are in the thick of school and work schedules and stresses are mounting. Daylight changes can affect routines too. Cold bugs aren't the only thing we should be thinking about keeping at bay; our mental immune system can use a boost, too, right about now."

To that end, CMHA BC offers six common-sense tips for protecting your mental well-being this fall:

- 1. Embrace routines** – For many of us, getting back to the grind of work and school can be challenging but our routines can actually be very healthy for us, says Hamid-Balma, and especially for kids. "If you build healthy habits now—including regular slots for exercise, clubs or social outings—you're less likely to drop them when it gets cold and dark," she says.
- 2. Build some outside time in** – As daylight changes begin to really sink in, people can find themselves commuting both ways to school or work in the dark, and retired people may find themselves not leaving the house much. Finding small ways to take breaks and get outside during the day is a good idea, even more so if you're prone to winter blues. Add a quick brisk walk with a friend and you've added two more mental health boosters: exercise and social support.
- 3. Get more face-time with people** – Social media, texting, and video-calling can be great ways to stay in touch with loved ones or make new friends. Use them to enhance rather than replace face-to-face interactions. Make a date to talk to someone in real life at a regular time each week or month. If you don't have a close friend or relative nearby, see if there's a local Meetup group or club you'd like to join, walk your dog with a neighbour, or try tai chi at the mall.
- 4. Little more water, little less caffeine** – Water replenishes brain cells and helps you concentrate and feel less tired. Most of us don't drink enough of it. While you're drinking more water, try to also limit caffeinated drinks because they can dehydrate you, make you anxious or reduce the quality (and quantity) of your sleep. Try more often to have herbal tea, decaffeinated black tea, or smaller cups of coffee.

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5. **If you can't solve your problem, solve a different one.** If you're stressed out by a problem that just doesn't seem to budge, it could be that you're trying to solve the wrong problem. "A common example," Hamid-Balma says, "is when we frame our problem as one of how to change someone else's behaviour when our own behaviour is all we really have control over. Sometimes just by reframing the problem, we might be able to do something about it and reduce our stress."
6. **Do a screening self-test...or two.** "People of all ages love using blood pressure machines at pharmacies; screening for our mental health can be just as fun, interactive and easy," says Hamid-Balma. BC is gearing up for its 21st season of Beyond the Blues: Education & Screening Days, a mental health education initiative which CMHA BC has helped lead provincially since 1995, helping almost 80,000 British Columbians to date. "If you're feeling low, anxious or stressed, go to a local Beyond the Blues event. Even if you're feeling OK but want to know how to recognize and prevent problems in yourself or a loved one, coming to an event is a free, friendly way to learn more."

At an education and screening site, you can take part in fun and engaging activities to learn more about mood and anxiety problems, community resources and self-care. At most sites, you can then fill out short self-tests on mental well-being, depression, anxiety and risky drinking and then talk privately with a clinician about next steps. The events are free, anonymous, confidential and walk-in. Most sites also host presentations, videos, games, and/or health fairs.

"A big part of winter-proofing your mental health is to know what risks to look out for, what things in your life are already helping you that you should keep doing, and when to ask for help," says Hamid-Balma. "Beyond the Blues helps with all those pieces."

To see all 70+ BC events in October and November, please visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca

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**NOTE TO MEDIA ABOUT VISUALS: Media are asked not to attend these events for photos or interviews to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of attendees. For visuals, please ask us about stock photos or contact your local site planner to see about getting photos/footage before the event day*

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