

## **A Comprehensive Approach to Managing your Mental Health**

No two individuals with the same illness will display the same symptoms. Both people will not have the same complaints, ailments, and frustrations so therefore, the approach in which their recovery is built, will not be the same either. Understanding the need for a comprehensive approach to the maintenance of a mental health is imperative. Long lasting recovery occurs when you are willing to look at all aspects of your life and dedicate yourself to making changes to “habit, attitude, and lifestyle” (Bourne, 2010). The way to achieve this goal is to approach your mental health by looking at seven different levels: physical, emotional, behavioral, mental, interpersonal, “whole self”, and existential/spiritual. An intervention may not be needed for each level. When addressing your anxiety, anger, impulsivity, depression, obsession or whatever your area for growth may be each level should be assessed to reach your optimum wellbeing.

Physical contributions may include imbalances in the brain or body, shallow breathing, dietary factors, muscle tension or perhaps an untreated medical condition. Ways to focus on recovery from physical level symptoms can be accomplished through meditation or progressive muscle relaxation for example. When practiced regularly, breathing techniques can be a successful way to calm yourself. Exercise is another practice, which is considered by many to be the most effective way to combat stress and tension- both factors contribute to anxiety, anger and depression. Changing your diet or getting a physical exam to rule out any medical conditions are two more ways to proceed towards the beginning of a healthy lifestyle. Finally, medication can be another component to managing your health. Using a health professional to determine these needs is critical to reaching your desired results.

The next area to assess is the emotional level. Many times the symptoms being expressed can be the result of suppressed or buried emotions such as anger, frustration, grief, or desperation. If you grew up in a family that did not encourage expression of feelings, as an adult you may be struggling not only with expressing emotions but identifying what you are feeling. Focusing on an intervention in this level will provide you will strategies to recognize the symptoms of suppressed feelings, identify what you are feeling, learn how to express that emotion, and then communicate them with others (Bourne, 2010). Each step will lead towards a healthier you.

We may not realize that certain behaviors we exhibit may perpetuate symptoms. Attempting to resist a panic attack or forcing yourself to not feel anger can cause your feelings to escalate. Rather than fighting back, learning how to work through and cope with the emotions you are feeling during the panic attack or moment of rage will provide you with long-term benefits and skills. Strategies exist to help you minimize the reaction before it starts and learn to “go with it” instead of reacting to the physical or physiological symptoms you are experiencing. Phobias are also important to assess. Avoidance is the number one behavior that causes the phobia to persist, which contributes to increased anxiety among other issues. With the help of a support person you can work on desensitization to eventually confront the phobia overtime.

Self-talk is what we say to ourselves internally, which has the potential to negatively affect our mood. This concept makes up the mental level in the comprehensive approach to recovery. “Self-critical thinking or perfectionist self talk” (Bourne, 2010) both contribute to anxiety. Many individuals also engage in “what if” statements causing excessive worry, fear and rumination. It is important to recognize these destructive thinking patterns before you can challenge the underlying mistaken beliefs preventing you from reaching a healthier outlook of yourself, others and the world around you.

The fifth and sixth levels refer to the interpersonal aspect of your life and the “whole self,” which incorporates self-esteem. Many of the internal struggles individuals experience stem from challenges in interpersonal relationships. If you are unable to set boundaries or communicate your feelings to others, you may find yourself chronically angry or anxious. There are several strategies for learning assertive communication, limit setting, and expressing your true feelings and desires to those that are important to you or involved in your life. The “whole self” level refers to our self-esteem, which is among the most intense contributor to anxiety. Self-worth begins being defined in childhood, and if you consider your childhood dysfunctional, you may carry a negative self-image, feelings of insecurity, shame, and inadequacy into adulthood. There are many ways to build self-esteem and one way includes cultivating a relationship with your *inner child*. The inner child is the part of you that carries the possible negative views that rose from childhood. With the help of a healthcare professional you can begin nurturing the child within to strengthen your self-worth as an adult.

The final component to assess for recovery from your mental health need is the spiritual or existential level. This includes developing a connection with a Higher Power, spiritual commitment and/or finding a broader purpose or meaning to life. This may involve looking into a vocation or hobby that fulfills your happiness and showcases your talents. Mental health growth has the potential to push you towards “intellectual development, emotional development, and even getting more in touch with your own body” (Bourne, 2010). Try treating your desire for mental health support as a call for reaching your full potential rather than a response to negative factors.

Not everyone who experiences a mental health struggle needs intervention on all levels, but remembering to assess each level will be imperative to finding a well-rounded approach to beginning a healthier lifestyle. Managing your mental health concerns may seem overwhelming. With help from a professional, you will be able to break your goal(s) down into smaller, obtainable objectives that will set the stage of a successful recovery.

Bourne, E. (2010). *The anxiety & phobia workbook*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New Harbinger Publication, Inc.