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Five tips to create a wellness-focused mind and body

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Wellness is more than a feeling; it’s an action. It is powerful and proactive. Simply defined, wellness is an ongoing, intentional way to live your best life. While a cancer diagnosis may affect your wellness plan, it might also help you create a new focus on the importance of wellness.

Every day, you have the ability to make your own choices to live as well as possible. Although it may feel like most of the information you read about cancer is focused

on illness-related topics, such as side effects or negative thoughts, wellness can help you think about and look at things differently.

Creating your wellness plan is about taking simple, specific steps and making daily changes. Building healthy habits, such as exercising, practicing good nutrition and nurturing supportive relationships have been shown to have a positive impact on health and well-being, especially while facing cancer.

Sami Mansfield, founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, shares five tips to support your personal wellness.

1. Be your own cheerleader: the power of self-talk

Your brain is responsible for both actions and reactions. While your brain controls many automatic functions, such as breathing, it also helps you think and experience emotions. You may know what causes you to feel emotions like fear or anxiety, or sometimes they may come up without you even realizing it. These can be reactions your body may have had to bad or negative experiences in the past.

However, your brain is able to adapt to new tasks and situations. Can you remember a time when you were learning a new skill or technology? At first, it may have been challenging, but it probably got easier over time, once you were able to believe that you could do it. You can learn to turn negative thinking into positive thinking with self-talk.

Self-talk is the constant stream of thoughts that run through your head. These thoughts can be either positive or negative. Some of your self-talk comes from logic and reason, but it can also come from past experiences or misconceptions. Positive thinking, or optimism, may improve your physical well-being and help you better manage everyday stress.

Try these strategies to improve your self-talk.

- Speak out loud to yourself. Use your name directly versus just talking to yourself
    - If talking to yourself is uncomfortable, talk to a pet or even a plant. If speaking out loud is difficult or if you don’t have a private space, start with writing in a journal, writing a note in your phone or sending yourself an email

- Listen to the words or tone you are using. Are you speaking positively or negatively?
- Provide positive feedback to yourself for completing tasks, no matter how big or small they may seem, such as making your bed for the day
- Tell yourself how wonderful one of your positive personality traits or skills is, such as your patience or your ability to cook

2. Move everyday

Planned physical movement, or exercise, has significant benefits for both your mind and body. In fact, exercise has been shown to improve heart health, muscle strength, fatigue, anxiety, depression and general well-being in people living with cancer.

Exercise can not only improve your physical health, but it can also have positive effects on your brain as you age. It may reduce the risk for cognitive decline. Cognitive skills affect abilities, such as thinking, judgment, memory and learning. Exercise can also improve your mobility and help you regain physical function and independence in your daily life.

Try these tips to get more exercise in your day.

- Set a schedule and use a timer to move for 10 minutes each day. These planned activities should be outside of things you may regularly do, such as bathing or preparing a meal
- Try these exercises to help improve your balance
- Learn new ways to keep moving indoors

3. Use food as fuel

Nutrition provides fuel for your body. Food is to your body like gasoline is to a car. When you put the right gas in your car, it runs at its optimal level. Most people know the benefits of good nutrition, but certain barriers, such as access, cost or taste can make eating healthy a challenge. If possible, speak to a clinical dietitian if one is available for a personalized eating plan.

Follow these guidelines from the American Cancer Society to optimize your body’s engine. Focus on 1-2 steps at a time to focus on building long-lasting habits.

Make plant-based foods a main part of all of your primary meals. This includes fruits and vegetables
but also seeds, nuts and whole grains

- Choose fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables over canned ones
- Read food labels to understand ingredients and portion sizes. If you don't know what an ingredient is or can't pronounce it, you may want to try a different food
- Limit consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (soft, sports and fruit-flavored drinks)
- Limit consumption of red meat and processed meat, such as bacon, sausage, lunch meat and hot dogs
    - If you eat red meat, choose lean cuts and eat smaller portions. To learn more about protein, click here
- Choose fish, poultry or beans as an alternative to red meat (beef, pork and lamb)
    - Choose whole grain breads, pasta and cereals, instead of ones made from refined grains, and brown rice instead of white rice
- Limit consumption of other refined carbohydrate foods, including pastries, candy, sugar-sweetened breakfast cereals and other high-sugar foods

4. Do things you enjoy

Pleasure is a key part of living a complete, happy life. Choosing activities you enjoy can help you achieve a better mood and happier life.

While you may need to adjust your activities due to treatments or energy levels, it's important to focus on the things you enjoy and are able to do.

- Write down a list of activities that you enjoy
- Make a list of things you need help doing, and have this ready for when someone asks how they can help you
- Schedule time each day to do an activity you enjoy, such as reading, calling a friend or playing a game
- Explore photos of the people you love, or watch videos that make you laugh

5. Cultivate strong connections

Human beings have a long history of being part of a tribe. We are social creatures, and one of the most important factors for happiness is your relationships with other

people. Having cancer may change who’s in your circle or allow you to create a new one filled with other people who have gone through the same diagnosis or experience as you.

Consider trying different ways to connect with your circle:

- Find a way that works best for you: over the phone, in-person or through a video chat or social media
- Write down what you are looking to get out of a relationship, such as support, a conversation or an activity partner. That way, you'll have a better idea for what you want and need.
- Ask your healthcare team for suggestions or tips for building or finding your own circle of support
- Search for local events through the free LivingWith® app
- Help others by volunteering your time. There may be in-person and online opportunities to contribute.

You may not notice an immediate difference in how you feel after doing these simple steps, but they each provide a small, feel-good action step that, over time, may add up to many more good feelings!

The information contained herein is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace discussions with a healthcare provider. All decisions about your health and nutrition should be made with a healthcare provider.

Sami Mansfield is an oncology exercise specialist and Director of Oncology Wellness for one of the largest cancer centers in the Midwest. She is also the founder of Cancer Wellness for Life, an organization focused on developing oncology wellness and exercise resources for hospital and healthcare organizations, nonprofits and individuals affected by cancer.