

Looking After Yourself:

Simple tips that make a big difference ...

Excerpts from *The SANE Guide for Consumers: A guide to living with a mental illness*

Dealing With Stress

Stress is not only an unpleasant and unwanted experience in itself, it can also contribute to a return of symptoms. By following some simple guidelines, you can act to reduce the stress in your life.

What is stress? Psychologists define it as an uncomfortable, even painful, mental state accompanied by feelings of great tension, anxiety and fatigue. It results from a sense of being unable to cope with the current demands that life makes. Make sure you tell your doctor if you have these feelings, and they should do what they can to reduce the stress by adjusting medication and suggesting other ways in which you can obtain support to deal with it. There are also some common-sense principles by which you can help reduce the stress in your life.

◆ Relax

What really calms you down? Going for a walk? Listening to your favourite music with closed eyes? Whatever it is, try setting aside regular special times of the day to unwind. When you're calmer inside, things just hassle you less.

◆ Talk it over

The more you let things get you down, the more than can grow out of proportion. Rather than feeling generally stressed, try to identify particular causes and what you can actually do about them. This is best done by talking it over with a friend or health professional who may be able to help. If using public transport is a problem, for example, they may be able to travel with you for a short trip, and build up to longer journeys together as it becomes less stressful.

◆ Do one thing at a time

There's nothing more stressful than having a heap of things troubling you at the same time. You can feel paralysed

simply by being unable to decide which thing to look at first. Dealing firmly with one thing at a time is a golden rule for reducing stress and getting things done.

◆ Ten commandments for reducing stress

1. Thou shalt not be perfect, nor try to be
2. Thou shalt not try to be all things to all people
3. Thou shalt occasionally leave undone things that ought to be done
4. Thou shalt not spread thyself too thin
5. Thou shalt learn to say *No* when it's best for you
6. Thou shalt schedule time for thyself alone
7. Thou shalt switch off and *do nothing* at regular intervals
8. Thou shalt be boring, unelegant and untidy at times
9. Thou shalt not even feel guilty!
10. Especially, thou shalt not be thine own worst enemy, but be thine own best friend

Dealing With People

Dealing with other people can be a challenge at the best of times ... And an episode of mental illness can often leave us lacking in confidence and unsure of how to relate to others. A few simple principles help to ease the process of learning to deal with other people again.

One of the major effects of mental illness can be that it seems to affect how the brain deals with information. As talking to another person is a highly-demanding exercise, it's no surprise that this seems such a great effort sometimes! We shouldn't have to feel overwhelmed by others; it isn't a good idea to spend too much time alone either ...

As usual, a happy medium that we're comfortable with is best. We are social beings and a degree of human contact is a natural necessary thing for all of us.

◆ Being with other people

There are times when being with other people can seem too much to handle. Think of some real-life situations where this has happened, and imagine what practical steps you could take which would have helped. For example ...

◆ Making conversation

Just chatting is an important part of life, yet sometimes the words just won't come. Try preparing yourself by having an answer ready for when you're asked questions like *What do you do?* and even have some phrases and questions ready yourself, to use when necessary.

◆ Write things down

It's easy to get tongue-tied and confused when you need to explain something eg. when you're visiting an office. Writing what you have to say as a letter or checklist means you can take this with you, and also have something to refer to.

◆ Being on your own

While it's good to spend some of your time with other people, never feel that there's anything wrong or embarrassing about spending time on your own. It's your life, and you know what you're comfortable doing at any particular time. If you do feel lonely, remember...

◆ Worrying makes it worse

Worrying can often be caused by the illness, without any real basis. So try not to waste time worrying *Does such-and-such like me? Or Why didn't so-and-so phone me back?* If it really troubles you, explain your concern to the person and ask them straight out. Then forget it.

Ordinary contacts are special too. Try to develop casual, regular, stress-free encounters with people such as neighbours and shop-keepers.

It's up to you as well as others. If the world won't come to you ... consider – or get help to – joining a community group or program and joining in their social events.