Mental Health Checkup
Lack of Illness vs Health

We often focus more on how to treat illnesses, both physical and mental, than on how to staying healthy. Many people go through their entire lives never seeking out a mental health professional. But the absence of mental illness does not necessarily mean mental health.

What is mental health? You can probably find many different definitions, According to the World Health Organization, mental health is more than just the absence of mental illness, it is "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

Mental Health	Mental Illness
Successful performance of mental function throughout the life cycle, resulting in • Productive activity • Fulfilling relationships • Ability to adapt to change and cope with stress Foundation for thinking, communication, learning, emotional growth, resilience, healthy relationships, and self-esteem	Health conditions involving by changes in: • Thinking • Mood • Behavior Associated with distress and/or impaired functioning

Topics to Consider in a Mental Health Checkup

While not exhaustive, the topics on this list are meant to provide a starting point to help you examine how you're doing emotionally and mentally. If any of these items raise a red flag for you, if you are concerned that you may have anxiety, depression, or another mental illness, be sure to talk with your healthcare provider. (See Healthy Minds Blog post on tips for finding a therapist.)

Concentration — Are you able to focus on the task at hand, whether at work or at home, and get it done in a timely manner? Or, do you find yourself overrun with missed deadlines and undone chores? Often the first sign that our concentration is waning is when our productivity goes down. Poor concentration is a hallmark of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) but it can also be a symptom of depression and anxiety and should not be overlooked.

Balance — Is there an appropriate balance between your home life and your work life? Between family time with your kids and "date nights" for you and your spouse? Are you getting in some "me-time", including physical exercise and spiritual pursuits? Achieving

American Psychiatric Association   *www.psychiatry.org*

perfect balance in your life is probably not possible, but that doesn't mean it's not worth striving for! Juggling too many responsibilities is a prime way to end up stressed out and unhealthy.

Mood — Do your moods feel pretty stable, or are you experiencing significant mood swings (either highs or lows)? Are you crying more than usual? Feeling persistently depressed for two weeks or more and any thoughts of suicide could indicate clinical depression.

Energy — Do you feel that you have the energy to do the things you need and want to do? Fatigue can be a sign of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses, but it can also be a symptom of many physical illnesses including cancer, diabetes and sleep apnea. If you find that you are feeling unusually fatigued or have other concerning symptoms, it is important that you contact your doctor right away.

Sleep – How are you sleeping at night? Is it restful, or does it leave something to be desired? Poor sleep can often be a sign that there is something troubling you emotionally. When under stress or dealing with a more serious mental illness, many people find that they cannot fall asleep as quickly as they used to. Excessive worry or a feeling of not being able to "turn off" their mind can make getting to sleep difficult and some people find themselves waking up frequently throughout the night.

For some, insomnia can be put to rest with simple sleep hygiene measures such as limiting caffeine in the evening and creating a bedtime ritual. For others, common over-the-counter (OTC) sleep aids such as Tylenol PM, Benadryl, and herbal medicines like melatonin can be helpful if used in limited quantities and for a limited amount of time. [Note: although they are advertised under many different brands, most OTC sleep medicines have diphenhydramine (generic Benadryl) as their active ingredient. Make sure to read the labels so you don't take medicines you don't need and to decrease your risk of unsafe combinations.] It's always a good idea to first check with your doctor before beginning any OTC sleep regimen to make sure there are no harmful interactions with other medicines you're taking.

Tension, Anxiety – Are you feeling tense and wound up all the time? How about nervous and anxious? Is it hard for you to unwind at the end of the day? We live in a fast-paced society and stress has become a common part of our everyday lives. If, however, you are finding that you're unable to take mental breaks during the day where you can feel totally relaxed and worry-free even for a few moments, then that could indicate that your stress is approaching dangerous levels. Relaxation is a skill that many of us have to learn and practice. There have been some great previous posts with relaxation tips as well as ways to cope with anxiety and stress.

Tuning In – One characteristic which psychiatrist and HealthyMinds blogger Gina Duncan, MD, identifies as critical to the foundation of good mental health is *knowing yourself, i.e. being self-aware*. In general, how "in touch" do you feel with yourself? Do you feel like you're experiencing emotions and you don't know why, like being angry or crying "for no reason"? It's not uncommon to get so busy that you don't have time to process everything that is happening on an emotional level in real time. However, taking some time to write in a journal or talk to a friend can be critically important to good mental and emotional health, particularly when you find yourself in periods of great transition or change. The danger of being out of touch with yourself emotionally is that you may respond to difficult situations in ways that you later regret

(such as impulsively sending off an angry email to your boss, or taking out your frustration on your kids). It is also difficult to advocate for yourself and your needs when you don't know what those needs are. Being able to take a moment and identify that "I feel angry because _____." or "I am hurt because _____." can take you a long way in staying in touch with yourself.

Avoidance — Do you feel like you're avoiding yourself? It may seem like a funny question, but if you find yourself going out of your way to keep from being by yourself, then that could indicate that there is something you are trying to avoid emotionally. Many people find that their feelings of anxiety or worry are intensified when they are alone, and so they find ways to distract themselves by staying busy. We can often be unaware of this subconscious strategy to protect ourselves from painful feelings. If you think that this describes you, when you have a moment, go to a quiet place where you will be uninterrupted and sit quietly for a few minutes. How do you feel? Take a moment to write it down. If you find that even the thought of spending quiet time by yourself makes you tense, write that down as well. The goal is not to avoid your problems, but to find effective ways to deal with them.

Eating Habits — Has your appetite changed? Are you eating too much or too little? And what are you eating? If you find that you're craving foods that are high in carbohydrates (sugar) and fat, or that you're eating larger quantities than usual, it could be a sign of emotional eating as a response to stress. While temporarily satisfying, high sugar and fatty foods ultimately zap your energy and leave you feeling lower. Not to mention that the added pounds can become an additional source of stress.

Adapted from a series of APA Healthy Minds blog posts from By Gina Duncan, M.D. in September 2010