

Take Care of the Organism

Physical self-care is instrumentally useful no matter your aims or mental health concerns. Don't restrict your attention to *directly* targeting particular symptoms or goals. Also look for high-leverage opportunities for improving overall wellness and effectiveness.

Physical wellbeing matters for mental health.

- Emotions are embodied. How we feel emotionally reflects, in part, our interpretation of the body's physiological state¹.
- Physical ill-being worsens mental health. Fundamentally, we are biological systems in need of tending to stay in good working order.
 - Physical ill-being taxes attention and energy, making emotion regulation harder.
 - Certain types of physical discomfort resemble or exacerbate emotional pain.
 - (E.g., exhaustion exacerbates low mood; hunger exacerbates irritability; hangover resembles anxiety)
 - Physical ill-being can worsen cognitive performance (e.g., focus and executive function), making it harder to achieve goals.

Consider the following targets. Consult an MD for personalized recommendations.

- **Sleep:** Aim for a sleep schedule that is both regular and sufficient. Monitor how napping affects you, so that you can balance the restorative benefits of napping with downsides, including nighttime sleep disruption.
- **Nutrition:** Keep healthy, satiating food well-stocked at home and work. Eat enough, regularly, to maintain energy and mood. Keep water handy and stay hydrated.
- **Exercise:** The benefits of exercise for mental health are well established. Aim for a regular routine; consider going for a walk when a full workout isn't possible.
- **Regular medical care:** Keep up with medical appointments when possible, especially if you have chronic health concerns.
- **Address physical comfort:** Take advantage of low-cost levers for improving comfort. Examples: get a comfortable chair for working, adjust the temperature of your sleeping environment, take breaks to stretch.
- **Mind your substances,** and limit those that contribute to ill-being.

Don't write off self-care as too simplistic or indirect.

- It's easy to read the above and think, "Okay, but my problem is [unemployment / panic attacks / lack of partners]. That's not gonna change if I [sleep more / eat healthier / exercise]." **Remember that most things are easier, and more actions are psychologically available, when overall wellbeing is higher.**
- You may also think, "I know that stuff...nothing to see here." To state the obvious, remember the benefits lie in actually deploying this knowledge!

¹ Seth, A. K. (2013). Interoceptive inference, emotion, and the embodied self. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17(11), 565-573. For a more general view, see [Being You](#) by the same author.