Depression and anxiety are often called the “common colds of mental illness.”

As such, just like we can’t completely prevent ourselves from getting the cold, we can’t completely avoid getting depressed and anxious at times. If someone tells you they are always happy, they’re probably exaggerating.

What we can do, however, is reduce our chances of getting into these moods, and learn to bounce back from them as quickly as possible when they overcome us.

Unfortunately, relentless advertising from pharmaceutical companies over the years has led us to believe that depression and anxiety are due to a “chemical imbalance in the brain.” In turn – so say the drug companies – one needs to take a pill to rebalance our brain chemistry, just like some diabetics take insulin to control their blood sugar.

Although this notion has been promoted so much that it is often accepted as fact, there really isn’t any sound evidence to support it. For one, there is no test for a chemical imbalance in the brain. In addition there is no solid evidence that the medication for depression and anxiety actually works.

And even if there is a chemical imbalance in the brain that leads us to depression and anxiety, it doesn’t necessarily follow that medication is the only way to correct it.

The good news is there is much we can do to improve our emotional health and prevent painful moods. Several of them are summarized in the article *Lifestyle and Mental Health* by psychologist Roger Walsh.

In this article, Dr. Walsh discusses several factors that can reduce our vulnerability to difficult moods, and even improve our physical health.

He refers to these as **therapeutic lifestyle factors (TLCs)**, and they include the following important and achievable steps:

- **Exercise:** We all know that exercise is good for our physical health, but did you know that it is also great for your emotional health? Regular exercise not only helps prevent difficult moods, but can relieve them as well – especially depression.
• **Nutrition and Diet:** A diet that consists of multicolored fruits and vegetables, fish that is high in omega-3 fatty acids (e.g., salmon), and which reduces excessive calories is good for your emotional well-being.

• **Time in Nature:** There is a healing and calming effect to being in nature. Conversely, spending excessive time indoors can cause disruptions in mood, sleep and our biological rhythms.

• **Relationships:** Healthy and supportive relationships are vital for our emotional and physical health. So much so that having a good support group will extend your life as much as quitting smoking.

• **Recreation:** Healthy recreation is important for our well-being and can easily be combined with other TLCs – such as exercise, time in nature and relationship-building.

• **Relaxation and Stress Management:** Many TLCs contribute to relaxation and stress management, helping reduce the effects of negative life stress on our minds, emotions and bodies. Also, stress is not necessarily a bad thing – healthy stress can benefit us in many ways.

• **Religious or Spiritual Involvement:** Those who participate in regular spiritual or religious activities tend to have increased emotional and relational well-being compared to those who don't. In fact, those who attend religious or spiritual services weekly live an average of seven years longer.

• **Service to Others:** People who volunteer tend to be happier and healthier. The "paradox of happiness" is that spending your time and resources on others can make you happier. We get by giving.

Fortunately, all of these lifestyle factors are under our control.

In addition – and unlike medications – they also cost little or nothing, don't have negative side effects and aren't addictive.

So if you find yourself in a funk, consider this list of therapeutic lifestyle factors.

Are you missing one or more of them in your day-to-day life?

If so, addressing this area of your life can help you to take charge of your moods, as opposed to your moods taking control of **you**.
We all know that exercise is good for our physical health – but it is less well-known that exercise has tremendous benefits for our emotional and mental health.

For better or worse, our lifestyles affect our mental health more than many of us realize.

While relentless advertising from drug companies has touted the unproven theory that depression and anxiety are due to "chemical imbalances" in the brain, what we do in our day-to-day lives has a much stronger effect on our moods.

**Prevent or Dispel Depression and Anxiety**

Although the "chemical imbalance" theory of depression and anxiety is unproven, even if it were true it doesn't follow that we need pills to recover, as the drug companies would have us believe.

Instead, exercise is one of the best things that we can do for our emotional health. Not only does it help to prevent depression and anxiety, but it can help us to overcome these difficult moods without the cost, side effects and addiction potential associated with medications.

It also helps to burn off the stress hormones our body secretes when we are going through difficult life circumstances. In turn, this helps with our stress management, which is gives us the benefit of yet another TLC.

This mental health benefits of exercise are so strong that it is being touted as a natural treatment for depression and anxiety.

**Improve Concentration**

Exercise also helps to clear our minds and improve our focus. In turn, this can allow us to look at our life circumstances more objectively and attack our problems more effectively.

Additionally, exercise is one of the best ways to reduce distractibility and restlessness for those who struggle with Attention-Deficit Disorder.

**Increase Your Energy**

Although we need to expend energy when we exercise, it is really an investment in our energy; when we recover from a good workout we usually have more energy than we had before. This increased energy persists and grows when we exercise regularly.
In turn, this positive energy helps us to push through rough patches and attack the circumstances that cause setbacks and stress in our lives.

**Kill Two Birds – Or More - With One Stone**

If going to the gym, an aerobics class or jogging doesn't appeal to you, you might consider giving yourself a push and trying it anyway. If you haven't tried these activities before, you may find that you enjoy them more than you thought you would!

Otherwise, there are countless creative ways to exercise, and many opportunities to combine your exercise with other therapeutic lifestyle factors.

Going hiking with a friend, for example, gives us the opportunity not only to exercise, but to **build relationships** and **spend time in nature** - in addition to the **recreation** it provides.

So give yourself some TLCs, and watch your happiness grow!

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**2. Improve Your Nutrition and Diet**

Have you ever found yourself eating when you’re upset – even though you’re not hungry?

What are you eating at such times? Or - perhaps more to the point - **what is eating you?**

When we use food as a way to cope with setbacks and bad moods, we're engaging in **emotional eating**. At such times, we're turning to food to help us feel better, instead of finding ways to **solve our problems** or cope with them more effectively.

We’ve all engaged in emotional eating at some point. By doing so, however, we may be shooting ourselves in the foot.

Research suggests that **eating excessive sweets and junk food** is associated with **significantly increased risk for depression**. While it isn’t clear if depression is directly caused by eating such foods, there does appear to be a correlation between junk food and negative moods.

Although it's not the healthiest of coping techniques, emotional eating is not likely to harm us if only done occasionally. But if eating is the **only** tool we use to cope with life's challenges, we risk making our difficulties worse.

There are a couple of reasons for this:
David Gosse, Psy.D. – Psychologist

- **Eating - by itself - does not address the problems that cause our distress.** If we don’t address what is leading us to feel bad, our moods are not likely to get better. Over time, they may even get **worse**.

- **If the only thing we do is eat in response to stress, we won't learn the skills to overcome our challenges.** In addition, we may create further problems over the long haul, such as obesity or increased risk of depression.

Almost every behavior has both an unhealthy and a healthy aspect, and it is no different with eating.

When used judiciously, good nutrition is a lifestyle factor that impacts mental health by helping us prevent negative moods and bounce back from distress as quickly as possible.

Foods that are good for our emotional health include:

- **A “rainbow diet” that consists predominantly of multi-colored fruits and vegetables.**

- A diet should typically include some fish. Cold deep-seawater fish (e.g., salmon) - which are high in beneficial omega-3 fish oils – are especially good.

- **Mounting evidence** suggests that food supplements offer valuable prophylactic and therapeutic benefits for mental health. In particular, Vitamin D, folic acid, SAME (S-adenosyl-methionine) and—most of all—fish oil seem to provide the most benefits.

- Good nutrition reduces excessive calories while increasing the nutrients in our diet.

Furthermore, **obesity may be associated with reduced cognitive functioning**, which can make it more difficult for us tackle the challenges in our lives.

**As such, while we are not always be able to control the setbacks that occur in our lives, we can control the foods that we eat.**

If we make the right food choices, we can take better care of ourselves and be prepared to cope with and manage the challenges that life throws at us as effectively as possible.
“Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.”
- Helen Keller

It's easy to feel good when life is going our way. During the rough patches, however, our emotional well-being is put to the test.

No one is immune to occasional bouts of depression, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, and other unpleasant emotions. It is a part of life that we can't control, at least not completely.

**One of the best natural approaches to preventing and overcoming bad moods is nature itself.**

Growing evidence suggests that as little as five minutes of contact with nature affects not only our emotional health, but our physical health as well.

All natural environments have been found to improve mental health, including parks in urban settings, so you don't necessarily have to go into the mountain to experience these benefits

Time spent in nature can provide a variety of benefits, including:

- **Cognitive** - Spending time in natural settings improves concentration and clears our mind.
- **Attentional** - We can focus better when we get around nature and away from modern-day distractions.
- **Emotional** - The sights and sounds of nature prevent and relieve anxiety, depression and stress.
- **Spiritual** - Nature helps us feel in touch with something greater than ourselves.
- **Happiness** - Time spent in nature improves overall well-being, and that’s something to smile about.

In contrast, modern day life often divorces us from nature - especially if we live in the city. A typical day for many of us is spent indoors, surrounded by screens and fluorescent lighting.

As a result, some of us get so little contact with the outdoors that the term "nature deficit disorder" has been coined - a condition that contributes to poor mental health. Lack of sunlight is associated with depression for some people, whereas adequate sunlight appears to boost mood.
Contact with nature is an important part of an emotionally-healthy lifestyle.

Would you like to cut your risk of premature death by 50 percent? Would you like to be happier, less stressed and better able to cope with life’s challenges?

This secret to mental and physical health costs nothing more than time, energy and – sometimes – courage. I’m talking about some of the benefits of developing healthy relationships.

There are many kinds of healthy relationships, from spouses, dating partners and family to friendships, mentors, coaches and more. Involvement in good churches, support groups or community organizations can be particularly beneficial in helping us develop healthy connections. Such relationships are positive and uplifting, and make us feel better about ourselves and our lives.

Healthy relationships benefit us in many ways:

- They make us happier – and lower our risk for anxiety and depression.
- They help us to recover more quickly from setbacks.
- They help us cope with stress more effectively.
- They improve our physical health.
- They can protect us from cognitive decline later in life.

Healthy relationships represent yet another aspect of our lives that we can control if we are committed to putting in the time and effort to do so.

In contrast, toxic relationships hurt our emotional and physical health, especially over time. While occasional conflict with significant others is normal, the stress of relationships that are chronically negative, hurtful and destructive does us more harm than good.

It is healthier to be alone than in a destructive relationship. But better still to develop a healthy relationship instead, as chronic loneliness isn’t good for us either.

While we all feel lonely from time to time, chronic loneliness drags down our emotional and physical health. Studies of loneliness and its effects find those who struggle with chronic loneliness are at higher risk for mental health problems and suicide, and are less able to cope.
with stress. These individuals also have more problems with their physical health, particularly in those who are middle-aged and older.

As society changes, fewer people live in or near their extended families, and increasing numbers are choosing to live alone. As a result, many individuals become more socially isolated, experiencing the pain of loneliness on a more frequent basis.

Sometimes we need to make a focused effort to improve this part of our lives, especially if we’re not satisfied with the quality of the relationships we have had in the past.

But the effort can literally save your life. The lack of healthy relationships can affect our mortality as much as smoking and alcohol use, and more than obesity and lack of exercise.

It's been said that we can't be both disconnected from others and happy, since these two aspects of life simply don’t go together. While it takes time and effort to develop healthy relationships - or to maintain the ones we already have – the benefits are well worth it.

5. Take Time for Recreation

What comes to mind when you think of the word vacation? Sitting on the beach in the Bahamas with a tropical drink? Going on a cruise? Taking a road trip?

A good vacation can be a great way to "recharge our batteries," so to speak.

But just what is a "vacation" anyway? Does it have to be an extended amount of time? Does it have to involve travel? That is how the word is usually defined.

If we play around with the notion of what a vacation is, however, we can open up opportunities to create "mini-vacations" on a regular basis - in addition to whatever longer vacations we make take during the year.

Who says a "vacation" can't be as simple, for example, as taking an hour to go for a nice walk - or a couple of hours to watch a good movie?

While recreation is meant to be fun, it plays more than a trivial role when it comes to our happiness. Time for recreation is not just a way to take a break from the day-to-day grind - it is also an important part of emotional health.
If we are feeling unhappy, sometimes we need to take a look at what is going on - or maybe what is not going on - in our day-to-day lives. It could be that we've neglected to take enough time for ourselves to enjoy life.

Negative attitudes towards recreation can keep us from making it a priority. These negative attitudes may come from ourselves, from those around us or from the culture we live in.

1. "I've got too much work to do to take time off."
2. "Only lazy people take breaks."
3. "I don't have time to take a break."

These are just a few of the negative beliefs that keep us from making time for recreation.

We probably all know some people on the opposite extreme – those who would rather play than work, and in the process neglect their responsibilities. But just about everything has a negative aspect when taken to an extreme.

Paradoxically, when done well, a good dose of recreation can actually make us more productive, not less.

Think of it like a pit stop in racing. Drivers need to make occasional pit stops to win the race - if they didn't they would eventually run out of gas, blow a tire or breakdown!

If you are feeling burned-out, irritable, impatient or drained, it could be a sign that your "tank" is running empty, and that you are in need of "refueling."

With some creative thinking, recreation is a great way to fit in a number of other lifestyle choices - such as time in nature, investing time in our relationships, exercise and so forth.

If we give this part of our lives proper attention, we will be both happier and more productive over the long haul. So go about the business of having fun!
David Gosse, Psy.D. – Psychologist

if any - margin in our lives. As such, many of us pack our schedules like sardines.

And that assumes that we even have a schedule. Others simply "wing it" and just do whatever pops into their head.

That's fine if either of those approaches work for you.

But if you're like me, when I go to either of these extremes I find that my life get more stressful. On top of that, I don't seem to get that much done!

The problem with most perspectives on stress is that it makes it out to be something that is all bad - which is misleading.

The fact is - even if it were possible - you wouldn't want a stress-free life.

As much as you may think otherwise, while a stress-free life would solve some problems in your life, it would create others.

In order to manage stress with success, we need to understand the difference between bad stress and good stress.

Bad Stress
Negative stress can often be caused by setbacks, losses, frustrations and aggravations, including financial struggles, job insecurity, conflict with loved ones, relationship breakup and health issues. If we have a lot of these unhealthy sources of stress in our lives, we suffer.

We might be depressed, anxious, angry, or hopeless - or a combination of all of these - especially if we go through long periods of negative stress. We may be irritable with those around us or at odds with our loved ones. Or we may be so stressed that we can't even sleep.

These stress symptoms add to our struggles, creating a vicious circle, if not a downward spiral. That's why it's called negative stress – since it erodes the quality of our lives.

Good Stress
In contrast to the above, good stress consists of healthy challenges, hard work and stretching ourselves outside of our comfort zone.

What makes this type of stress good is that, in the end, our lives are better off as a result of going through this stress. Examples of good, or healthy, stress include:

- Exercising
- Studying
- Having difficult conversations - with a significant other, co-worker, etc.
- Working hard towards an important goal - such as losing weight or getting out of debt
We still suffer when we go through good stress - but in the end we're glad we did it, because our lives are better off as a result.

Take the example of exercise. In order to get stronger physically, we need exert and stretch our muscles to increase our strength and stamina. We intentionally do something that is uncomfortable in the moment, so that we'll be stronger and healthier later.

Both bad stress and good stress are uncomfortable. What makes the difference is the result: bad stress takes a toll on our emotional and physical health over time, while good stress makes us stronger and healthier.

Both successful and unsuccessful individuals tend to deal with a lot of stress in their lives. Successful people, however, tend to experience mostly good stress. Unsuccessful people, in contrast, tend to have higher levels of bad stress in their lives.

As such, may you have a stressful life – but in the good sense of the word. It could very well be the secret to your success!

If I told you that there was a lifestyle factor that could improve the length and quality of your life – by boosting both your mental and physical health – would you be interested?

These are just some of the benefits experienced by those who participate in religious or spiritual activities on a regular basis. As such, this represents the seventh therapeutic lifestyle change (TLC) that can enhance our well-being.

A variety of studies have found that involvement in religious or spiritual activities can improve our emotional well-being and prevent many psychological and behavioral problems. These include reductions in the risk for anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicide.

But these activities lead to benefits in our physical health as well, and are associated with reduced risk of stroke, cancer, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

Furthermore, the combined effect of these benefits appears to be so strong that those involved in religious or spiritual activities on a weekly basis live an average of seven years longer when compared to those who don’t – and that’s just the average!

Why is this so? The reasons are many and aren’t completely understood from a scientific perspective, but one of them appears to be the social support that is found in a spiritual
community. Being around like-minded people who share our belief system – and who are also supportive – help us cope with the negative effects of unhealthy stress when we are going through a challenge in our life. In addition, the values and world-view that are shared in a religious or spiritual community help us give meaning to struggles and remain hopeful in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, almost all spiritual communities emphasize service to others in one way or another, which is a therapeutic lifestyle factor unto itself. And contemplative practices – such as prayer and meditation – are effective technique for coping with stress when life isn’t going our way.

Not all religious or spiritual communities, however, are created equal. The results mentioned above appear to come mostly from positive and supportive communities that emphasize values such as love, forgiveness and tolerance. In contrast, spiritual communities that emphasize guilt, punishment and intolerance appear to have little, if any, beneficial effects on our emotional and physical health; and they can even be harmful.

As such, if religious or spiritual involvement is not currently part of your lifestyle, you’d be well-advised to consider it as one of your TLCs!

8. Service to Others

“My advice is that if you must be selfish, be wisely selfish. Wise people serve others sincerely, putting the needs of others above their own. Ultimately you will be happier.”

– Dalai Lama

When we are in a bad mood, sometimes it can be helpful to take time to focus on ourselves. We may need to spend some time on our own self-care by focusing on some of the various therapeutic lifestyle factors that have been mentioned in this report.

If that is all we ever did to take care of ourselves, however, we would be missing out on an essential ingredient of happiness – one that has been recognized for thousands of years by many religions and spiritual disciplines: altruism.

Altruism can be defined as the selfless concern for the well-being of others. When we are altruistic, we become less self-centered and more other-centered. When it is done in the right spirit, giving to others of our time and resources creates a win-win situation. Because, while
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altruism helps others, it also makes us happier by improving our emotional well-being and relationships.

In addition to being a spiritual principle, the benefits of altruism have also been recognized in science. Altruistic behaviors promote psychological, physical and social well-being. Altruism also helps us overcome unhealthy characteristics such as greed, jealousy and self-centeredness, while enhancing healthy one such as love, joy and generosity.

That being said, these benefits depend on a number of conditions. Almost anything in life can be taken to an extreme, and if we give, give and give to an excessive degree we can put ourselves at risk of burnout. Our motivation for helping is another important factor – service motivated solely by pleasure in helping seems to be the key to unlocking the benefits of altruism, as opposed to service driven by a sense of duty, obligation or internal pressure.

With those considerations in mind, the benefits of altruism suggest that one of the keys to our own happiness is to help others. It may not make rational sense, but when done in the right spirit there is a great deal of evidence to back up this timeless spiritual principle. For this reason, it has come to be known as the “paradox of happiness.”

You Can Beat Depression and Anxiety

Our emotional health is not due to mysterious circumstances beyond our control. Nor is it necessarily the result of a traumatic past or some hypothetical chemical imbalance in our brain that can only be addressed by taking medication.

Just as our physical health is determined by a number of choices and factors in our lives, so too are there many lifestyle factors that determine the quality of our emotional health. These include exercise, nutrition and diet, time in nature, healthy relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religious or spiritual involvement and service to others.

The good news is that we don’t necessarily have to make all of these lifestyle changes to experience the benefits. You may find that some TLCs suit your own individual personality or circumstances more than others.

As such, consider TLCs to be the basic “ingredients” of happiness, and feel free to experiment with them until you find the “recipe” that work best for you!

And if you need a little guidance and support as you work to overcome your challenges and improve your quality of life, I invite you to call me, Dr. David Gosse, at (702) 385-HOPE for a free 15-minute consultation.

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