

50 New Year's Aspirations for Better Mental Health

1. Recognize all the times you got it right. Grab a notepad or create a new document: Make a list of three times you were gracious in the midst of meanness; three times you faced your fears and prevailed; three times you wanted to quit, but kept going.
2. Know that failures contain the recipes for success — Gather your ingredients, do your thing.
3. Protect your emotional well-being day with the Big Three: Quality sleep, lots of water, and slow, deep-breathing.
4. Consider your options when catastrophic thinking threatens to derail your mood. Close your eyes (this helps to block out stimulation) and fill in the blanks: I am afraid of _____. The worst-case scenario would be _____. On a scale of 1-10, the likelihood of this happening is _____. If this happens, I can do _____ and _____ and _____, instead of worrying and feeling helpless.
5. Smile more. While it's not easy to keep smiling when stressed out, studies report doing exactly that has health benefits. When recovering from a stressful situation, study participants who were smiling had lower heart rates than those with a neutral expression.
6. Make exercise fun. No sense in forcing yourself to workout at the gym if it's a continuous drag. Hit the local high school track, park or neighborhood boot camp to get your fit on.
7. Talk less. You don't need to explain yourself as much as you think you do.
8. Stay in touch with family and friends and keep them in the loop of your life events.
9. Eat quality chocolate.
10. Visit your local animal shelter. Nothing gets you out of your head faster than getting down on one knee and petting an 11 year old German Shepherd or a scared Chihuahua.
11. Share your talents. When things don't go your way it's easy to think you're a failure. You're not. Switch the dial and notice your unique gifts. Find someone to help out.
12. Get rid of unwanted clothes, kitchen gadgets, furniture and any other unnecessary items taking up precious physical and mental real estate.
13. Talk to the homeless man or woman at the park. Ask if s/he needs a water or a Pepsi. The answer will probably be yes.
14. Pay attention to your thought patterns. Common unhealthy tendencies include living in the past (leads to depression) and fearing the future (contributes to anxiety). Cherish this moment — it's the only one you've got!

15. Hug your family, friends and pets more. Don't forget yourself — you need hugs, too!
16. Spend a few extra minutes in bed each morning to focus on the day ahead and all the opportunities that await.
17. Give yourself frequent breaks when dealing with stressful events. Your emotional energy is scarce and finite.
18. Hit the bottle and the pipe less. Find alternative ways to cope with stress, uncertainty and time.
19. Keep your mobile phone charged, and designate a spot to hang your car keys.
20. Organize the paper clutter on your kitchen counter while your morning coffee or tea is brewing.
21. Pause two beats before responding to people who get on your nerves.
22. Look around — notice those areas that need a make-over. We often get stuck in habitual patterns of behavior. Life is constantly evolving — things that used to work may no longer. Adjust accordingly.
23. Floss your teeth before bedtime. Good daily habits form the cornerstone of mental health. Plus, lying to your dentist twice a year isn't cool 😊 .
24. Avoid wearing all-grey clothes to work as this color is associated with passivity, low involvement and a lack of energy.
25. Take more day trips.
26. Make Sunday your self-care day: get a massage, a mani-pedi, extra sleep, a delicious brunch, or catch up on leisure reading.
27. Beware of mindless candy: Think Facebook, sensational news, salacious current events, Donald Trump and all-things Kardashian. Set your timer for a few minutes and move on when time's up.
28. Ask yourself, "Am I telling myself stories again?" when you fall into the same childhood tendencies of irritable behavior when feeling stressed out. Notice what's different about now.
29. Listen to others with the goal to connect or to learn something new. Catch yourself when you go into response mode and you're more interested in your agenda than taking in what the other person is trying to communicate.
30. Fire up your creativity and go against conventional wisdom (or lack thereof) to solve a problem.

31. Wake up 15 minutes earlier than normal during the week. Moving slowly and purposefully sets you up for a calm, peaceful day where you are in control. Not the other way around.
32. Steer clear of assholes.
33. Don't be an asshole.
34. Leave drama where it belongs: On Broadway or at the movies. Your central nervous system will thank you.
35. Think faster. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, mulling, over-analyzing and delaying decisions doesn't help. Trust yourself and decide, already.
36. Keep moving. One of the hardest aspects of depression is fighting inertia. Even small steps make a difference.
37. Remember that happiness is a habit. You can rewire your emotional template each and every day. Let me help you!
38. When distraction interferes with productivity, try the Pomodoro Technique: Work for 25 minutes, then take a break for 5 minutes. Repeat this sequence two more times. On the fourth round, take a longer break. Having an egg timer or mobile device helps keep track of time.
39. Make your bed every morning. If the day doesn't go well, at least you can sleep on a neatly made bed.
40. Make time for play. Dance, skip, tell a joke, or do something you normally wouldn't do that adds whimsy, spontaneity and fun to your day.
41. Focus on solutions rather than problems.
42. Designate 15-20 minutes per day to worry, or schedule it, preferably near the end of your work/school day. Chances are when 4:45 pm rolls around, you'll be otherwise occupied and you'll realize that your worries aren't so pressing.
43. Practice mindfulness-based activities. Check out this resource, and this one and this one to promote calm, relaxation and presence of mind and body.
44. Look for the good in others. Look for the good in yourself.
45. Find a balance of structure that works for your lifestyle. If you're Type A, do less, and if you're prone to depression, do more. One of the best ways to get your groove back is to move rhythmically — not too fast, and not too slow.
46. Limit your time spent bowing in silent prayer to the iPhone. Constantly checking email, texts and social media updates contributes to distraction, frazzled nerves, social comparison, and a lack of productivity.

47. Commit to intentional acts that promote mental wellness every day. Here's a wonderful resource to help guide you, while this one will get you emotionally fit and fabulous in a month.

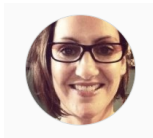
48. Have a healthy skepticism about what you see on social media. Remember you're viewing 'edited reality.' That sun-soaked scenic shot of Hawaii in your feed only shows a moment in time. Who knows how many pics didn't make the cut before it, or how much of reality is filtered-out.

49. Visit a doctor to rule out any physical condition which causes you to feel more anxious or depressed. On that note — stay away from Dr. Google and self-diagnosis.

50. Make healthy thoughts the most important part of your day: Rewired negative or unhealthy thoughts with four actions: 1. Ask yourself, *'Is this thought based in reality?'* 2. If yes, choose three actions to remedy your situation. 3. If no, remember your negative bias is working against you (when recalling a situation, our memories tend to default to the negative events, and discount the positive events). 4. Fire the Negative Committee inside your brain. Replace it with positive, realistic and healthy thoughts. *Always*.

Happy 2016 and beyond!

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Yours in emotional well-being,

Linda Esposito