

11 Little Mental Health Tips That Therapists Actually Give Their Patients

The goal of therapy is to give you the tools and strategies for navigating whatever is going on in your life—from stress or relationship issues to managing a mental health diagnosis. But a therapist isn't going to just hand over some life-changing advice and call it a day.

“Most of the work of therapy happens outside the consultation room,” licensed clinical psychologist [Alicia H. Clark](#), Psy.D., tells SELF. “The best progress happens when you apply what you've learned outside that setting, in your real life.”

The good news: This means that you have the power to enact real change in the way you think, behave, and cope on a daily basis. But you need to put in the work.

“There are 168 hours in a week,” licensed clinical psychologist [John Mayer](#), Ph.D., author of *Family Fit: Find Your Balance in Life*, tells SELF. “It would be terribly arrogant on the part of a therapist to believe that your one-hour intervention will suffice to keep your clients mentally healthy for the rest of the 167 hours.”

But, we get it, therapy isn't always accessible to everyone.

So, while this isn't meant to be a substitute for professional help, we asked mental health professionals to share the most impactful and least intimidating strategies that they typically give to their patients. If you're looking for mental health advice that you can start acting on immediately, try some of these tactics:

1. Actually try writing your thoughts down.

Venting is awesome for a reason—it helps you get out your frustrations. That's one of the reasons why it can be helpful to keep a mental health journal, David Klow, licensed marriage and family therapist, founder of [Chicago's Skylight Counseling Center](#) and author of the upcoming book *You Are Not Crazy: Love Letters from Your Therapist*, tells SELF.

You don't need to do anything in-depth or lengthy—just take five minutes or so a day to write down your thoughts, feelings, or ideas. This can be especially helpful if you want to keep track of changes in your moods or behavior over time (maybe to discuss with a therapist later). But it can also just be a place to work through something in a private, non-judgy space—something that you may not feel comfortable talking about just yet.

2. When you're super stressed and overwhelmed, see if there's any way to put a positive spin on it.

Stress happens, and it always sucks on some level—whether you're overworked or overbooked or both.

Still, Dr. Clark says you can take those moments when you're totally overwhelmed and try to look for the good in them. For example, if you're stressed because you're up against an intense work deadline, think about how that stress is actually helping to push you to get it done. "The sensation of pressure doesn't have to be negative—it can be a positive challenge and motivating," Dr. Clark says. Or, if you don't have a free weekend to yourself in the next two months, consider how it's pretty great that you've got such a rich social life these days. In many cases, it's all about how you view it.

And, of course, if you're chronically stressed and there really isn't an upside, consider viewing that as a welcome warning sign that you need to find ways to scale back before you burn out.

3. Plan to take daily, low-key walks (and actually do them).

Sometimes you just need to step away from what you're doing or dealing with and get some air. Sure, getting regular exercise is important for mental health, but even just taking regular, relaxing walks can be soothing for your mind. Plus, it may literally force you to take a breather when you need one.

"Getting out into the world and connecting with life is usually healing, as is the rhythmic nature of walking," Klow says. "It can help get you out of your head and into the

world.” Try taking a walk when you first get up or after dinner, or try scheduling 20 minutes into your work calendar to remind you to just step out for a bit.

4. Counter negative thoughts with positive ones.

Negative thoughts are just a part of life, but they don't have to consume you. Instead of trying to ignore those thoughts altogether, try countering them with positive statements, suggests Dr. Mayer. For example, if you're feeling anxious and regretful about staying in bed til noon one day, follow that with a reminder that you really needed some extra rest and alone time this week. You can get back out there tomorrow.

5. Make a list of “your people.”

You know the ones—these are the people you know you can always call, text, or email when you need to feel a connection, Klow says.

“By building a list of people that you trust, with whom you can talk to in times of need, you allow yourself a strong sense of not being alone,” he says. The next time you're struggling, check out your list and reach out to someone on it. Then, work your way down if someone you love isn't free to talk.

6. When you're stuck in a negative thought spiral, write down two good things.

It's hard to think of anything else when you're really upset or frazzled, so this exercise is mostly about hitting pause and broadening your focus.

Just think of two or three positive things in your life in this moment—something that brings you joy, something you're proud of, someone who loves you. This can help ease your feelings of angst and frustration, Dr. Clark says. "Gratitude is something I work with people to cultivate especially when life feels overwhelming and negative," she adds. Even being thankful for a hot shower can help you reset.

7. Have a self-care arsenal.

Everyone has certain things or coping mechanisms that give them a boost when they're feeling crappy, and you might not even realize what yours are, Klow says. Maybe it's taking a bath, watching that one YouTube clip, putting on the sweatpants with three different holes in them, whatever. Just make sure whatever it is, it's accessible when you really need it.

8. Talk back to your inner voice.

Everyone has an inner voice, i.e. the way you talk to yourself

in your head or out loud. But sometimes that voice can be cruel—even though it’s ultimately dictated by you. It can tell you that you’re a failure or convince you to stress about something that you have absolutely no control over. “Most people have a loud inner critic which makes their life more stressful,” Klow says. “Learning to have a reassuring and soothing inner voice can make a big difference in improving your mental health.”

Obviously that’s easier said than done, but here’s a good place to start: When your inner voice is giving you really crappy feedback and advice, stop and consider how you would talk to your best friend in this situation. Then try to adjust your inner voice to talk like that. Chances are you wouldn’t tell your friend she’s doing everything wrong and everyone hates her. You’d probably tell her she’s overreacting, that she has no reason to think these things, and that she should focus on what she can actually control in the situation.

9. Ask yourself “and then what?” when you’re stuck on an anxious thought.

Ruminating over something that’s making you anxious isn’t going to achieve anything. But you can help push your thought process forward by forcing yourself to think ahead, Dr. Clark says. “This helps elucidate thoughts that are reasonable, probable, or sometimes even rational,” she says.

For example, if you keep worrying that you’re going to lose your job, ask yourself what would happen if that were the case. That might seem terrifying at first (you’d be strapped for money, you could lose your apartment, it could impact your

relationship, etc.) but then follow those thoughts—what would happen next? Maybe you would look for a new job, find a cheaper apartment, take out a loan. Eventually your thoughts should come around to reasonable solutions to your biggest worries. You might even realize that these scenarios—while certainly anxiety-inducing—are highly unlikely to come to pass.

10. Think about your alcohol habits and whether you could stand to cut back a little.

Your alcohol intake doesn't just impact your physical health—it affects your mind, too. So it's important to consider your [drinking habits](#) when you're aiming to improve your mental health, says Dr. Clarke.

If you find that you're typically drinking more when you're feeling depressed or anxious, or that you [end up feeling worse whenever you drink](#), try cutting back on how much you have and how often you have it. Keeping a log of your drinking and your emotions before and after might also be helpful.

11. Have a bedtime ritual.

Quality sleep is a crucial part of your mental health, but it can be especially hard to come by when you're struggling with anxious or depressed thoughts. So do everything you can to try to quiet your thoughts before you get into bed.

Since it's unlikely you're going to solve anything overnight, Dr. Clark recommends pressing pause on your thoughts and trying to get a solid night of sleep before diving back into things. That might include writing down anything you're worried about so that you can get back to it tomorrow—and stop thinking about it now.

You can also look for winding-down activities that won't work against you (the way staring at your phone or Netflix might), like coloring, journaling, or reading (as long as you set a stopping point in advance).

The bottom line: There are a number of small but impactful ways to improve your mental health every day.

Of course, this list is no substitute for getting help from a licensed mental health professional who can walk you through individual strategies that can help you. But hopefully this gave you a few ideas that you can use the next time you're feeling overwhelmed. Remember, don't be afraid to reach out for help if you need it.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a mental health disorder, visit the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) website for valuable resources to find help and support, or call the toll-free helpline at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

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