



An Essential Mental Health Check-In

EVERY YEAR, YOU schedule appointments with your physician and dentist to make sure your body and teeth are strong and healthy. Doesn't your mental health merit the same attention? Although an annual psychological checkup may not be feasible for everyone in the current health-care system, individuals should still feel empowered to explore their mental well-being. A self-exam like the one below is not an official diagnostic tool and in no way substitutes for professional assessment or treatment. But considering a wide-ranging set of questions can provide a framework in which to take inventory of your inner life, providing the opportunity to probe, reflect, and grow.

How Are You Doing?

FOR EACH OF these items, ask yourself if the statements describe your life, or if they don't. If your answers to half or more are negative, it may be time to schedule a formal check-in with a mental health care provider.

1 MOOD. I have days when I feel down, but over the past year, I haven't experienced a period of depressed mood that lasted longer than two weeks or negatively affected my work or relationships. There's enough going on in my life to keep me absorbed, and I have interests or hobbies I engage in regularly.

2 RELATIONSHIPS. I have people who care about me and people whom I care about and can depend on. I express my love to the people closest to me. I have at least one person with whom I feel I can share my most personal thoughts and feelings. If I have a significant other, we enjoy each other's company far more than we argue or disagree.

3 PROFESSIONAL AND FINANCIAL STABILITY. I feel like a contributing member of society. I am



either engaged in full-time work, provide care for children, or am retired but remain active. I find my work interesting enough and reasonably fulfilling. My workplace is not physically or emotionally toxic. I do not have excessive debt, or if I do, I am following a plan to pay it off. I neither feel panicked about finances nor spend money recklessly.

4 SUBSTANCE USE. I believe my alcohol or drug use is under control, and others in my life would agree. In the past year, my drinking or drug use hasn't increased significantly, nor have I tried to cut down but failed. I haven't suffered any negative repercussions, such as arrests, work absences, injuries, or relationship conflicts from substance use in the past year.

5 TEMPER. My temper is usually under control. I don't use physical aggression to intimidate others. People don't often tell me to calm down or think of me as hot-headed. I don't hold grudges or plot revenge against those who have wronged me. I don't feel as if people are out to get me.

6 PHYSICAL HEALTH. My health is adequate. I have had a physical with blood work in the past year, I follow my doctor's advice, and I take medications as prescribed. I walk at least 30 minutes a day, four days a week. I mostly eat food that is healthy and limit junk food. I don't binge or unduly restrict my intake. I do not suffer from symptoms for which doctors cannot find a cause.

7 SLEEP. I do not have difficulty falling or staying asleep, and I get at least seven hours more nights than not. I sleep fairly regular hours given the requirements of my job or childcare responsibilities and don't have frequent nightmares.

8 SELF-CARE. I am able to relax and take it easy. I know family and friends are generally more important than work, and my actions reflect that. I take an hour a day to relax and do things I enjoy. I spend a full day not working at least once a week.

9 PURPOSE. I feel as if there must be some sort of purpose to my life, even if I am not sure what it might be. I am not frightened about the future or tortured by the past. I am able to enjoy being with people and doing things in the moment, and I notice the beauty in the world.

10 GOALS. I don't feel as if time is running out to do the things I want to do. If I want to, but haven't yet committed to a life partner, had children, or launched a career, I feel those goals are within reach. I do my best to be a good spouse, parent, and/or child.

11 SUICIDALITY. I am glad to be alive. In the past year, I have not had more than a fleeting thought about

suicide. I know there are people who care about me and that they and others would be worse off without me. I look forward to certain experiences and want to keep experiencing them.

12 WARNINGS. In the past year, no one has suggested that I seek mental health treatment, and my partner has not suggested entering couples counseling.

—Glenn Sullivan, Ph.D.

When to Take A Mental Health Day

IF YOU HAD a cold, you might decide to power through your workday. But if you had the flu, you'd likely stay home and rest—and no one would call you "weak"; more likely, coworkers would thank you for not coming in. Mental health should get the same respect. We're too often told to "get over it" when we struggle with anxiety, depression, or similar concerns. But if you don't proactively address your mental health, you won't be able to perform at your best. Here's how to tell if it might be time for a mental health day:

- 1** When you're distracted by something you need to address. If an unfinished task is leading to anxiety, a day off to complete it can address your stress, provide a sense of control, and help you focus more fully when you're back at work.
- 2** When you've been neglecting yourself. If you have not had time to recharge recently, an opportunity to practice self-care may help you perform better.
- 3** When you need to attend mental health-related appointments. If you need to visit your doctor, adjust your medication, or schedule an appointment with a therapist, taking a day off can be instrumental.

—Amy Morin, LCSW

TIMETABLE FOR CHANGE

TODAY: Make sure you have scheduled all of your essential health checkups for the year—medical, dental, and specialists—and if not, schedule them.

THIS MONTH: Devote a block of time without distractions to a mental health check-in like the one above and think about which areas you might need to improve on.

THIS YEAR: Be attentive to your stress and exhaustion levels and, if you believe it's merited, see how taking a mental health day makes you feel.