

Boost your mental health

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Many people are struggling to access or continue with professional mental health assistance as a result of cost-of-living pressures.

It's timely to consider what people can do to assist their mental health, whether they are accessing therapy services or not. Even when seeing a mental health professional, people make the most effective gains when they apply the following principles.

It helps to acknowledge if you are suffering a degree of mental distress that is impacting your mood or functioning. There is no shame in this. Acknowledging your vulnerability and choosing to actively do something about it is a core step to improving your wellbeing.

It helps to clarify what are your hopes for change. Do you want to experience an improved mood, a shift in behaviour, such as tempered anger reactions or reduced substance use, or greater ease with performing certain roles or responsibilities? The key is to then be prepared to do something, anything at all, to work towards your goal.

Taking even a small active step to improve your mental health, such as boosting your physical activity, delaying acting on an unhelpful impulse, recognising and stepping back from negative thoughts, or seeking support from a trusted friend will often lead to other benefits.

For example, I recall a chronically traumatised client greatly improving his depression by deciding that he would take a short walk on his property each day and then say to himself, "At least I did that!" In doing so, he was not only mobilising himself more, but was starting to counter his deeply critical self-thoughts.

A next step is to acknowledge and build on whatever positive changes you have made. An important therapist role is pointing out the seemingly minor yet constructive steps that people have taken that they may have overlooked.

As people recognise they are making genuine progress they tend to become less blinkered, more hopeful and more open to further significant changes.

Most psychological difficulties relate to rigidity in one form or another.

This may include stuck habits, stereotyped thinking or long-term patterns of avoidance. As people notice even small benefits from their positive steps, this supports further shifts. It can lead to more hope, insight and an expanded outlook. Giving yourself a pat on the back for your efforts will speed your progress.

Over and above specific therapy strategies, much of the work of experienced therapists comes down to helping people enact these principles. They might seem simple enough, but they make a real difference. Achieving and maintaining changes in behaviour, thinking and mood will usually take considerable effort and persistence. The path to progress does not have to be smooth or grand. It usually isn't. Chris Mackey is a principal psychologist at Chris Mackey and Associates, Geelong