

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

[MHANATIONAL.ORG/MAY](https://mhanational.org/may)

LOOK AROUND, LOOK WITHIN

2023 OUTREACH TOOLKIT

[WWW.MENTALHEALTHMN.ORG](https://www.mentalhealthmn.org)



MENTAL HEALTH
Minnesota
An affiliate of Mental Health America

CREATE COMFORT

A big part of a mentally healthy living situation is feeling like your space gives you comfort, support, and calming energy. This could look like keeping comfort items around. Your favorite blanket, a meaningful gift, or a candle in your favorite scent can go a long way in helping you feel more at home. Your home can also impact your mental health based on colors, natural light, and set-up. Appropriate light, furnishing textures and patterns, and room organization can help reduce signs of anxiety and depression.⁸

WHAT CAN I DO TO CREATE COMFORT?

Notice how you feel in different parts of your home. What spaces feel the most comfortable and why? Consider how you can include those elements in other areas of your home that don't have the same energy.

Know that there's no one-size-fits-all ideal home environment. You might need to rework things a few times to find what's best for you.

Personalize your space. Put up photos of you and your loved ones, display your favorite belongings, and decorate with the intention of creating a specific feeling, like joy, creativity, or peace.

Don't let finances prevent you from changing your space. Being more comfortable in your space might be as simple as moving furniture around, swapping wall art between rooms, or opening up your blinds to let in more natural bright light.

CHECK AIR QUALITY

Good air quality can raise oxygen levels in your brain, boosting mood and focus.⁹ It's also associated with reducing the effect of stress hormones and promoting better sleep.¹⁰ While getting fresh air directly from outside is ideal (mostly because of the other benefits of nature), filtered air protects your well-being, too. You can also get a number of similar benefits from the way you breathe.

According to a 2022 literature review, 95% of studies on outdoor air pollution, mental health, and human/animal brains found that exposure to polluted air changes the brain. Of the studies, 73% reported that those exposed to above-average levels of air pollution showed more symptoms and behaviors associated with mental health challenges.¹¹

Many studies on different breath awareness and regulation techniques have found them to reduce symptoms of stress, depression, and PTSD.¹²

WHAT CAN I DO TO BREATHE BETTER?

Check the air quality. Go to airnow.gov to see the air quality in your ZIP code.

Open windows. Let air in as weather allows and if you live in an area with low levels of air pollution.

Use an air purifier. Better indoor air quality and flow can help you think more clearly.¹³

Do some breathing exercises. Try slowly breathing in through your nose for five seconds and out through your mouth for five seconds. The way you breathe has a strong impact on helping you regulate your emotions. Diaphragmatic breathing can improve attention and levels of cortisol (the stress hormone).¹⁴ Visit bit.ly/41PYLHP to find additional breathing exercises.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

When you're struggling with your mental health, just getting through the day can be hard, but there are things you can do to your space to help yourself be more productive and reach your goals. Ultimately, a healthy home environment will look different from one person to the next. It might take time, thoughtfulness, and multiple tries to get your space to meet your needs, but eventually it will help make your space feel right for you.

WHAT CAN I DO TO SET MYSELF UP FOR SUCCESS?

Remove barriers to healthy habits. Try putting your cleaning supplies or chore schedule in sight if you want to be better about keeping things neat, or place fresh fruit on your counter if you want to eat healthier.

Keep sensory or stim toys around the house. These types of toys can help channel your nervous energy into a healthy distraction so you're better able to focus on tasks that require a lot of brain power.

Prep! If starting the day is hard, lay out your clothes and pack your lunch the night before so you can grab them quickly when the morning comes.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

If you're taking steps to improve your surroundings at home but are still struggling, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.



WORKSHEET:

SHAPING YOUR HOME ENVIRONMENT



On a scale from 1-10, how satisfied are you with your space?



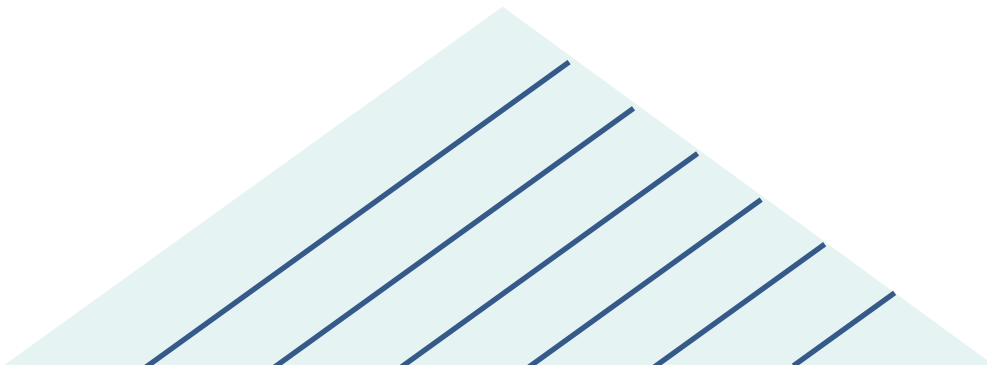
What do you want to feel when you're in your space? What might you want to change about the space to help create those feelings?

Thinking about your space, what do you already love about it? Write your answers to the prompts below in the heart shapes.

- a. Something that makes you feel happy.
- b. Something that makes you feel cozy.
- c. Something that makes you feel safe.
- d. Something that makes you feel connected.
- e. Something that makes you feel like you.

What do you feel like your space is missing? This can be an item, an overall aesthetic, a feeling, or another factor. Write your answers in the roof of the house.

What are one or two things you can do right away to bring more of what you want into your space? Write your answers in the moving boxes.



a.

b.

c.

d.

e.



THE OUTDOORS & NATURE

Spending time in nature is linked to many positive mental health outcomes – improved focus, lower stress, better mood, and reduced risk of developing a mental health condition.¹ Most studies on nature and well-being look at green spaces like parks and forests, but researchers are also beginning to look at blue spaces – places with ocean and river views. However, you don't need a picture-perfect outdoor experience to get the benefits of nature.



PLANTS & GREEN SPACE

Seventy percent of respondents to a Mental Health America Connection Survey reported wishing they had more time outdoors, ideally in nature away from their neighborhoods. Cities often have more stressors to physical and mental health, but green space (like parks and gardens) can reduce their impact. Even spending some time in your backyard (if you have one) can produce positive outcomes, and feeling connected to nature helps your mood even if you don't spend time outdoors.¹

Children living in neighborhoods with more green space had a reduced risk of developing depression, mood disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and substance use disorder.²

Even being in the presence of indoor plants is worthwhile – studies have found this to improve focus, memory, and stress tolerance.³

WHAT CAN I DO TO FIND GREEN SPACE?

Don't discount the little things. While being in the wilderness is especially nice, even city parks, a small garden, or sitting under a tree can support your mental health.

Bring the outdoors in. Adding greenery to your space can have a similar effect to seeing plants outdoors – and some, like snake plants and bamboo palms, can purify your air.⁴

NATURAL LIGHT

Sunlight triggers the release of serotonin and vitamin D, which are associated with boosting mood and focus and reducing stress.⁵ Without enough sun, these levels can drop, leading to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Light exposure also has a direct impact on your body's sleep-wake cycle, and consistent sleep is one of the most important factors in your well-being.

- More time spent in outdoor light is associated with lower odds of using antidepressant medications and fewer symptoms of insomnia.⁶
- The natural lighting of a home is known to impact how you describe your own mood. Improvements to natural lighting have a positive impact on overall emotional social well-being, particularly among women and younger population.⁷

WHAT CAN I DO TO GET NATURAL LIGHT?

Enjoy the sunshine. Just 10-15 minutes of sun on your arms and legs a few times a week has the potential to generate all the vitamin D you need; however, this depends on factors like the season, time of day, pollution, skin tone, and more.⁸

Try a light box. Light therapy can help with symptoms of depression and sleep disorders. The bright light from a light box mimics natural sunlight, causing the brain to produce serotonin and regulate your internal clock.⁹



CONNECTION

One of the greatest benefits you get from nature is connection, which is linked to a better connection to self, community, and purpose. Time in nature benefits personal growth, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and social skills.¹⁰ When children connect with nature, they're more imaginative and independent, and they feel more connected to the peers they're playing with and other living things.

- Accessible nature in a neighborhood, such as parks, lakes, or gardens, are associated with an increased sense of community belonging.¹¹
- Of respondents to MHA's Connection Survey, people who reported not feeling connected to nature also didn't feel connected to themselves, to others, or to spirituality/purpose.

WHAT CAN I DO TO CONNECT?

Plant something. Gardening is a great mindfulness activity. Getting your hands in the dirt can help you feel more grounded, and helping a plant grow can even boost your self-esteem.¹²

Practice gratitude. Nature is everywhere – even in cities, you can find places like community gardens, little courtyards, or trees full of birds and squirrels. Once you start tuning into your senses and appreciating the unexpected, it often feels more meaningful.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

If you're taking steps to incorporate nature into your surroundings but still feel like you're struggling with your mental health, you may be showing the early signs of a mental health condition.

Take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.



WORKSHEET:

OPENING YOUR MIND TO THE OUTDOORS

Sometimes it's hard to do the things we want to do – and it's especially hard to do the things we don't want to do but know are good for us. You can boost your motivation by thinking about how to connect your goal to positive feelings.

GUIDED MEDITATION

For 30-60 seconds, close your eyes and think about being outdoors. How do you feel? What do you see? What is around you? Light? Wind? What does it smell like? What does it sound like? Open your eyes. Below jot down some notes about what benefits you felt being outdoors. *Push aside any thoughts about what you "should" feel and really think about the positives about spending some of your time outdoors.*



PLANNING

What is one thing you can do in the next week or two to spend time outdoors for your mental health? *In MHA's Connection Survey, 68% of people answered "taking a walk" – that's often the first activity that comes to mind, but you have other options too! Anything that gets you outside counts as a starting point. (Examples: reading in the backyard, exercising in the park, a camping trip, etc.)*

BUILDING MOTIVATION

Motivation is tied to pleasure or the avoidance of pain or fear. We feel motivation from things we say or feel inside our minds or from things we get from others or outside ourselves. What gets you motivated? What helps you feel accomplished, appreciated, or loved? *(Examples: checking off a to-do list, hearing verbal praise, spending time with others, doing things that relate to my values, etc.)*

PLANNING INTO ACTION

Now that you've done some reflecting, it's time to start preparing for action. How can you make your answers to "Planning" and "Building Motivation" work together? Or, when working toward your goal, what can you do to keep your mind on the positive it brings to your life? *(Examples: When I take a walk, I'll check it off my list; I'll share goals and wins with friends for praise; etc.)*



NEIGHBORHOODS AND TOWNS

Did you know that your ZIP code plays a role in your health? It might surprise you to learn that up to 60% of your health is determined by where you live.¹ Your neighborhood, along with your town and larger geographical region, impacts your sense of community and belonging, and determines how easily you can access the things and services you need, including for your mental health.



ACCESS TO QUALITY RESOURCES

One of the biggest ways your location can impact your mental health is how easy or hard it is to access the things you need. This includes healthy food, safe outdoor space, quality medical care, and public transportation (which still may not get you where you need to go in a reasonable amount of time even when you do have access). Because local income taxes usually fund public services, low-income areas are often under-resourced in quality education, road maintenance, community programs, and more, which can make it difficult for people to meet their basic needs. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other marginalized communities often feel these strains the hardest.

- Roughly 6% of people in the U.S. live in a food desert, which is an area with limited options to get affordable and healthy food.^{2,3} Food deserts often lead to food insecurity, which is associated with increased stress and depression. In young adults, food insecurity often co-occurs with suicidal thoughts and substance use.⁴
- Each year, 3.6 million people in the U.S. go without health services because they don't have a car, access to public transportation, or another way to get appointments.⁵
- A study on community recreation centers in California found that lower-income neighborhoods had lower-quality facilities and fewer no-cost youth programs.⁶

WHAT CAN I DO TO GET ACCESS?

Get to know your neighbors. The people living around you can be a big help when you need something. You can support each other with carpools, running errands, or sharing resources.

Connect with a group in your area where community members share and exchange services. You may be able to find an organized mutual aid program, or you can search for a local Facebook or NextDoor group focused on community support.

GENTRIFICATION AND POVERTY

Gentrification is when a low-income neighborhood quickly changes as wealthier people and businesses move into the area. This often forces out long-time residents and businesses as rent, mortgages, property taxes, and the general cost of living rise. People and business who are forced to move – particularly within the BIPOC community – generally end up in lower-income and under-resourced areas.⁷

- A 2020 study found that adults living in gentrified neighborhoods – particularly renters, low-income residents, and long-term residents – were at increased risk for serious psychological distress compared to those in low-income, ungentrified neighborhoods.⁸
- Hospitalization rates for mental health conditions, including schizophrenia and mood disorders, are two times higher in people displaced by gentrification compared to those who remain in their neighborhood.⁹
- A study on New York City neighborhoods found a 22% higher rate of anxiety or depression among children who started life in areas that gentrified than among children in areas that did not gentrify, even when controlling for income and rent.¹⁰



WHAT CAN I DO TO PROTECT MY NEIGHBORHOOD?

Support local businesses. Locally owned businesses – from coffee shops to grocery stores to home services – keep communities going. By shopping locally, you help them stay open.

Stay connected. If you are forced to relocate, try to stay connected to your original community or the people you knew from it. Many gentrified neighborhoods previously had a strong community identity and culture, and maintaining those social ties can protect your mental health.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Feeling a sense of connection is crucial for your mental well-being. While you can find this with many people and in many places, the people you live near can provide community and social support. Your physical closeness to neighbors allows for spontaneous interactions and shared interests, which can lead to genuine friendship. Strong community among neighborhoods and nearby residents protects mental health through shared support, resources, and joy. On the other hand, you may be in a neighborhood without community, feel like an outsider, or lose your community because of gentrification – all of which can have be harmful to mental health.

- In low-income and under-resourced areas, community bonds often predict the mental health of residents. Strong social ties within neighborhoods protect well-being by fostering a sense of teamwork and community care.¹¹
- Of children living in neighborhoods that parents perceived as “not supportive,” about 18% had a diagnosed mental health condition, compared to 13% of those living in supportive neighborhoods.¹²

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE NEARBY SOCIAL CONNECTIONS?

Be a friendly neighbor. It seems obvious, but taking the first step to wave or say “hello” can be the beginning of a fulfilling connection. You can also try to organize group gatherings.

Seek out places within your neighborhood or town. Where can you find safety, comfort, or connection? Think outside of the box of where you can find people with similar interests or commonalities to you. These could be parks, places of worship, barber shops, tattoo parlors, cafes, or libraries.

COMMUNITY SAFETY

There are many reasons people might feel unsafe in their local surroundings, including violence and mass shootings, police presence and brutality, and discrimination and harassment. These safety concerns may prevent people from engaging in outdoor or community activities, which can be harmful to physical and mental health. Even if you haven’t dealt with fear or violence yourself, witnessing or hearing about it can still impact you. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently defined community violence as a “critical public health problem,” and the World Health Organization has recommended adding exposure to community violence (ECV) as a new adverse childhood experience (ACE) category.^{13,14}

- People across the U.S. are on edge, with a quarter of Americans live in fear of being attacked in their own neighborhoods.¹⁵ Youth exposed to repeated community violence are less engaged at school and more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.^{16,17}
- Many predominantly BIPOC neighborhoods are over-policed, causing chronic stress and hypervigilance. This policing is often focused on low-level offenses like traffic stops or curfew violations, which research shows does not reduce crime rates but does risk escalating to police violence and cause community trauma.^{18,19}
- LGBTQIA2S+ people living in rural areas are less likely to have protections, such as nondiscrimination laws, and more likely to have discriminatory laws, like religious exemption laws that allow service providers to discriminate.²⁰

WHAT CAN I DO TO FEEL SAFE IN MY COMMUNITY?

Focus on community care. Crime occurs in areas where people don’t have their needs met.²¹ While you can’t fix everything, you can take part in keeping your neighborhood safe by providing support and resources and advocating for harm repair over punishment.

Identify safe people. Being prepared can help alleviate anxiety and fear. Know who your allies are and who you can count on if you find yourself in danger.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

Nowhere is perfect, and every community faces challenges. Stressing over your well-being in your neighborhood can take a toll on your mental health.

If you the area where you live is worrying you or constantly on your mind, take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.



SAFE AND STABLE HOUSING

Housing is more than just protection from the outdoor elements. Safe and stable housing is a basic need, and it can be difficult or impossible to care for your mental health if that need is not met.



STABLE HOUSING

Stable (or secure) housing means that you aren't living in uncertainty about your housing situation and generally have a choice over when to move. The opposite of this – housing instability – can mean you're facing a number of different challenges, like struggling to pay rent, overcrowding in shelters, moving frequently, or spending most of your income on housing.

If you face the possibility of homelessness or move spaces frequently, the stress and anxiety of those situations can wear on you after a while, especially if you're moving without much notice. Frequent moves also make it hard to develop routines and connections to your local community, which are beneficial for mental health. For many people, not having a true "home base" to consistently return to can leave them feeling distressed, disconnected, or isolated.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I'M EXPERIENCING UNSTABLE HOUSING?

Seek support in finding housing. Each state has information on identifying services. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has information on local homelessness assistance and help with preventing housing loss. Their portal, [hud.gov](https://www.hud.gov), can direct you to state-specific resources. If you meet low-income guidelines, you might qualify to live in different types of public housing. You can locate your housing authority at [affordablehousing.com](https://www.affordablehousing.com).

Build your connection to self. It sounds cliché, but feeling at home in your mind can help you cope when your housing is uncertain. Having healthy routines that you can carry out almost anywhere (like deep breathing every morning or practicing gratitude before going to sleep) is a great way to establish that. Practices of mindfulness in challenging situations can help you handle what is causing stress and improve your emotional state.¹

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Only about 15% of adults in the U.S. live alone – meaning most people share living space with family members, roommates, or others. Small disagreements among household members are totally normal, but being scared of the people you live with might mean you're in a problematic or abusive situation. The location of your housing can also play a role if you are feeling unsafe. Living in an unsafe neighborhood not only affects physical safety but can also impact mental health. Neighborhoods are places where you should be able to build a social network – places to help mental health thrive. An unsafe neighborhood can limit your ability to connect with others and find community.

Experiencing – or even witnessing – physical, emotional, or psychological abuse is traumatic. It can have long-lasting effects on your mental health and lead to conditions like depression, anxiety, or PTSD.² New research shows that women who have experienced domestic abuse have three times the risk of developing a mental health condition compared with those who have not.³ Experiencing abuse is never your fault.

You deserve to feel safe.



WHAT CAN I DO IF I FEEL UNSAFE?

Tell someone you trust. Feeling unsafe at home is a big burden to carry alone – sharing with someone can help you feel like you have a safety net. Learn more about home safety at bit.ly/3F3vslc.

Find another place to feel like home. Get familiar with a community center, cafe, place of worship, or friend's home so that you have a place of comfort. If you are scared for your safety or experiencing abuse, it is important to remove yourself from the situation. You can call the domestic violence hotline at 800-799-7233 or visit domesticshelters.org/help to locate a shelter near you. Call 911 if you are in immediate danger and cannot remove yourself from your home to seek help.

POTENTIAL SAFETY HAZARDS

Your home doesn't need to be perfectly tidy, but some house basics are essential for your safety. Your living space shouldn't have the potential to cause health issues – exposure to things like mold, toxic chemicals, and uncleaned animal mess puts you at risk of physical and mental health challenges.⁴ A hoarding condition can create such circumstances that put everyone living within the home at risk.

It's also important to think through safe storage of potential dangers like weapons and addictive substances, especially if you or someone in the home has thoughts of suicide. Over half of the nation's deaths by suicide involve a firearm, and safe storage (and proactive policies) can help lower this rate.^{5,6} If you're struggling to control your substance use, you may want to get rid of those substances in your home altogether to avoid temptation. If they belong to someone else, you could ask them to keep drug(s) or alcohol out of sight or locked away.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT SAFETY HAZARDS?

Determine who is responsible for fixing housing-related hazards. They may be your responsibility or the responsibility of a landlord, building owner, or town/municipality.

Have a professional take care of safety hazards. Once you've identified who is responsible for fixing hazards, make sure a qualified professional is there to check it out or make repairs.

Add friction between you and dangerous objects and/or substances. This could look like removing items from your home, locking them up so they are harder to access, or putting other safeguards in place to keep you from engaging in the behavior you want to change. Making it harder to act on risky decisions is powerful harm reduction.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

Having safe, stable, and healthy home conditions set the foundation for achieving and maintaining good mental health.

If you're taking steps to improve your housing situation but are still struggling with your mental health, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition – take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.

