

# Health Insights

## December 2022

### The Mental Health Benefits of Reading

Researchers investigating the impact of reading experiences are reporting evidence of promising mental and social health benefits for readers. Whether reading alone or with others, people are finding connection and meaning between the pages, giving their mental health a boost along the way. Practitioners are now exploring new models using the literary arts to support mental health in clinics, classrooms, and communities worldwide.

#### Benefits of Reading

The experience of being immersed or engaged while reading a story is called narrative absorption and serves as more than an innately pleasurable experience – it can also enhance our sense of well-being. Researchers believe that mentally transporting ourselves away from our physical surroundings can provide an escape or opportunity for meaningful contemplation.

Reading not only provides these opportunities, but it also helps us make sense of our worlds. In one neuroimaging study, participants who read more narrative fiction had greater activation of parts of the prefrontal cortex involved in perspective-taking when reading text containing social context. This greater activation explains the correlation between lifetime reading and the ability to understand how people are thinking.

Sima, R., & Hagan, E. (2022, March 16). The mental health benefits of reading. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-art-effect/202203/the-mental-health-benefits-reading>

A good story tends to stick with you, and so do the benefits. The health impacts of reading last long after we put down the book, with some research showing reductions in depression symptoms persisting months, or even years, later in adults. Reading can not only help make life more worth living, but is also associated with living longer. One study found that older adults who regularly read books had a 20% reduction in mortality compared to those who did not read.

#### Reading Builds Bridges to Understanding Ourselves & Others

In a time of pronounced isolation and disconnection caused by the pandemic, reading fiction may also help foster greater empathy and social cognition. One study found that frequent fiction readers were associated with better social ability and the tendency to become absorbed in a story correlated with higher empathy scores. These results, along with a meta-analysis, found that lifetime exposure to narrative fiction was associated with more perspective-taking and empathy.

Reading and responding to fiction may foster young people's understanding of human nature and their place in the world, especially if the texts are thematically relevant and coupled with writing activities that reflect on personal experiences related to the reading. Identifying with characters going through similar experiences can comfort readers, knowing they are not alone in their struggles or pain.

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# Mental Health Moment

## What is Emotional Health?

Good emotional health is essential to resilience, self-awareness, and contentment. It's important to understand that having good emotional health doesn't mean you're always happy or free from negative emotions; instead, it's about having the skills and resources to manage the ups and downs of life.

Working on our emotional health is just as important as caring for our mental and physical well-being. Taking care of our emotional health can help us with the following:

- **Resilience to stress.** Emotional distress makes you more vulnerable to physical illness by impacting your immune system.
- **Deeper relationships.** It will be easier for you to connect with others by showing empathy and compassion. You'll also manage arguments more easily and talk through your feelings.
- **Higher self-esteem.** Your thoughts, feelings, and experiences influence how you feel about yourself. Good emotional health will help you see the best you.
- **More energy.** Having good emotional health helps you feel more energized and focus more clearly.

## Improving Emotional Health

Improving your emotional health will take some time, as it is more of a process than a goal. You may already be doing things that can help improve emotional health. Review these tips to see what you can do to enhance your emotional health:

1. **Practice emotional regulation.** Coping strategies such as meditation, journaling, listening to music, and talking with a therapist can help you respond instead of reacting.
2. **Exercise.** Regular exercise can help ease depression and anxiety by releasing natural brain chemicals that can increase your sense of well-being.
3. **Strengthen social connections.** Staying connected with others helps provide a buffer when going through challenges.
4. **Be mindful.** Practicing mindfulness can help curb emotional reactivity and develop greater satisfaction.
5. **Get quality sleep.** Sleep deprivation can lead to repetitive negative thoughts. Make sure you're going to bed and waking up on a consistent schedule.

Lamothe, Cindy. "Emotional Health: Why It's as Important as Physical Health." Healthline, Healthline Media, 14 June 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/emotional-health#improvement>.

## Coping With Change

Change can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. It's important to remember that it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry when experiencing change. Learning to cope with change in healthier ways will help you become more resilient.

1. **Taking care of your body** is an important first step in coping with change. You can do some of the following things to help with that:
  - Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate.
  - Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.
  - Be physically active.
  - Get plenty of sleep.
2. **Make time to unwind.** Try to do activities that you enjoy. Catch up on a project you've been working on, or start a new hobby!
3. **Connect with others.** Talk with other people that you trust. Openly discuss your feelings and concerns. Consider connecting with community or faith-based organizations.
4. **Limit screen time.** Disconnect from your phone, tv, and computer screens a few times each day.

Free and confidential crisis resources can also help you or a loved one connect with a skilled, trained counselor in your area. Visit this QR code for resources if you are seeking help:



### CDC Mental Health Resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/tools-resources/individuals/index.htm>

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, July 20). Stress and coping resources. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/tools-resources/index.htm>



## December Quiz

# Simple Au Gratin Potatoes

### Ingredients:

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 cups 2% milk
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 5 cups thinly sliced peeled potatoes (about 6 medium)
- ½ cup chopped onion

### Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°. In a large saucepan, melt butter over low heat. Stir in flour, salt, and pepper until smooth. Gradually add milk. Bring to a boil; cook and stir 2 minutes or until thickened.
2. Remove from heat; stir in cheese until melted. Add potatoes and onion.
3. Transfer to a greased 2 qt. baking dish. Cover and bake 1 hour.
4. Uncover; bake 30-40 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. If desired, top with additional pepper.

### Nutrition Facts

¾ cup: 224 calories, 10g fat (7g saturated fat), 35mg cholesterol, 605mg sodium, 26g carbohydrate (4g sugars, 2g fiber), 7g protein.

Simple au gratin potatoes. Taste of Home. (2022, October 27). Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/simple-au-gratin-potatoes/>

## Mental & Emotional Health

### *The Mental Health Benefits of Reading*

1. One study found that older adults who regularly read books had a \_\_\_\_\_ in mortality compared to those who did not read.
2. What are some of the mental health impacts of reading?
  - a. Increased memory retention
  - b. Reduction of depression symptoms
  - c. Increased social skills

### *What is Emotional Health?*

3. What are some of the benefits of taking care of your mental health?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Which of the following is a tip for enhancing emotional health?
  - a. Practice emotional regulation
  - b. Read a book
  - c. Clean your workspace

### *Mental Health Moment - Coping with Change*

5. What is your go-to healthy coping skill for change?  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Healthy Habits Calendar

## December 2022 - Mental & Emotional Health

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 Welcome to December! Start the <i>Read Everyday Challenge</i>	2 <b>Finance Friday:</b> Make a budget for your holiday shopping	3
4	5 <b>Motivation Monday:</b> Take 30 minutes to read or listen to a book	6	7 <b>Green Wednesday:</b> Find a way to make your home more environmentally friendly	8	9	10 <b>Service Saturday:</b> Find a way to serve your neighbor
11 <b>Self-care Sunday:</b> Start your day with stretching & meditation	12	13 <b>Tummy Tuesday:</b> Add fruits & veggies to your plate	14	15 <b>Thirsty Thursday:</b> Drink at least 8 glasses of water	16	17 <b>National Maple Syrup Day:</b> Invite friends over for breakfast
18 Hanukkah Begins	19	20	21 <b>Workout Wednesday:</b> Exercise for 30 minutes today	22	23	24 <b>Christmas Eve Service Saturday:</b> Spend time with others during the holiday
25 Christmas	26 Hanukkah Ends Kwanzaa Begins	27 <b>Thoughtful Tuesday:</b> Write down 5 things you are grateful for and 5 things to look forward to in the new year	28	29	30 <b>Finance Friday:</b> Write down your financial goals for 2023	31 New Years Eve



# Challenge: Read Everyday

## 30 Day Challenge:

The challenge this month is to read at least 15 minutes each day. Make time each day to work on establishing this healthy habit. Dig out a book you've been meaning to finish or take a recommendation from a friend for a new book to start. Benefits of daily reading include:

- Reduced stress & depressive symptoms
- Slowed progress of dementia & Alzheimer's disease
- Improved focus & concentration
- Increased empathy
- Lower blood pressure & heart rate
- Improved sleep quality

Week 1		
Day	Book	Minutes
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Week 2		
Day	Book	Minutes
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Week 3		
Day	Book	Minutes
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Week 4		
Day	Book	Minutes
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

### Answers to Quiz:

- Q1: 20% reduction | Q2: b. Reduction of depression symptoms | Q3: Resilience to stress, Deeper relationships, Higher self-esteem, More energy  
 Q4: a. Practice emotional regulation | Q5: Quiet Space, Relax, and Imagine