

# Mental Health Reset 2021: Striving for Stability

Get grounded with a daily routine, reconnect with others and restore emotional balance.



By [Lisa Esposito](#), Staff Writer Jan. 8, 2021, at 9:14 a.m.

This article is based on reporting that features [expert sources](#).

## Your 2021 Mental Health Reset

Who *wasn't* glad to say goodbye to 2020? The tumultuous year challenged every aspect of our mental (and physical) health. Depression, anxiety, unstable moods, social isolation and existential fear shattered our peace and wore everyone down.



(GETTY IMAGES)

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Now that 2021 is here and the pandemic's end is somewhere in sight, resolve to put your [mental health](#) back in order. Experts describe steps on how to move forward and reclaim your emotional equilibrium:

- Anchor your day with a morning routine.
- Reach out to others to stave off isolation.
- Find low-stress ways to connect from a distance.
- Take an in-depth relationship inventory.
- Find fun, creative activities to boost your spirits.
- Exercise regularly – ideally outdoors.
- Use mindfulness and meditation to stay present.
- Try out a mental health app.
- Make restoring good sleep a priority.
- Eat healthfully.
- Seek immediate help if you're endangered.
- Address substance abuse and relapse.
- Choose and express gratitude.
- Remember to be kind to yourself.
- Look for light and hope at the end of the pandemic tunnel.
- Hang in there.

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The most common [mental health issues](#) arising during the pandemic are also the most common issues in general, says Dr. Don Mordecai, the national leader for mental health and wellness at Kaiser Permanente.

[Anxiety disorders](#), followed by major depression and depressive disorders "really account for the lion's share of conditions that we see," Mordecai says. "Next most common would be your substance use disorders. And, frankly, there are signals that all of these are going up under the pandemic."

It's important to understand that showing symptoms don't equal somebody having major depression, notes Mordecai, who is also an adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School. However, he adds, it's likely that documented mental health diagnoses will rise in the near future.

"Of course, we're in this funny time where the vaccines are coming out, so people are very hopeful – but we're also at the very worst time in terms of the pandemic's effects," Mordecai says. "So people may be feeling kind of whipsawed by that."

These strategies can help restore your serenity and keep you emotionally grounded:

**Start with a stabilizing routine.** "Try to develop a morning routine of healthy activities that you do every morning to set the table for the day," suggests Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and Bethesda, Maryland. "That routine can include things like yoga, meditation, exercise, prayer, some sort of conversation or connection with friends or groups, listening to podcasts – anything that nourishes you." Having an anchor for the day gives you a sense of well-being and that all is well, she says.

**Reach out to others.** Make a concrete effort to stay in touch with others in your life. "Reach out to three people a day," Gadhia-Smith recommends. "And if you can, try to have a full conversation with three people a day. It really helps to reduce the isolation."

**Have phone conversations or video chats.** Inability to interact with families, friends and community members as you have in the past is not good for either physical or mental health, says Kyle Bourassa, a clinical psychology researcher at the Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development at [Duke University Medical Center](#).

Interacting virtually or from a distance is the next best thing to meeting in person, but *how* you connect makes a difference. "Past research has shown that interacting on social networks can have really negative effects on your mental health," Bourassa says. Oftentimes, he says, phone calls and video chats are better for you than posting on Facebook or Instagram.

**Practice mindfulness and meditation.** To stave off fear of the future you can't control, stay in the present. "It's important to bring yourself back to the present moment," says Gadhia-Smith, who recommends mindfulness and meditation for her clients to do so.

**Try out a mental health app.** Apps like Calm and myStrength can serve as mental health tools. "We're using them in two ways," says Mordecai, who conducted a [study](#) on incorporating high-quality "digital therapeutics" into the Kaiser health care delivery system. "One is as an adjunct to treatment, especially cognitive behavioral therapy." Apps can encourage patients to do their CBT mental health "homework" between sessions, by making the work more compelling and convenient to access, he says. The other approach is giving all Kaiser members access to download the apps simply to practice

mindfulness and ease stress on their own. You can ask your own provider for a referral or just try an app on your own to help you relax and sleep better.

**Declutter your relationship.** Too much togetherness – partners stuck at home during lockdown – can strain any relationship. "Some couples have become closer and happier," Gadhia-Smith says. "But others who had problems lurking under the surface have gotten into more difficulty. They're having to face their issues head-on because of the increased time together and the lack of activity and distractions that they previously had."

It may be time to go full Marie Kondo on your partnership or marriage. "Couples can do their own version of decluttering in their relationship," Gadhia-Smith says. "Face issues that have been lingering. Work on your communication skills in order to talk about what's important to each other and to try to resolve issues. Keep what works, keep what's good and build on that. Try to work through and then let go of old issues that no longer need to be there."**Eat healthily.** The "pandemic 15" is no joke as dietary and nutrition issues are becoming a problem. "I'm seeing people really struggling with food," Gadhia-Smith says. "Because that's one of the few things we can do, and a lot of people use to that to anesthetize themselves." Try to find alternative ways to feel satisfied, and seek out a therapist, or a registered dietitian or nutritionist if you need help getting [healthy eating](#) back on track.

## SEE:

[Best Foods to Eat for Your Mood – and a Few Bad Ones.](#) ]

**Move your body.** Regular exercise is more important than ever to lift depressed, sluggish moods. "If I could get patients to do just a couple things to improve their mental health it would be to learn mindfulness techniques and to exercise," Mordecai says.

Outdoor physical activity – if you have space that safely allows it – will boost your spirits further while helping you stay or get back in shape. "There has been a surge in home exercise equipment being purchased," Gadhia-Smith notes. "But getting outside is best. If weather doesn't permit, do what you can. Try to move your body for at least 30 minutes a day."

**Focus on sleep restoration.** While you can't really recover all the hours of sleep you lost during the pandemic, you can [restore healthy sleep habits](#) for the present and future. Brush up on sleep hygiene and feel the difference that sleeping well makes in your emotional endurance and ability to function.

**Choose gratitude.** The pandemic has wrought immeasurable loss and pain. Even so, if you're intentional about choosing a positive outlook, it can help change your perspective for the better. "It's very easy when we're under a lot of stress and things aren't going well to look past the things that matter to us and that we do feel grateful for or feel hopeful about," Bourassa says. "Some people find a lot of value in gratitude." Come up with a gratitude list, he suggests. "It doesn't have to be long – it can be two or three things that you're thankful for. That can be something that you do every morning or night. Just a quick reminder – nothing too intense."

Mordecai give examples: "Think about what you have to be grateful for – big things like your spouse, your children. Little things – to feel the sun on my face today, a taste of this food. Really sort of consciously drawing yourself into that positive experience can be very helpful," he says.

**Talk to your health care provider.** When should you reach out for mental health help? "It's obviously a personal decision," Mordecai says. "At some level, it's about distress and functioning. So, if you're not able to function – whether it's as a parent, or a partner or an employee – that's probably a pretty good indication that you need more help. It doesn't necessarily mean that you need to see a psychiatrist or take medication. But you might need to talk to a trusted friend, or a pastor or your employer, if they're open to that, just to get a better sense of balance." Even if you're still able to function, he adds, you can also reach out for help with persistent feelings of distress.

**Get help for domestic violence.** Unfortunately, it's particularly difficult to escape [domestic violence](#) during tight quarantine conditions. Increases in abuse and intimate partner violence is a chilling effect of the pandemic and lockdown conditions, Bourassa notes. To find a shelter near you, [domesticshelters.org](#) is an online, searchable directory of nearly 3,000 programs in the U.S. and Canada.

**Seek immediate help for imminent harm.** If you're struggling with thoughts of hurting yourself, or others, it's extremely important to seek mental health treatment and support, Bourassa emphasizes. Distance methods like virtual therapy make that possible if in-person treatment isn't available. [Telehealth](#) – including mental health treatment – has boomed during the pandemic.

To find resources in your area, visit the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) website or call the NAMI hotline at 800-950-NAMI (800-950-6264). The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 800-273-8255.

**Address substance abuse now.** Pandemic conditions have also created a perfect storm for [substance abuse](#) or addiction relapse to occur. Increased stress, isolation, confinement to home, fewer options for healthy activities and reduced access to support and treatment can threaten a shaky recovery. "There are still lots of recovery meetings, but they're all virtual and no longer in person," Gadhia-Smith notes. "That sense of community is harder to find."

These factors make it all the more crucial to seek treatment, whether in person or virtual. Go through [FindTreatment.gov](#) on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's website and take advantage of resources like the SAMHSA National Helpline at 800-662-4357.

**Embrace signs of hope.** "On the positive side, I'm starting to see some hope with the vaccine coming," Gadhia-Smith says. "People are looking forward to taking it and they're starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel, with the possibility of life getting back to normal. Although, most people realistically know that it's not going to be quick."

## **SEE:**

[Tips to Manage Stress at Work.](#) ]

**Be kind to yourself.** Protecting and supporting loved ones during the pandemic can leave you little time to look after your own emotional health. If you're responsible for small children or a parent with dementia, for example, you really need time to recharge.

"One of the things we always tell caregivers who are taking care of dependents or children is to make sure they provide themselves some opportunity or time to take care of themselves," Bourassa says. "A lot of people will feel guilty about taking care of their own needs: 'Oh, you know, the kids are what's important, or the person I'm taking care of.' But if you're not at your best, you're not able to give others your best. So it's important to make sure that we're doing the things that matter for us, too."

**Hang in There.** It's difficult to stay vigilant about physical distancing, face masks and hand hygiene after so many months of doing just that. "Over the course of this pandemic, people changed their behavior to an amazing extent early on," Bourassa says. "But it's becoming harder and harder for people to maintain those behavioral changes they made. There's a real impulse to want to be done with it – which I think we all have."

Even so, stay motivated and proactive about safety measures until the threat of contagion has truly passed, Bourassa urges: "It's important to remind ourselves that we need to get to that point first, before we can sort of let go."

## The Best Exercise for Every Mood



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