

The Psychological Society of Ireland's 40 (practical) tips for mental health, well-being and prosperity.

Psychology Matters



As part of celebrations to mark its 40th anniversary, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) has compiled this list of practical tips. Psychology is unique among the human sciences and helping professions for the way it uses research to help people solve or cope with problems. Each of the tips below is supported by at least one study that demonstrates the tip can be helpful. Whether you want to learn to be more content in general or are struggling to cope with a challenging situation, check out the 40 tips below for sound, practical and evidence-based suggestions.

The Basics

1 Look after your basic needs first: Eat and sleep.

Before trying to tackle any of the complex demands of day-to-day life, it is vital that we start with full energy levels. Feelings of tiredness and hunger can make many problems seem worse, so make sure to get the sleep you need and maintain a nutritious diet.

2 Listen to your body and use your breathing.

Take time each day to pay attention to your body and what it is telling you. Try to recognise when your body and mind are stressed. Can you feel tension or stress building up? Sore back? Headache? Don't ignore these signals. Try to alleviate them before they build up. If you are feeling stressed or anxious, take a few deep breaths and concentrate on letting go of all your worries. This can be the most useful immediate tip to stop getting caught in a cycle of stress.

3 Happiness happens without money.

A person's happiness is not related to their financial wealth. Yet research has shown that people believe that money is important in order to be happy. Even if you would be happy to get some money, remember that we can achieve happiness without it too!

4 Laugh and remember the laughs.

Even forced laughter in a laboratory setting can bring about a positive mood. Laughter has also been shown to have a beneficial effect on our coping skills. Remembering the times we laughed together makes us evaluate our relationships more positively. So don't be afraid to laugh and remember the laughs you have shared.

5 Try to find something to be grateful for.

Taking time to be thankful and to say thanks to other people improves your mood. Remember, though, this is not the same thing as ignoring problems or denying anger. Look for what is positive and/or beautiful during your day.

6 Get active.

While physical activity (that suits you and your level of ability) is good for your body, exercise is good for the mind too. Regular exercise gives you energy, improves mood and relieves stress, anxiety and depression. Once you get into it, it can also be great fun!

7 Drink alcohol responsibly and in moderation.

Drinkers in Ireland drink more than in other western European countries and many have risky drinking habits that lead to adverse consequences. The Department of Health and Children advises that up to 21 standard drinks a week is considered low risk for men and up to 14 standard drinks a week is considered low risk for women. Drinking above the advised weekly limits for low risk drinking is associated with much poorer outcomes for people with mental health problems and various other health risks. So if you do enjoy a drink, spread out your drinking over the week and don't save it for one session or big night out.

8 Engage in meaningful, creative activities.

Get involved in meaningful, creative work. Do things that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive, whether or not you get paid for it – things like gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something.

9 Do what you love.

Getting good at something doesn't often come easy and people who become excellent at something aren't necessarily "gifted" at a young age. Expert performers such as soccer players, piano players, neurosurgeons and tennis players are nearly always made, not born. It's practice that makes perfect. If you like something you are more likely to work hard at it to become very good at it. When it comes to choosing what you would like to do with your life, choose something that you like.

10 See fun as a priority not an indulgence.

Make leisure time a priority. Do things for no other reason than that it feels good to do them. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.

11 Lose yourself.

Learn an activity that makes you lose sense of time, that makes you feel fuller as a person after doing it and gives you a sense of calm. This could be knitting, repetitive prayer, meditation, or playing a musical instrument. If practised daily for at least 20 minutes it has been shown to reduce blood pressure, improve levels of antioxidants, reduce stress, and improve mood.

12 Don't let a little anxiety stand in your way.

While there are obviously certain fear-inducing situations or activities that should

be avoided, often people can avoid doing things that they want to do or that are good for them because of nerves. Doing the things that we are a little anxious about helps them become less frightening. Avoiding activities or situations that are fear-inducing only results in increased anxiety about that situation.

13 Set yourself realistic goals.

Break the big goals into smaller steps or tasks. Smaller tasks are much easier to complete. And it's easier to see your progress with smaller tasks too. These provide a gradual sense of accomplishment that can motivate you to continue. Rome wasn't built in a day but some of it was!

14 Avoid conversations about weight and appearance.

Conversations around weight, appearance and pressure to be thin, result in increased body dissatisfaction. But it's not that easy to avoid. Young women can be afraid to avoid this topic for fear they will be seen as "stuck-up" or conceited by the other women. But continuing to talk about these topics, creates a norm that can keep us believing all women feel poorly about their bodies.

Daily Routine (Home, School, Work)

15 Exercise your brain.

The human brain is a wonderful organ. It contains 100 billion neurons, weighs only 3lbs and uses 20% of the body's energy to function. Learning new things and a continuous curiosity keeps your brain working, generating new brain cells and new neural connections in the brain. Such mental stimulation keeps the brain fit and can prevent cognitive decline in older age.

16 Remember to remember.

People often realise too late that they have forgotten to do something that they had meant to do and setting an alarm or leaving a 'post-it' is not always practical. You can increase your chances of remembering what to do by thinking about where and when you're going to do it. For example, you might think, "when I get home and sit down on the couch, I will pick up the phone and call my mother". Anxiety can often make these everyday lapses seem worse. Try to relax and give yourself a break. It can help to improve your memory.

17 Set academic goals to better yourself, not others.

It can be a competitive world and we can often feel pressured to do better than the people around us, rather than simply trying to better ourselves. Research has shown that students who work towards improving their own performance, rather than working towards outperforming others, show the best motivation, learning strategies and academic outcomes.

18 Study together.

Working collaboratively with peers provides adaptive opportunities for learning. This can encourage us to change our usual techniques and find a system for thinking, teaching and learning that works for us. Find other people to work with you and you will reap the benefits.

19 Choose an activity, join a group and get involved.

Join a special interest group or get involved in extracurricular activities. These groups offer wonderful opportunities for finding people with common interests – people you like being with who are potential friends. And studies of college students have shown that personal adjustment and integration into campus life plays a huge role in student retention in college.

20 Remember work isn't everything.

While work plays an important role in many people's lives, it's important to get the work life balance right. Employees who enjoy down time or relaxation outside of their job are more likely to recover their energies and be engaged when they are at work; that is, they have more energy available to them at work and they feel more dedicated to the task at hand. So a balanced approach to work is a win-win for you and your employer!

21 Get to know your work-mates.

Engaging with a social group in work has been shown to reduce stress and increase your life and job satisfaction.

22 Volunteer.

Doing something that helps others has a beneficial effect on how you feel about yourself. Volunteering can bring about feelings of personal achievement, a sense of community spirit and solidarity. There is no limit to the individual and group volunteer opportunities you can explore. Schools, churches, not-for-profit and charitable organisations of all sorts depend on volunteers for their survival.

