

Finding and achieving
quality of life
beyond a mental health condition:

Top Tips





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About this guide

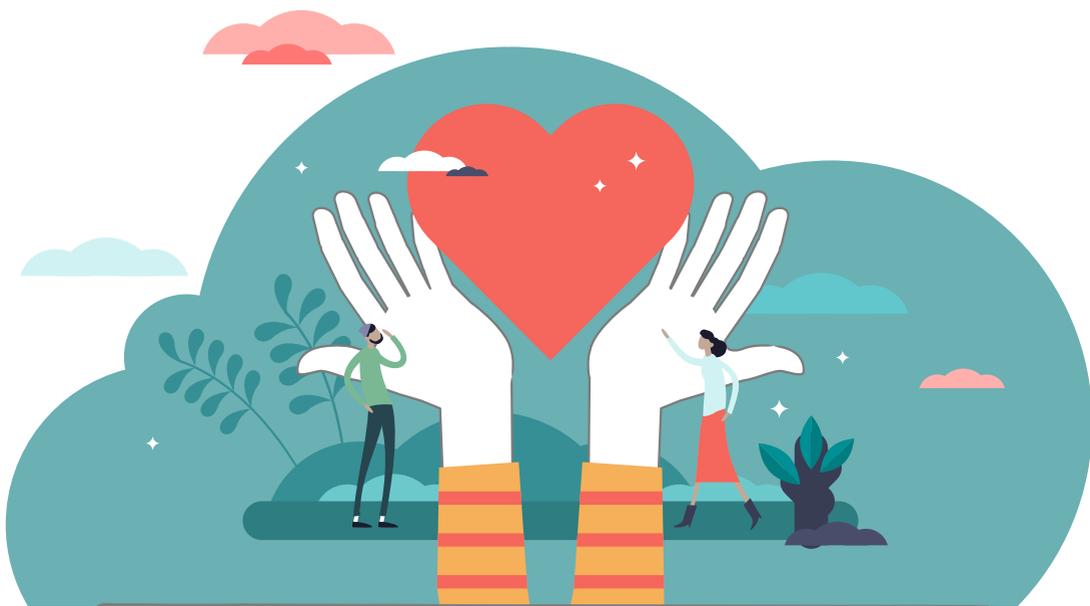
It is more important than ever, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, that people with mental health problems are able to maintain good quality of life.

This booklet includes top tips for those who experience a mental health condition to help improve their quality of life and think about their sense of belonging and place in society. It is based on two discussion workshops with people with lived experience of a mental health condition, and carers.

The learning from those experiences and what people with a mental health condition found most useful are captured in a list of ten top tips below.



The tips in this booklet are not intended to replace professional help or treatment, but they can be useful in addition to them. Many top tips have been included here so it might be worth revisiting this booklet over time and just trying some tips at a time. Improving quality of life can be difficult and is a lifelong process. It helps to come back to this guide regularly, and try something new from it at different times.



What is quality of Life and why is it important?

Quality of life includes a range of things such as:



Our sense of wellbeing, happiness, health;



A positive environment we live in;



The things we do in our life (our work, our physical and social activities);



How we think about the world and our place in the world (our culture, values and religious beliefs);



Our circumstances (income and wealth; physical health and social standing) and;



The relationships we have with other people (friends, family and others).

These things can influence or affect us in many different ways. Quality of life matters because it's ultimately about making life more meaningful, which for someone with a mental health condition can be a struggle at times. Often stigma and/or the negative perceptions from people in society can lead us to think that achieving a good level of quality of life is impossible for those with mental health conditions – but actually it is possible to attain a good level in some areas. There are many ways in which quality of life for someone with a mental health condition can be improved in many different aspects of our lives.



What makes a difference to better quality of life?

This guide describes seven main areas and includes **10 top tips to try.**

- 1 Accepting yourself and making adjustments
- 2 Quality of life as a mindset
- 3 Taking action to change
- 4 Positive relationships
- 5 Hobbies and activities
- 6 Finding your place in society
- 7 Self-image, self-identity and self-perception

1 Accepting yourself and making adjustments

Our quality of life can change over time; our situations may change and as we get older, we may also think differently about what we want from our lives. Our goals, ambitions, expectations and outlook on life can also change after a first diagnosis of a mental health condition.

It can be hard to come to terms with such changes in our lives, but here are some approaches which some people have found useful.

Speak and listen

It may be helpful to seek talking therapy and/or speak and learn from people who have lived through similar experiences; learning from their experiences can help us become stronger. It also helps to know that you are not alone and to take opportunities for sharing your thoughts, and feelings with others who can empathise with you and/or have had similar experiences.



Acceptance

Being diagnosed with a mental health condition can be life-changing. You may want to get back to your life as it was before your symptoms began or received your diagnosis. This might be a challenge as it can be tempting to reminisce about the positive aspects of life before your mental health condition. Some important first steps to moving forward include trying to accept any changes or differences in your life and adjusting any expectations of yourself, especially if they place extra stress on you. You can try to make whatever adjustments you can even if it is difficult at first, for example try to practice, as best as you can, acceptance on a daily basis.

Acceptance of yourself and your condition helps because you will shift your focus away from what you consider to be your limitations.

“When I’m really depressed I have different expectations of myself. I don’t get angry for not having done something, instead I see every day as a new day and a new chance to try again.”



Learn and appreciate what you can do.

These approaches may be difficult after just being diagnosed, but you can also try to learn from your situation.

"[Try to] learn what's achievable and what is not."

Appreciate the things that you can still do and learn that some things may now be more difficult or no longer possible.

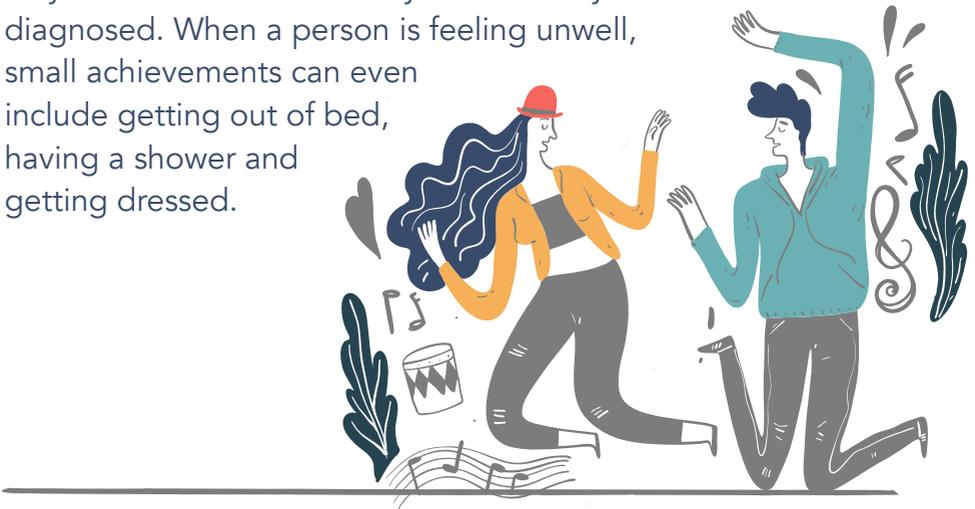


2 Quality of Life as a mindset

Sometimes we can find ourselves stuck in a negative attitude which makes us see everyday life as a struggle. Some people who experience a lot of trauma or suicidal thoughts may question whether they even deserve a life. It can be hard to get out of this cycle but a good start is to know that you do deserve a life and try not to allow negative thoughts to grow.

Celebrate small achievements.

In celebrating small achievements you can develop a perspective to find pleasure or happiness in small things. It is also valuable to know that with hindsight some problems may not seem as bad as they were when you were first diagnosed. When a person is feeling unwell, small achievements can even include getting out of bed, having a shower and getting dressed.



Talking therapy and/or sharing experiences with others can help with improving your mindset or the way you think about things.

“Because I have long periods of depression, which I will have my whole life it’s important to learn how to live with it.”

Give thanks for what you have.

For some people, depending on their diagnosis and severity of symptoms, practicing gratitude or giving thanks for what you have may be challenging, especially when symptoms are particularly bad. It might be difficult to ‘set your mind’ to think more positively and/or be grateful for the things you have, especially if, for example, your symptoms are on-going (e.g. you hearing negative voices all the time). Even though this might not be easy, there is still benefit from reflecting on your outlook and whether a negative perspective on your life is making the situation more difficult in reality. Some people find giving thanks is a useful way to help focus on the positive aspects of their life.



3 Taking action to change

The first step towards taking any action this can be the most difficult. This doesn't have to be a sudden or drastic change. You can approach each area one at a time and gradually accumulate positive achievements. Some people find it very helpful to have someone to support them through any changes they would like to make in their lives (e.g. a mental health professional, therapist, psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or nurse, peers, and/or friends).

Seeking support from professionals.

'I needed someone (a mental health professional) by my side who said, 'OK, you know there are more things to life than just the negative things you have been talking about. We're going to take action and look at what else there is for you that can make you happy...''



When you reach out for professional support, it is useful to find help that is easy to access and doesn't involve you having to repeat your story or history again and again. It is important that mental health professionals don't just see you in terms of symptoms and treatment, but that they take a more informal/friendly approach when supporting you in this way.

These professionals can be like a companion who join you on your journey to take action and work with you towards achieving a better quality of life.

You may have to guide mental health professionals so they can know what you would like and how you would like to be guided and/or supported. For example, you can discuss self-acceptance, aspects of your condition and/or the things you would like to achieve in your life. If, after a while, you believe that your relationship with your mental health professional is not meeting your needs, it might be advisable to try to find another one that you feel more comfortable with.



4 Positive Relationships

It is hugely important to talk to other people who are supportive and understand you – family, friends and those living with similar mental health conditions. This can be a key element to improving your quality of life.

Many people are likely to isolate when they feel down or depressed, this can make a person feel much worse as isolation can sometimes amplify a bad experience. However, when you are with someone you trust and can talk to, you are less likely to feel alone.

“Relationships are the heart of a good quality of life... it’s a powerful thing to have someone in your life [and to talk].”

Relationships can change over time and even more so if a person’s mental health changes and they are diagnosed with a mental health condition as a child or young adult.

Relationships between people will always have to adapt to changes (e.g. changing circumstances, such as getting married or having a baby). This is also the case when someone experiences mental health issues. It can then be helpful to develop these relationships into collaborations or friendships and to ensure there is plenty of empathy with the people closest to you.

“I surrounded myself with friends that have empathy for people with mental health issues. You have to [learn] to recognise those people who can make it better, who understand you and can pick you up.”

It might be difficult for some people around you to understand your diagnosis and accept you. This may take some time and effort from you as well as from those closest to you, who may also need to be supported in this process. This is because the people closest to you may at times find it hard or tiring to support you when things become difficult. It is important to keep communication open at all times if you feel safe to do so, regardless of whether you are feeling unwell or not. If you are a carer or friend, let the person know you are there for them.



A NOTE FOR CARERS

and others supporting someone with mental health problems

Sometimes it can be difficult to empathise with mental health conditions, especially for heavily stigmatised diagnoses. Listening is an important skill for the person closest to someone with a mental health condition. They don't necessarily have to offer advice, resolve problems, or make any judgements. Often it can be better to allow the person to talk through and reflect on their situation and not interrupt them.



Hobbies and activities

If you are seeking a better quality of life this might involve making changes in your life, perhaps making more friends, getting out more, engaging in more activities, looking for a healthier life style (e.g. better food, exercise), and/or placing yourself in a positive environment.

Stay active

Taking part in activities and hobbies leads to better mental health and wellbeing. Regular exercise, for example, can help to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve mood. Even walking for 15 minutes a day can help boost mood, so exercise does not have to be too strenuous.

Hobbies

Some people find doing activities and hobbies can help improve the way they see themselves; they find they have better self-esteem. Focusing on an activity can help people redefine their role as a person, moving away from just being a patient, to having a more rounded identity which is based on skills, interests or activities.

“I do ballet and it’s hard to keep up because my concentration and memory are a problem. But, it’s very important to continue doing activities. They give you a different role; I see myself differently.”

Although taking part in hobbies can be very positive, it is good to be aware why you are doing these. Sometimes people get involved in many activities or put excessive pressure on themselves to perform these as a means to avoid their thoughts or symptoms. Sometimes it can be helpful to focus on just one or two activities, or to allow yourself to stop for a little time if the activities lead to stress and/or make your symptoms worse.

Activities/hobbies are also good for giving you a sense of purpose and structure to your day. These can even help fulfil your goals or dreams.

Allow yourself time off

However, when a person is particularly unwell, they may not be able to take part in their usual activities or hobbies.

They may lack the motivation to do the things they like.



“I become a completely different person when I’m depressed. I forget how much I enjoy the things I like doing.”

In this situation it’s important to show yourself kindness and compassion.¹ Again, you may need to adapt hobbies according to your needs (e.g. if you’d like to socialise more or to lose weight).

You may sometimes be reluctant to take part in activities because you may be anxious about meeting new people, especially if you are accustomed to being on your own. In these cases it is worth trying to move out of your comfort zone to do something you want to do. You might find it easier to join a small group or take part in a 1-1 activity.

Try to find activities that are affordable for you, and some can even be done for free, such as volunteering or exercising in your local park.



¹GAMIAN-Europe. *Take care and be kind to yourself*. Accessed from: <https://www.gamian.eu/wp-content/uploads/Take-care-and-be-kind-to-yourself-VF.pdf>

6 finding your place in society

An important aspect of quality of life is our sense of belonging within society and our connection with others. As described previously, central to this are the relationships we have and the activities that we do. Before your diagnosis you may have been working and actively involved in many activities and situations, and with that, have a sense of feeling valued and knowing your place in society.

Self-perception

After your diagnosis your situation or circumstances may have changed, perhaps even dramatically. You may feel differently about yourself or feel less in control than you had been before.

Sometimes we might find ourselves in situations where we feel we don't fit in with society, or that society doesn't fit around us or value who we are because of our mental health condition.

But feeling valued can help increase our sense of belonging which comes from within us, and from the people around us. This is especially so when people share a common goal and/or purpose.

*“People do have value within a society,
within a community and within a group.”*

Participate in new ways

It is valuable to maintain a flexible attitude towards being involved in a group as this can help if for any reason you can no longer participate. For example, if you belong to a football club but you are not able to participate because of your medication, you may not feel a valued member of the group. However, even if you are no longer able to participate as before there will still be benefit to you if you can take part and support other members in a different way, which maintains your value within the club and to yourself.

Some people take on either paid or voluntary work that helps them feel that they are giving back to society. This can help with having a sense of purpose and feeling good about ourselves.

*“I needed to do something to feel valued...
[that was important for me].”*



The sense of participation, achievement and helping others helps us to feel valued. For people who find it difficult to work or engage in activities, it can be helpful to join a peer support group, for example, to share your experience of your mental health condition and contribute to helping others which can be very rewarding and fulfilling. Your experience can resonate with others who can also learn from your story.

“For me being valued is the work I do for my organisation, I’m a Board member [of a peer support organisation] so I give back to society by doing that work....It helps me feel good..”

Recognising your strengths and remembering what you are good at, not only helps you feel better, but will help towards improving how you feel/perceive yourself and what you would like to do or achieve. This will also help with finding your place in society.

You may need to adjust your expectations and take on responsibilities gradually so that you can reach a sense of achievement, but at the same time try not to put too much pressure on yourself. Prepare for those occasions when you may need extra support.

7 Self-image and self-identity

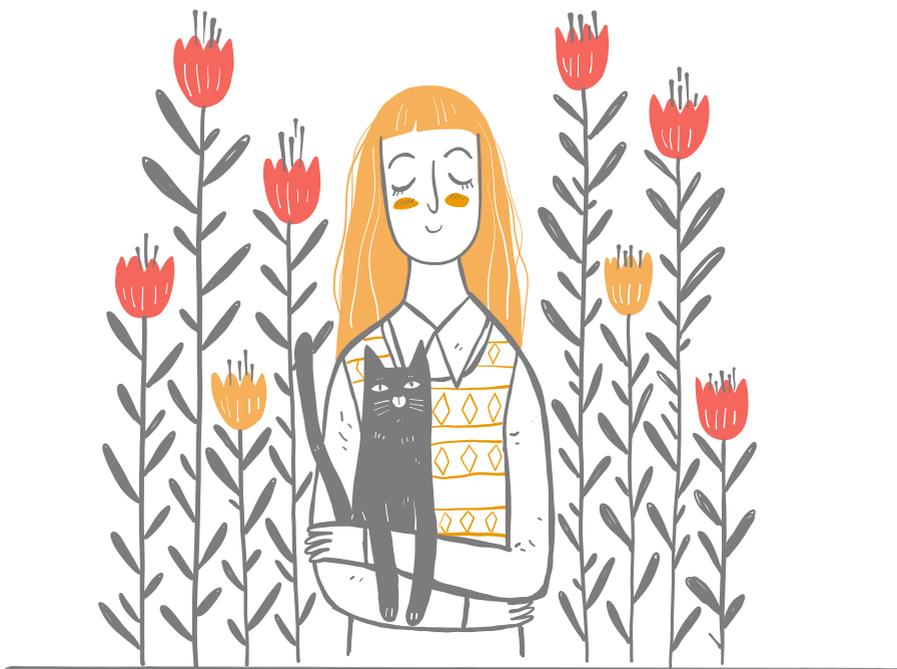
An important part of our quality of life is the sense that we feel worthwhile in ourselves. But sometimes people may underestimate what you are able to achieve because of your mental health condition. It is common for people with mental health problems to internalise the negative ways that society can perceive and portray mental health diagnoses. There is an interaction between how we think we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves and this too can affect our quality of life either positively or negatively. Sometimes a negative self-image can stop someone doing positive activities, and this can then intensify a sense of isolation and poor self-worth.

It is important to balance those negative influences with positive ones, especially those that remind us of all the positive things and the courage we have demonstrated throughout our life. These will help you re-evaluate the way you perceive yourself.

“You must not forget your past accomplishments. We are the result of all our past, which has good and bad in it, but if you emphasise the positive you establish a framework from which you can build...”

Your self-image may radically change when you first develop a mental health condition. It may become very negative. Some people with lived experience find that this is a temporary process and that their self-image is now better than before they were diagnosed.

"I was diagnosed with severe depression in the past and it made me feel quite broken...it made me feel that I was really different [from others] because I wasn't fitting into the 'normal' category [of society]. With time I grew to see it as a strength, the fact that I'd been through this."

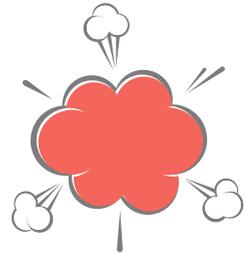


Top tips

1. Speak and Listen

Share your thoughts and feelings with people you feel comfortable with, who can empathise with you and may have had similar experiences.

- Some people join a peer support group or meet with friends or family who may be able to listen/empathise with them.



2. Reflect, appreciate and accept yourself

Reflect on your situation to see what you have learned from your difficulties and appreciate how far you have come in terms of any successes or improvements in your life.

- Some people keep a diary to reshape their life story and write what they have learned and the meaning found from doing something despite their situation.

3. Give thanks

Be aware of the positive things that are happening throughout each day; being thankful even for the small things can help.

- Some people keep a note of things they are grateful for, such as people close to them (e.g. friends, family), and achievements in their day. If you are feeling unwell, you can try to celebrate even small achievements, such as getting dressed, going for a nice walk, preparing a tasty meal or speaking to a friend. This can help you adopt a hopeful mind-set and focus on the positive aspects of your life.

4. Do what you can

Avoid putting a lot of pressure on yourself to do things you cannot do at the moment. Try to be patient, you may need to relearn old skills and practice them.

- Try to be honest about any limitations you face it can help you to find practical ways to overcome them. Sometimes you may not be able to complete a whole activity without help. It can be beneficial to do what you can and accept help to complete the task.

5. Seek support to make change

If there are situations you find difficult, don't try to cope alone. Seek help from positive people. These may be mental health professionals, friends, family or members of community groups.

- Try to be clear about what you want to achieve and the help you need.
- Try to find practical day to day solutions to any difficulties and find the support you need to help you along the way.



6. Positive Relationships

Some people seek people they can trust (for example, from a patient organisation) and who can help in difficult times:

- Try to surround yourself with positive relationships and people who understand you, they will remind you that you are not alone. Tell them if you just want them to listen and not pass judgement. Sometimes it can help to just to have a general chat while doing something simple together or going for a walk.



7. Hobbies and activities

Participating in hobbies and activities are an important part of good quality of life. These can include a wide range of things from paid employment, volunteering or simply taking part in art, crafts and music.

- Try to find activities that make you feel good about yourself; those that are fulfilling, rewarding and affordable for you.

8. Join in with Life

Be open-minded to new ideas and situations. Community or support groups can be very beneficial for trying out new things.

- Find a supportive peer or community group who share your interests, they can be supportive and value you and your contribution. This will help you understand that you are not alone.
- Some people who find it difficult to connect with large groups, find smaller groups that are more comfortable for them.
- Try to take small risks even if it feels uncomfortable at first.



9. Take small steps

Sometimes people find large tasks, goals or achievements overwhelming.

- Try to break down your goals and activities into smaller steps to make these more manageable for you. For example, if you'd like to join a club, first go with a friend to see what it's like.

10. feel good about yourself

Feeling good about yourself can be achieved in many different ways, such as doing something worthwhile, for example, supporting other people. Or, taking the time to reflect on your strengths and the courage it took to get you to where you are now.

- Some people keep a balance of positive and negative thoughts about themselves to improve their self-image.



We would like to thank you for taking the time to read this guide. We encourage you to revisit it regularly and wish you all the best with your journey.

“Mental health...is not a destination, but a process. It’s about how you drive, not where you’re going.”²



² Noam Shpancer



<https://www.gamian.eu>

