

# PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

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## 15 Tips to manage your Mental Health in 2012

By Janine Shamos

It's 2012 and many of us have promised to make this year a 'better' one. We make resolutions and promises but we don't always stick to them. "Many people don't know where to start or how to tackle the problems," says SADAG's Zane Wilson. 2011 was a very tough year for many South Africans and heading into the new year – getting back into work and school and all the emotional, physical and financial responsibilities this includes – can be hard and many people are struggling to cope. "People may already be suffering hardship and for those experiencing depression, anxiety or trauma, the start of the new year may not be as easy-going as they'd like," says psychologist Lee-Ann Hartman.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) is the country's largest mental health NGO and receives over 400 calls a day. "Mental health services are growing in demand and while we can't always make the problems disappear, we can help people cope better with what life throws at them," says the organisation's operations director, Cassey Chambers. SADAG has some tips to make 2012 a mentally healthy one.

**1. Talk.** Keeping your feelings bottled up is a sure way to burnout and burn-up. Talk about how you feel to a friend or a relative, or call SADAG if you feel you have no one you can talk to (SADAG is open 7 days a week from 8am to 8pm on 0800 20 50 26). "Getting someone else's perspective is crucial," says Hartman. "Sometimes, talking in itself can be therapeutic and it's a relief to get things off your chest and realise you're not alone or going crazy!"

**2. Keep in touch with people.** When we feel stressed, depressed or anxious, we often withdraw socially and spend more and more time alone, wallowing in our thoughts and fears. "Balance the time you spend with yourself and with other people – friends and loved ones, even strangers can help you feel connected," says Hartman.

**3. Don't be a superhero.** If you need it, get professional help. "We all feel sad or stressed out at times, but if you don't know why and the feelings aren't going away, you need to get help," says psychiatrist Dr Frans Korb. Talk to your GP, a psychologist or call SADAG.

**4. Be your own hero.** There are lots of qualities we admire in other people – they're carefree, have a great family connection, look healthy, are kind – we can have them too. And it's ok to ask for help to get the things you want. Live your life the way you want it, not the way other people expect you to.

**5. Stop making excuses.** Many of us use all kind of excuses for not doing the things we know we should do – we play the victim and wallow: I've just got divorced, that's why I eat too much; I'm depressed, that's why I hate my job; I'm too busy looking after the house to exercise. It's time to stop complaining and start acting – what can you control? Control it. Suzanne Leighton, Cape Town-based alternative therapist and Support Group Leader says that it's important to schedule something creative into your calendar at least once a month. "What do you do creatively, as a means of self-expression? Plan to do it regularly." Take action! Leighton advises that we all take simple steps, right now, that have maximum benefit.

**6. Keep active.** It sounds like a horrible cliché but physical activity really does improve your mental health. "Go for a walk, play with the dog, dance, skip – you don't have to be going to a gym every day to be exercising," says Hartman. It's important to have rhythm in your life: "Have a structured guideline, for example regular sleep, meals and exercise," says Leighton.

**7. Eat well.** As the old saying goes – you are what you eat. Living on caffeine and high-fat foods is not going to make you feel better physically or emotionally. Keep a balanced diet, eat throughout the day – it will give your body the help it needs to keep fit and fighting.

**8. Think of three good things.** The reality is that things do go wrong and sometimes we feel we're drowning in negativity and the world looks bleak. When times get even tougher, it's even more important to focus on some positivity. "Each night, write down



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three good things from your day – maybe just the fact that it is over and it didn't rain on your clean washing," says Wilson. Over a week, this can make a significant difference to how you feel... and how you see the world.

**9. Deal with the debt.** Say no to offers of credit cards and speak to your current bank about paying back your debt. If you have a problem, it won't go away on its own – the sooner you face up to it and get a plan, the better. Call SADAG for numbers of debt counsellors.

**10. Stop shopping.** We all buy things we don't need. When we're happy, stressed, bored, furious – we shop. While 'retail therapy' has its place, it can land you in trouble. "Have a budget, stick to it and don't take credit cards with you if you know you are going to a shopping centre where you may buy a lot and spend your rent," says Carol, a 54-year-old shopping addict.

**11. Schedule worry time.** If you're the kind of person who worries about everything (from whether the Matric results were right to the effect that sunlight has on your new pot plant) STOP. Set aside 10 minutes at the same time each day to worry about everything – keep a diary or piece of paper and time yourself. In the 10 minutes write down everything you're worried about – everything. Then put the pen down. Read your list. Remember that worrying about stuff doesn't help but doing something about it does – so cross out all the things you have no control over. Then change the things you can.

**12. Stop doing things that make you miserable.** Go through your CD and DVD collection and throw away or hide the ones that make you sad and negative. "We all have triggers that spur on our anxiety or loneliness or depression," says Hartman, "Don't do it to yourself – if movies with Jennifer Aniston make you angry, don't watch them; if songs about love make you sad, turn them off." We need to examine our behaviour that could be self-sabotaging. Leighton advises these questions: "What are your entrenched bad habits? What benefits do you get from this behaviour? How could you get the same benefits in a healthier, more constructive way? How do you strengthen yourself?"

**13. Spend time with nature.** We live on the most beautiful continent in the world, in the most beautiful country – get out of the house! Spend time outside, in the fresh air – in a park, by the sea, in your garden, go for a walk or just sit under a tree. Reconnect with nature – it will lift your soul.

**14. Get involved.** Human beings really are 'people through other people', so rather than stewing in your own negative juices, do something for someone (or something) else. Volunteer where your heart is – an old age home, an animal shelter, an orphanage. Talk to the newspaper seller, smile at the stranger next to you in traffic.

**15. Get support.** SADAG facilitates over 160 Support Groups throughout South Africa. "Support Groups offer non-judgmental support and advice for sufferers and loved ones," says Leighton. Support Groups are often an essential part of treatment and a crucial way to cope, for both patients and their families. To find a Support Group in your area, call SADAG on 0800 21 22 23.

## IMPORTANT NUMBERS TO REMEMBER

**Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 or SMS 31393**

**Pharmadynamics Police and Trauma Line: 0800 20 50 26**

**AstraZeneca Bipolar Line: 0800 70 80 90**

**Sanofi Aventis Sleep Line: 0800-SLEEPY (0800 753 379)**

**Dept. of Social Development Substance Abuse Line: 0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312**

**Dr Reddy's Helpline: 0800 21 22 23**

**Office Lines: 011 262 6396**

**Website: [www.sadag.co.za](http://www.sadag.co.za)**