

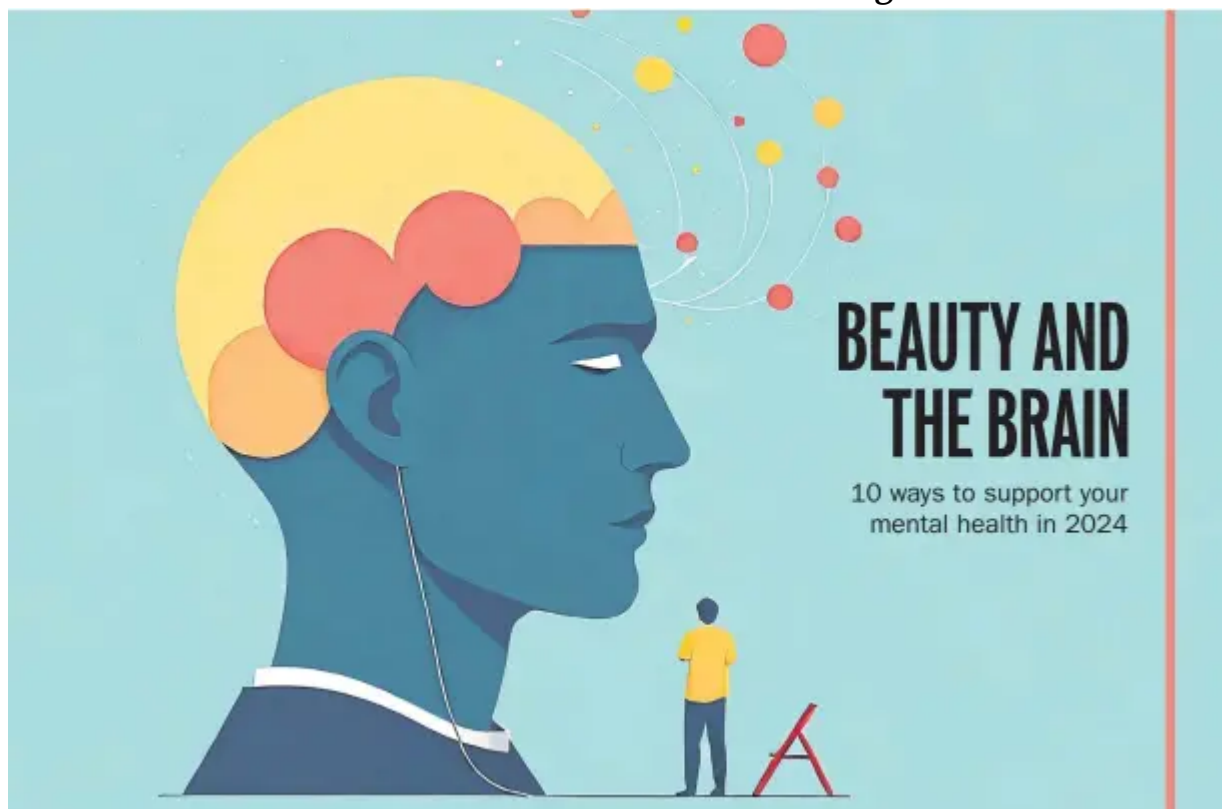
- Mental health / Sleep / Anxiety / Habit

## BEAUTY AND THE BRAIN

### 10 ways to support your mental health in 2024

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Since the height of the pandemic, there has been a cultural shift in the way we talk about mental health. It's as if the years of isolation and uncertainty helped us understand how vital our emotional needs were to our overall well-being.



Now that we're paying more attention to our inner lives, it's also essential that we take action. Fortunately, there are a number of things that everyone can do to nourish their mental health and find moments of joy.

Here are some of our favourite tips from the past year as we prepare to enter 2024.

#### 1. TRY A PROVEN WAY TO SLEEP BETTER

Experts say that getting enough sleep is one of the most important things we can do for our mental health. If you're having trouble falling or staying asleep, studies have found that cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia, or CBT-I, is as effective as using sleep medications in the short term — and more effective in the long term. CBT-I helps people address anxieties about sleep and find ways to relax. To find a provider, try the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine directory at [behavioralsleep.org](https://behavioralsleep.org).

#### 2. LEARN HOW TO TELL WHETHER YOUR ANXIETY IS PROTECTIVE OR PROBLEMATIC

It's normal to feel anxious from time to time. In fact, having some anxiety can actually be useful. Experts say an internal alarm system can improve our performance, help us recognise danger and even encourage us to be more conscientious. So we asked Dr Petros Levounis, president of the American Psychiatric Association: How much anxiety is too much?

“If you start to notice that worry and fear are there constantly, that is a signal that you need some help,” he said.

Other signs to look out for include restlessness, a sense of fear or doom, increased heart rate, sweating, trembling and trouble concentrating.

### 3. STOP THE WORRY CYCLE

If you have a tendency to ruminate, there are a few simple ways to curb the habit. The first is to distract yourself: Research shows that diversions can help get your mind off whatever is stressing you out. Try playing a word game or listening to music, paying close attention to the lyrics.

Other times, it's better not to fight the urge — but that doesn't mean you should let your thoughts spiral out of control. Set a timer for 10 to 30 minutes of dedicated rumination time, and give yourself permission to mentally mull things over. When the timer goes off, it's time to move on.

### 4. PRACTISE 'FIVE THINGS TIDYING'

When you're struggling with your mental health, basic tasks such as washing dishes or doing laundry can feel impossible. But living amid mess can make you feel even worse. KC Davis, a licensed professional counsellor and author of the book *How To Keep House While Drowning*, advises focusing on function over aesthetics — your home doesn't have to be perfect, but it should be livable.

An efficient way to keep things from getting out of hand is to practice what she calls “five things tidying”. Tackle the five main categories of clutter — trash, dishes, laundry, things with a place and things without a place — one at a time to help cleaning feel more manageable.

### 5. EMBRACE GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a positive emotion that can arise when you acknowledge that you have goodness in your life and that other people — or higher powers, if you believe in them — have helped you achieve that goodness.

To really reap the benefits of gratitude, experts say, it's important to express it whenever possible. That might include writing letters of thanks or listing the positive things in your life in a journal. Giving thanks to friends, romantic partners and even co-workers can also offer a relationship boost.

### 6. BE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT AGEING

Research shows that mindset really matters when it comes to health, and it can even extend your life. A classic study found that people who were optimistic about ageing lived 7.5 years longer than those who had negative perceptions of it.

To adopt a more positive outlook about getting older, shift your focus to the benefits of ageing, including better emotional well-being and higher emotional intelligence. Look for ageing role models, too: older people who stay physically active and engaged in their communities, or those with traits that you admire.

### 7. PARTICIPATE IN THE ARTS

The notion that art can improve mental well-being is something many people intuitively understand but don't necessarily put into practice. You don't need talent to give it a try,

experts say. Writing a poem, singing or drawing can all help elevate your mood, no matter how creative you consider yourself to be. One of the easiest ways to get started is to colour something intricate: Spending 20 minutes colouring a mandala (a complex geometric design) is more helpful for reducing anxiety than free-form colouring for the same length of time, research has found.

#### 8. LOOK FOR A LITTLE BIT OF AWE EVERY DAY

Sometimes we have to remind ourselves to connect with the physical world around us. Enter the awe walk.

Pick a walking spot (either new or familiar) and imagine that you're seeing it for the first time. Then pay attention to your senses. Feel the wind on your face, touch the petals of a flower. Simply notice the sky. It can be more restorative than you might expect.

#### 9. TAKE A TECH BREAK

If you're having trouble focusing, it's not just you. Research has found that over the past two decades, the amount of time we spend on a given task has shrunk to an average of just 47 seconds, down from 2.5 minutes. Technology is often to blame.

To regain control of your concentration, Larry Rosen, a professor emeritus of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, suggested a strategy he calls "tech breaks". Set a timer for 15 minutes, then silence and set aside your phone. When time is up, take one or two minutes to check your favourite apps — that's your tech break — and get back to work for another 15-minute cycle. The goal is to gradually increase the time between your tech breaks, building up to 45 minutes (or more) away from your phone.

#### 10. TAKE A DEEP BREATH

One of the fastest, easiest ways you can calm your mind and body is by taking slow, deep breaths. Doing so helps to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system — the counter-balance to the "fight or flight" stress response — and lower your blood pressure and regulate your heart rate.

One breathing exercise that can be particularly helpful for mitigating fear and anxiety is 4-4-8 breathing, where you inhale for four counts, hold your breath for four counts and exhale for eight counts.