

A Mental Health Master Plan

We're used to thinking about physical health as having separate, but interrelated, [parts](#): physical activity, fitness, sleep, nutrition, hygiene, risk and disease prevention, etc. We can take stock of our physical health, identify the areas that needs support, and then make changes, knowing that the benefits will ripple out to impact the whole of our body.

Our mental health is multi-faceted too. Just like our physical health, we can examine its parts to make changes that will benefit the whole. Perhaps the most logical place to start this exploration is by thinking about the first place that physical and mental health overlap - the brain.

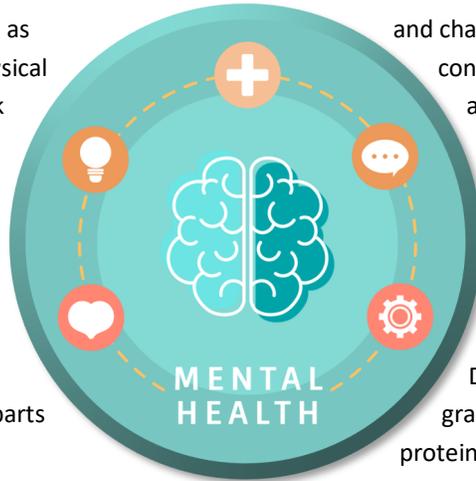
Brain Health

What's the complex object in the known universe? The human brain! While the scope of what [our brains](#) are able to do is astounding, and the ways that they do those things is perplexing, caring for these 3-pound miracles is pretty straight forward.

 **Protect your head.** Even without a diagnosis of a concussion, "getting your bell rung" can have long term impacts. [Brain injuries](#), and recovery from them, can be as complex as the brain itself. For instance, an injury to one part of the head can cause damage on the opposite side, or even throughout the whole brain.

 **Protect your mouth.** There are about 700 different species of bacteria that live in your mouth, and roughly 2 dozen of those can [cause harm](#) other parts of your body. Chronic gum disease or oral infections allows those harmful bacteria to escape into your bloodstream through the vessels in your gums. They then can travel throughout your body, damaging other organs, including your brain.

 **Protect your hearing.** [Hearing loss](#) leads to the loss of sensory input, which causes the "hearing" section of the brain to shrink,



and changing the brain's structure. Hearing loss can create confusion and lead to mental exhaustion. That can zap a person's energy for remembering, thinking, doing things, and interacting with other people.

 **Feed your brain well.** Our brains are only about 2% of our body weight, but they use about 20% of the calories we consume. It's critical that we keep them fueled with high-quality energy! Diets that [emphasize](#) vegetables, berries, whole grains, fish, nuts, unsaturated fats, and plant-based proteins, protect both our hearts and our brains.

 **Amp up the mental stimulation.** When was the last time you put yourself in a situation that required you to learn? How long has it been since you've seen, done, tasted, heard, or tried something new? When we introduce novel experiences into our lives, we stimulate new connections between brain cells, and may even help our brains to grow additional nerve cells.

 **Don't just sit there—move something!** Regular physical activity increases the amount of oxygen-rich blood that gets to the brain, supports the development of new neurons, and increases their connectivity. This leads to brains that work more efficiently and can adapt better to change. Exercise can also help improve blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels, all of which impact the health of your brain. High blood pressure, high blood sugar, and high levels of LDL cholesterol (the "bad" kind) damage blood vessels, reducing the amount of blood that can reach tissues and organs. The health of every part of your body depends on healthy blood flow, and this absolutely includes your brain!

 **Avoid all forms of tobacco and minimize alcohol use.** [Tobacco use](#) is damaging to brain health. It increases the risk of stroke, dementia, and cancer. Alcohol hampers the brain's communication pathways and impacts it's ability to process information. Over time, [excessive alcohol](#) consumption can increase the risk of some cancers and lead to permanent brain damage.

Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We're here to help!
Ask a nurse or provider if you'd like to talk. 218-387-2330

A common metaphor for the brain is that of a computer. If the physical structure of our brains is the “hardware,” then our thoughts, emotions, and feelings can be looked at as the “software.” Hardware and software glitches can cause mental health issues.

Thoughts are our opinions, assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes. They’re shaped by our life experiences, brain health, and education, and they determine our points of view about the situations we encounter. Just like we can, but rarely choose to, think about and change our automatic breathing patterns, we can choose to think about and change our automatic thinking patterns. Our thoughts impact and alter our emotions and feelings.

Emotions can be thought of as the instinctive bodily reactions that are caused by chemical changes in the brain. They can be things like our hearts beating faster, pupils dilating, or facial expressions changing.

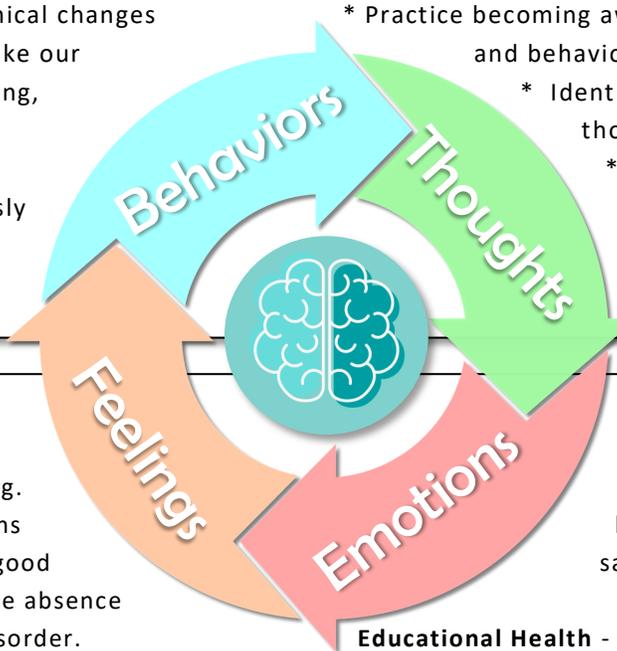
Feelings are the way we consciously experience those emotional reactions, and the names we

give them: joy, sadness, grief, etc. Feelings are generated by emotions, and are what happens when the brain notices changes in either itself or the body and then gives those changes a label or meaning. For instance: *My thoughts and my heart are racing! I must be frightened!*

As we become more consciously aware of our thoughts, emotions and feelings, it gives us the power to choose the behaviors that spring from them. Our behaviors then affect the ways we think and feel, which reinforces those helpful behaviors. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a type of therapy that deals especially with this cycle.

CBT helps people to:

- * Identify the situation, conditions, problems, or goals they’d like to address.
- * Practice becoming aware of the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that impact those things.
- * Identify the automatic thinking about those that is inaccurate or unhelpful.
- * Interrupt those unhelpful automatic thought patterns, and then reframe and replace them with helpful, accurate ones.



Mental health is the entirety of a person’s emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Just like good physical health means more than the absence of illness, good mental health means more than the absence of depression, anxiety, or other disorder.

Having robust mental health means that a person is able to

- Enjoy life
- Bounce back after challenging experiences
- Adapt to adversity
- Feel safe and secure
- Achieve their full potential

But, mental and physical wellbeing don’t occur in a vacuum. They’re impacted by the “Social Determinants of Health,” factors that, when woven together, make up the fabric of our lives.

Environmental Health - The health of an individual is deeply impacted by the health of the place that they live. Are the air and water clean? What’s the quality of available housing? Do they have access to transportation? Is their neighborhood safe? Is healthy food available?

Economic Health - Does someone have the financial resources to afford secure housing, enough healthy food, medical care, and to save for future needs?

Educational Health - Does a person have access to quality educational opportunities? Are there programs for early childhood education? Are teens able to graduate from high school? Is higher education available and affordable?

Social Health - Are the relationships within the community healthy? How can individuals get the social support that they need? Are citizens able to participate in community decision-making? Are people able to live lives free from discrimination?

Healthcare - Do people have access to high-quality, affordable health care? What about good medical insurance? Are there opportunities to increase their health literacy so they can make informed decisions?

If you have questions or concerns about your physical or mental health, reach out the providers here at SMC! Just call 218-387-2330 to make an appointment.