



# The Basic Human Needs for Good Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

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If you are suffering from an emotional problem such as depression, anxiety, obsessive behaviour or repetitive addictions, there is only one place you should start when looking for a solution. Your basic human needs. It seems obvious, but all too often, when it comes to psychology, common sense goes out the window, and the textbooks come off the bookshelf. Why not leave them there for just now, and ask yourself the following questions...

- If you had no petrol in your car, would you be wondering why it won't start?
- If your garden hadn't seen rain for 6 months, would you be racking your brains about why all the plants had died?

Of course not. But ask human beings to apply the same objective observation to their own lives and you are setting a much trickier task.

Take a look at these two real life case studies from our clinic, and see if you can spot the problem:

## Case Study One: Stressed-Out Sue

'Sue', 23, came to me in a highly agitated state complaining that she felt she was on the verge of 'going crazy.' She reported the following problems:

- **Feeling close to tears much of the time**
- **Irrational thoughts**
- **Feeling depressed sometimes**
- **Feeling manic some of the time**

I asked her about her routine and she told me that she got up at 6.00 am everyday to catch the early train to her job in a busy IT company in the city. The rest of the conversation went something like this:

**Me:** "So you just grab breakfast and get on the train then?"

**Sue:** "No I never bother with breakfast, I grab a coffee on the train."

**Me:** "Gosh, you must get really hungry by lunch time!"

**Sue:** "I don't bother with lunch I just work straight through and eat a sandwich on the train at the end of the day"

**Me:** "What time do you get home?"

**Sue:** "About 9.00 pm then, to unwind I drink a bottle of wine so I can get a decent night's sleep."

**Me:** "And how long have you been feeling like this?"

**Sue:** "About six months!"

**Me:** "How long did you say you'd been in your present job?"

**Sue:** "Wow! It must be around six months now."

So, Sue was getting up at six, skipping breakfast, skipping lunch, grabbing fast food on the homeward journey and then drinking herself to sleep. At weekends she slept and caught up with friends but usually felt too lethargic to do very much.

I suggested to Sue that continually ignoring our mind and body's basic needs usually has severe consequences. I suggested that, as an 'experiment' she do the following:

- Start having breakfast
- Take at least half an hour for lunch
- Use a 'power nap' relaxation exercise I'd taught her after her mid day meal
- Keep her work day evenings free of alcohol and just drink during the evening at the weekends

She also mentioned that she was thinking of asking her boss if she could have one day during the week working from home. I enthusiastically agreed that this was a great idea as she would then have an extra travel free day.

I saw Sue the following week. She was transformed. She beamed at me, looking years younger. She was sleeping better without the alcohol, she was eating regularly and was now working at home on Wednesdays. She said her moods had totally stabilized and she was no longer tearful. This was two years ago.

I bumped into her recently and she told me she was still "checking the oil and water before worrying about an engine breakdown!"

## **Case Study Two: Loner Brian**

'Brian' was a single forty six year old mature student and part time freelance illustrator. He reported feeling miserable and low.

On checking his basic needs, it was clear that his diet was fine. He also slept well regularly, although seldom felt rested after sleep - a common symptom of depression.

However, it soon became obvious that he had very little social contact. He sometimes spent weeks alone working on his course dissertation and on illustration work.

He said he spent a lot of time 'in his own head' and agreed that we all need some kind of contact and a source of stabilization. We looked at ways he could increase social contact and he suggested he started going to bowling again. There was a regular group he knew pretty well but he hadn't been for months although he used enjoy it. He also decided to begin jogging around the park again as this always lifted his mood (serotonin, a neurotransmitter connected to a sense of well being is increased through exercise) and he enjoyed being recognised and acknowledged by dog walkers in the park.

I suggested he have his lunch in a busy little cafe close to where he lived. He made these changes and reported later feeling a great deal better. Whilst not all depressions lift so quickly, in Brian's case the basic need for social support and connection was the main offender in making him feel bad much of the time.

## **Nine basic human needs**

Apparently, if you chuck a frog into a pan of boiling water, it will hop straight out again. But if you put him in cold water and slowly heat it up, he will sit there until well and truly poached.

Problems due to missing 'basics' in peoples lives tend to develop over time, and so can be easily missed. Then, when the problem arises - be it anxiety, depression, addiction or some other nasty - they can't for the life of them fathom out why!

It's therefore a great idea to know what your own garden needs in order to grow well, so when you see something starting to wither, you can check your list and apply the necessary nutrients.

So here's the list. (At least, our list. If you think we've missed any, do let us know!)

### **1. The need to give and receive attention**

"No Man Is An Island"

Without regular quality contact with other people, mental condition, emotional state and behaviour can suffer quite drastically. This is often particularly obvious in elderly people who have become isolated. After days alone, their first contact may be their GP, who sees them for 10 minutes.

They are highly likely during this short period to appear 'strange' as their thwarted need for attention asserts itself in an outpouring of communication. If the GP takes this as representative of the patient's general mental condition, they may prescribe drugs, where really a few hours of being listened to would suffice.

You may also have noticed this in evening-class attendees who command the teacher's attention all the time, asking seemingly daft questions and not really listening to the answers!

### **2. Taking heed of the mind body connection**

This is so important, and so often neglected. Without correct and regular nutrition, sleep and exercise, your psychological state can suffer considerably. It is often seen that young people, on leaving home and the structure that provides, succumb to one mental illness or another. Their mealtimes, sleep patterns and other regular habits become disrupted, with predictable consequences.

It seems that people are increasingly treating themselves as machines!

### **3. The need for purpose, goals and meaning**

"The devil will make work for idle hands to do."

Perhaps the overriding element that sets human beings apart from other animals is the ability to identify, analyse and solve problems. This is what enabled us to develop to where we have.

If this ability is under-used, the imagination can start to create problems of its own - perhaps in an attempt to give you something to do because it is not occupied doing anything else.

Regardless, if a person is deprived of the outward focus and satisfaction created by achieving goals, mental illness is often close behind.

The need for meaning is perhaps even more profound. Viktor Frankl's book 'Man's Search for Meaning' documents the impact of lack of meaning on concentration camp prisoners, of which he was one. He says in it that "What is the meaning of life?" is a question that is asked of you, not one that you yourself ask. It is a hugely powerful and important read when considering mental health.

#### **4. A sense of community and making a contribution**

Tying in with the need for meaning, this basic need provides a context for a person. It gives them a reason for being, over and above their own personal needs, that has been shown to benefit the immune system, mental health and happiness.

One obvious fulfiller of this need is religion, but can also be an idea shared with others, a club, charity or community work. In fact, anything that takes the focus off the self.

#### **5. The need for challenge and creativity**

Learning something new, expanding horizons, improving on existing skills all provide a sensation of progress and achievement. Without this, a person can feel worthless, or that there is no real reason for their being.

#### **6. The need for intimacy**

Tying in with the need for attention, it seems that people have a need to share their ideas, hopes and dreams with others close to them. For some, this can be as simple as talking to a loved pet, but for most of us, it requires that we have at least one individual with whom we can converse 'on the same level'.

#### **7. The need to feel a sense of control**

"All your eggs in one basket."

The results of total loss of control over your surroundings, relationships or body are not hard to imagine, and have been well documented.

From survivors of torture, to someone losing their job, those who are able to maintain a sense of control somewhere in their life fare the best. This is why having a variety of interests and activities is so important.

#### **8. The need for a sense of status**

It's important to feel important. And we all know some people for whom this need is too important! However, if someone feels recognised for being a grandmother or parent or good son or daughter, this may be enough. Young people finding their feet can have improved self-esteem if they feel they have attained a position of trust and recognition. Young boys in Birmingham, UK who were at risk of exclusion because of behavioural problems were trained as mentors and paid for helping younger kids who were also at risk of exclusion. Not only did the mentors' own behaviour improve, they also reported greater levels of happiness, contentment and self-esteem. Much disruptive, problematic behaviour may be a misapplied attempt to meet this need for recognition.

## **9. The need for a sense safety and security**

We need to feel our environment is basically secure and reasonably predictable. Financial security, physical safety and health, and the fulfilment of other basic needs all contribute to the completion of this need. As with all of the following needs we can take it too far and become obsessive about it – you will see this sometimes if the need for creativity is not met.

### **Many Needs, One Life**

It may seem that a life that meets all of these needs would be intolerably busy. But of course, one activity can meet many needs. Charity work for example, could be said to fulfil 1, 3, 4 and 5, and could contribute to 6 and 7. Walking with a friend as a pastime might go towards 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6.

Generally, what this suggests, and what has been borne out by recent research, is that a more complex life is a more healthy one.

Then if one area of life fails or is taken away from you, your basic needs are maintained, at least in part, by those that survive.

### **So the message is...**

If your progress through life has gone a bit awry for you or a friend, check if there is petrol in the car, and that the battery is charged before going to a mechanic to have the engine taken apart!

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