

# The Six (6) Pillars of Good Mental Health (Part 3)

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There are some basic supports that need to be in place for all of us to achieve maximum brain health (good mental health) regardless of age, gender, health or mental illness. These are the six (6) pillars of brain health: sleep, water, exercise, nutrition, humor, and laughter and social connections.

Nutrition, the fourth pillar, refers to brain nutrition. The brain requires a steady diet of nutritionally-dense brain food to function well; it can use up to 30% of our calories in a day. Every day you plan to use your brain, you need to fuel it regularly and well from all the major food groups. Most nutritionists recommend some fuel every 3 to 4 hours. Our brain craves clean, simple foods from all the food groups. A steady and consistent pattern of high-quality fuel keeps our brains young and healthy. Good snack choices and three balanced meals of protein, fats, fruits and vegetables, and complex carbohydrates will meet our brains nutritional needs.

The brain is the fattiest organ in our body and it requires certain high quality fats such as Omega 3, 6, and 9 types. Fat should make up about 20 to 30% of our diet, depending on our weight. High quality proteins, optimal fruits and vegetables, nuts, legumes, whole grains and clean water complete the plan. Whole foods fuel and rejuvenate the brain.

The brain is the only major organ in our body whose level of function is totally dependent on the composition of our last meal. A meal full of essential fats, proteins, vitamins, antioxidants and different deeply-colored foods in modest proportions that fill your stomach to 80% capacity gives your brain health energy and the essential foods to work efficiently – fast and accurate

connections, crisp communications and little to no brain fog.

Humor and Laughter, the fifth pillar, is the best balancing elixir for the human brain. Most of us had our first laugh between the ages of three and four months. Childhood brought a brief period of life when our objective, and our parent's objective, was to make us and those in our world smile and laugh. This period evolved into the realities of our current world – growing up and education became serious business. The world we live in has become serious business. We find ourselves surrounded by conflict and violence, too much choice with too little time, responsibilities and obligations, outcome-based performances coupled with slogans such as "Be the Best You Can Be". These factors contribute to restricting and curbing our natural instincts for humor, comedy and laughter.

Laughter requires the coordination of many muscles throughout our body, increases our blood pressure and heart rate, alters our breathing, and reduces the levels of some neuro-chemicals. Humor and laughter are processed through a complex pathway of brain activity using a combination of cognitive, movement and pleasure processing. Laughter is a complex human behavior which occurs unconsciously – we can inhibit it but we cannot fake it.

Laughter is truly the best medicine. We do not need a prescription, there are no negative side effects, it does not cause weight gain and we do not need health insurance coverage to access laughter. Take some time today to enjoy some humor and laughter.

Social Connections, the sixth and final pillar in this series, involve families, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. A large part of who we are, our sense of self, is determined by our social identity – who do we belong to? We are social creatures and we have evolved to live in social groups from families to sports

teams, from book clubs to volunteer groups; our "memberships" have dramatic impact on our lives and on our mental and physical health. Our sense of social identity is central to our mental functioning, health and well-being.

Socially connected people are generally happier, remain more actively engaged, are in better physical and emotional health, cope more effectively with change and life transitions, volunteer more in their communities, and are in better health and live longer.

Our social connections involve social support, social networks, social engagement and supportive environments. People need people; the story of our individual lives is made up primarily of what we did with whom. Our fondest memories are generally not those moments of solitude, no matter how important they are, but those moments in the company of people we love and people who love us.

This concludes this series on the Sixth Pillars of Good Mental Health. The information provided here comes from the series of 6 brochures developed by Janet Frick and the MHA last year. References for this information are included in the brochures which are available at the MHA Office.

The next column, in support of May as Mental Health Awareness Month, will be the start of a series on Recovery and Resiliency.

The Mental Health Association will hold its 8<sup>th</sup> Semi-Annual Clothing sale at Beth Israel Synagogue, Wednesday April 21<sup>st</sup> through Friday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>. Please contact the MHA office for more information or see our website, [www.mhaleb.org](http://www.mhaleb.org).

*By Shem H. Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County*