

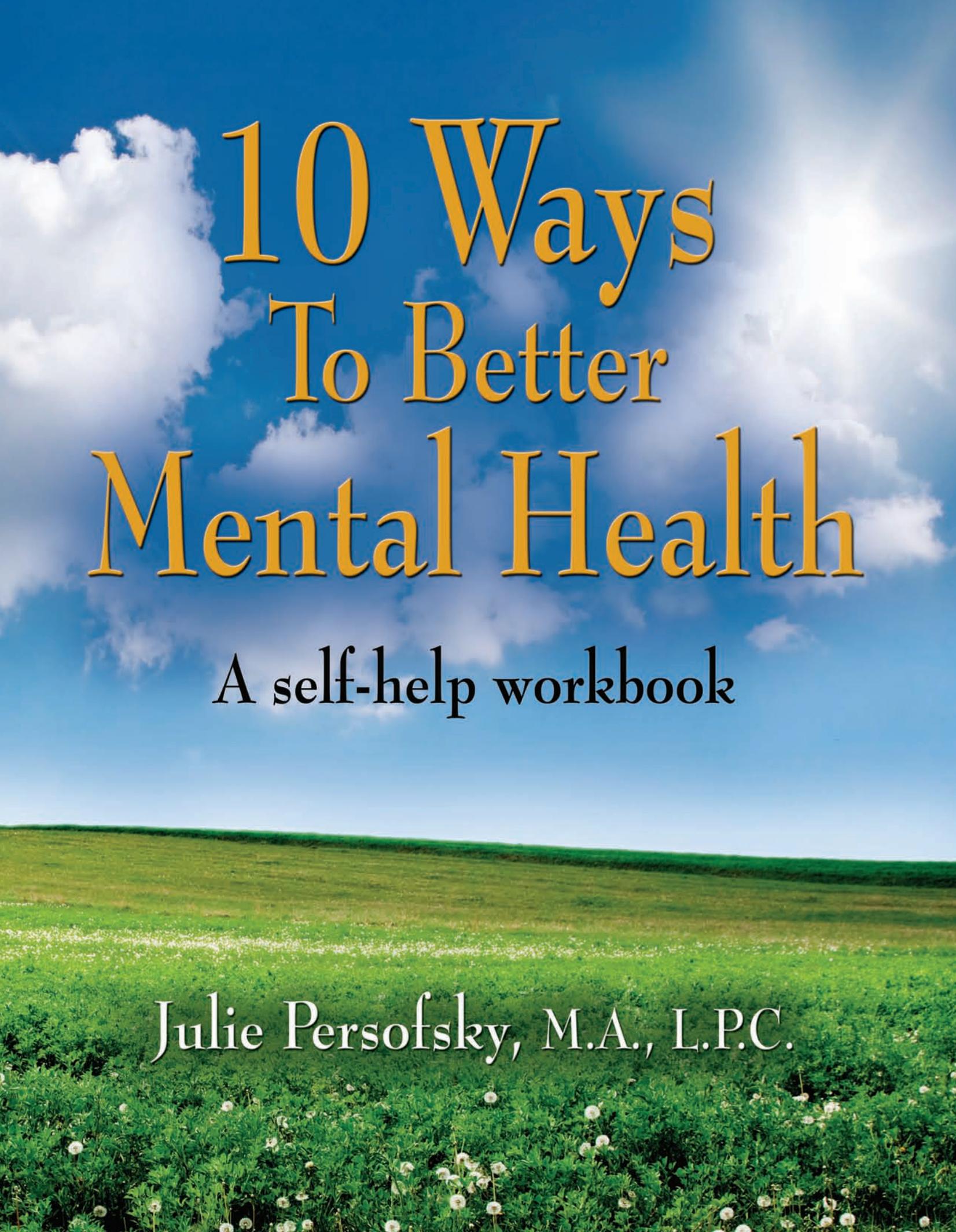
10 Ways to Better Mental Health is a workbook to help people deal with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, trauma, phobias, anger problems, and stress. Each chapter presents an example of someone suffering from a particular group of symptoms, and explains what the person did to get better. It then invites the reader to try the exercises that follow and learn new coping skills.

10 Ways to Better Mental Health

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10 Ways To Better Mental Health

A self-help workbook

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Chapter 2: LEARN TO RELAX

Stress can affect your mental, emotional, and physical health. Headaches, depression, anxiety, high-blood pressure, and disturbed sleep are signs of severe stress. Relaxation can reduce the effects of stress and give your body a chance to recover.



I am so stressed!

George is a 51 year old man who is holding down a full time, high pressure job. Every weekend he takes the train to the other end of town and stays with his elderly mother. He helps her with shopping and housework. By the time he returns home on Sunday night he is thoroughly exhausted. When George recently saw his doctor he was told that his blood pressure is dangerously high and he has to change his lifestyle.

At the next therapy session we decided to work on stress reduction. We practiced a relaxation breathing technique and George said it made him feel calm and relaxed. He said he would use it to relieve stress during the work week.

We also talked about ways he could find some time for himself. He called his sister and told her what the doctor said. She agreed to take care of their mother on Sundays so George could have a break. We discussed activities George could do on Sunday to relax. He said there is a park nearby that he has always wanted to go to, but never had the time. He said he loved fishing at that park. He planned to go there on Sundays if the weather was dry.

After several weeks of using relaxation breathing and going fishing on Sunday, George came in with a big smile on his face. He said he had just seen his doctor and his blood pressure had dropped to normal.

The benefits of relaxation are many. Try some of the following methods.

Relaxation techniques

When you are stressed your muscles tighten, your breathing becomes rapid and shallow, and less oxygen reaches your brain. Relaxation techniques allow you to release muscle tension and restore the normal oxygen flow. Check off the techniques you want to try.

– Deep breathing.

Take a few slow, deep breaths throughout the day. Do it more often when stress is severe.

– Relaxation breath.

Breathe in through your nose, then slowly breathe out through your mouth. Feel a stream of relaxation flow through your body from your head, down through your chest, your legs, feet, and out through your toes. Feel a stream of relaxation flow through your shoulders, down your arms, to your hands, and out through your fingers. Let your limbs relax and go limp. Take a deep breath in and out.

– Controlled breathing.

Put your hand on your stomach. Breathe in through your nose slowly for the count of 4. Feel your diaphragm contracting, your ribs rising, and your lungs filling with air. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for the count of 6, letting your body go limp. An alternative is to hold your breath for the count of 4 between the in and out breaths.

– Muscle relaxation.

This exercise works on the principle that muscles can only hold a certain amount of tension. If over tightened, muscles will release. Wear comfortable clothes and sit in straight back chair.

Instructions:

1. Rest your right hand on your knee. Make a fist. Straighten your right arm from your fist to your shoulder, making it stiff like a board. Tighten your fist for the count of 5, then let go. If your hand gets numb you tightened your fist too hard. The aim is for the whole arm to feel warm and heavy.
2. Bend the right arm up with your loose fist pointing upward. Pull your fist toward your head, as if showing off your muscles. Bend it hard enough to feel tension in upper half of your upper arm. Hold for the count of 5, then let go.
3. Turn your right arm and fist downward toward your hip, arm slightly bent. Lift your elbow back and up, raising your shoulder. Tension should be felt in the lower half of your upper arm. Hold for the count of 5, then release.
4. Put your right hand on your right hip. Gently touch your hip with your index finger and thumb on top. Lift your rib cage. Stretch out your upper body by leaning to the left. Count to 5, then sit up straight.
5. Extend your right leg and tighten your muscles from the hip to your toes. Point your toes downward for the count of 5.

6. Repeat steps 1 to 5 for the left side of your body.
7. Roll your head around your shoulders in a circle to the left several times, then to the right several times.
8. Massage any tension in your neck, temples, behind the ears, head, etc. To massage use the fingers of both hands. Rub in tight circles with fingers slightly pushing in on the tight muscles to loosen them.
9. Close your eyes and tighten the area around your eyes for the count of 5, then let go.
10. Finally take a deep breath in and out.

— **Practice a visualization.**

Another way to clear your mind is to sit in a quiet place and imagine yourself in a peaceful, comforting place using all your senses. For example, imagine being at the beach, in the mountains, at a spa, or fishing on a beautiful lake. You can stay in this imaginary place as long as you like.

Here is the beginning of a visualization of the beach:

The weather is clear. The sun warms your face and your shoulders. You see and hear the ocean waves crashing onto the shore. The boardwalk stretches out behind you, and the beach stretches out to your left and right. You feel the sand between your toes and taste the salty ocean air...

— **Be inspired.**

Read or listen to an inspirational, spiritual, or motivational story. Do this for 15 to 30 minutes, once a day or more often if you feel severely stressed.

Treat yourself

Doing enjoyable activities reduces stress. Check off the activities that you enjoy.

- Take a bubble bath.
- Listen to your favorite music.
- Watch a comedy show or favorite movie.
- Watch a sports show on TV.
- Eat “comfort” food.
- Have a manicure or a pedicure.
- Get your hair cut and styled.
- Visit a friend.
- Go fishing.
- Go on a retreat.
- Spend time with your pet.
- Visit a place you love.
- Other: _____
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Keep a journal.

Write about your stress, how it affects you, and what you are doing about it. Writing can relieve tension and lead you to some creative solutions.

Share feelings.

Talk about what is stressing you with supportive friends and family.

Summary

Use multiple ways to relax:

- Learn a breathing technique
- Learn a muscle relaxation technique
- Practice a visualization of a peaceful place
- Read something inspirational
- Treat yourself to an enjoyable activity
- Write in a journal
- Talk to others about your stress

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