The 6 Pillars of Mental Health (and How to Achieve Each One)

4 MIN READ

JUN. 16, 2026

BY MICHELE ROSS

What does true mental health look like? Scientists say there are six core features worth cultivating.

We've gotten pretty good at talking about what mental health *isn't*. It's not unmanaged anxiety. Depression. Chronic stress. But it's also not simply the absence of those things, or, for that matter, other kinds of emotional suffering.

Researchers are increasingly identifying mental health as an active ingredient in how well we live and age, linking it to **better sleep**, **lower inflammation**, **stronger cognitive function**, and a **measurably longer life**. That means it matters that we can recognize what it looks and feels like when it's working, *before* it shapes how long we live, and whether we live well.

Which raises a deceptively simple question: what does genuinely good mental health actually look like?

To answer that question, researchers in Australia surveyed 122 experts across 11 disciplines. After three rounds of review, six pillars of positive mental health emerged with more than 90% consensus. Here's what each one means and looks like in practice, plus expert advice on how to foster each.

1. Meaning and Purpose

Meaning helps people understand the "why" behind their lives. Purpose gives them direction. The research, published in ***Nature Mental Health*** in April 2026, identified these two related factors as being among the most important ingredients of

mental health.

Meaning doesn't only help you to recognize what matters to you. It can also help you make sense of your past, the good times and bad. Meanwhile, purpose is more future-oriented. **Elizabeth Winkler, LFMT**, a therapist and meditation teacher in Beverly Hills, California, likens purpose to your North Star, orienting you toward a specific goal or intention.

To find more meaning in your life, ask yourself **what's truly important to you**, whether that's relationships, learning, resilience, or creativity. If you have trouble answering this, Winkler suggests reflecting on your life as if this were your last day on earth. What moments, people, or places would stay with you most? What would you want to leave behind? The answers often reveal where you derive the most fulfillment, and where you may want to invest more of your time and energy.

Purpose takes things a step further. It invites you to consider what you're aiming toward and the action steps required to get there. Perhaps you feel like your purpose is to be a present parent or grandparent. Fulfilling your purpose could look like scheduling an annual family getaway, going to every soccer game on the calendar, or offering to babysit your grandkids weekly. And it's a constant work in progress: "Purpose becomes something we practice, not something we someday arrive at," Winkler shares.

2. Life Satisfaction

"Life satisfaction is less about having a perfect life and more about feeling internally connected while living it," says **Yasmine Saad, PhD**, a licensed clinical psychologist and the founder and CEO of **Madison Park Psychological Services** in New York City. In other words, achievement is less important than congruence, whether your daily life actually reflects what matters to you.

You could have a high-paying job but dread every minute on the clock. Or have a huge social group but lack the intimacy you crave. The goal isn't just to rack up achievements and signposts of having "made it." It's to ensure you're living in a way that you actually find meaningful. If there's a disconnect, you're likely to experience negative thoughts and emotions, Saad warns, no matter how good things may look on the surface.

You may notice more dissatisfaction with your life if you feel like you're not living up to your potential or failing to keep up with others. But the key to enhancing life satisfaction, Saad says, is to focus less on what you lack and more on what genuinely energizes you.

Ask yourself: *What makes me feel connected, alive, and at peace?* According to Saad, life changes when you stop measuring fulfillment by what's missing and start recognizing what you have that already matters to you. Allow yourself to define success on your own terms and create more harmony between your values and daily life.

In practice, this could look like:

- Scaling back your work hours to make more time for hobbies
- Scheduling more 1:1 time with friends to connect more deeply
- Spending less time on your phone and more time outdoors

3. Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance means acknowledging your flaws, limitations, and insecurities without allowing them to define your worth. But that doesn't mean you should stop striving for self-improvement.

"Acceptance does not mean giving up or resigning ourselves to what is," says

Winkler. “It means being willing to face ourselves honestly so we can heal, grow, and make changes if desired or needed.”

Self-acceptance is crucial for mental health since it helps to silence your inner critic. It shifts us from judgment into compassion, both for yourself and for others. When you don’t accept yourself, the effects will likely spill into other areas of life. “Many of the parts of ourselves we reject do not disappear. They often get projected onto other people or the world around us,” says Winkler. She says this at the root of your shadow: a part of yourself that’s yet to be fully seen, understood, or accepted. “Without acceptance, shame grows. But with acceptance, healing becomes possible.”

Feel like you could use some work on this pillar? Winkler suggests exploring parts of yourself you’re avoiding or don’t want to be fully seen. The more honestly you acknowledge these parts of yourself, the less of a mental load you’ll carry, and the more readily you’ll be able to meet yourself with tenderness. You can say these thoughts out loud, write them down, or discuss them with a friend or therapist.

“Simply giving voice to what has been hidden opens the door to self-acceptance because shame grows in silence,” she says.

Self-acceptance could look like:

- Navigating a divorce without feeling like you “failed” at your marriage
- Aging physically without self-criticism
- Acknowledging feelings of jealousy or shame without spiraling

4. Connection

Humans are **hard-wired for connection**. “Safe relationships help regulate our nervous system and remind us that we are not alone,” Winkler shares. They stave off loneliness and isolation. They allow us to feel seen and heard. They make us feel we

matter.

But before you count how many friends you could call at 3am, Winkler reminds us that all connection begins with ourselves. “The more connected we are to ourselves, the more connected we can feel to others and the world around us,” she says. To connect more deeply with yourself, she recommends mindfulness practices like meditating and journaling to become more aware of your thoughts, emotions, and needs.

From there, focus on ways to connect to others around you. Prioritize quality over quantity, and nurture the relationships that matter most. Don’t skip small opportunities to connect, either. **Research** shows that engaging more frequently with weak ties (these are people you’re less acquainted with, like your barista or neighbor) can yield greater happiness and a sense of belonging. **One study** found that weak ties may even promote greater emotional well-being than close ties in older age.

Make it a priority to socialize often, no matter who’s in your orbit. “Relationships deepen through consistency, not intensity,” Winkler shares.

Some more ideas to foster connection include:

- Going to a co-working space if you work remotely
- Scheduling weekly phone calls with loved ones
- Catching up with friends over coffee instead of texts
- Volunteering
- Joining a community sports club

5. Autonomy

“Autonomy is the ability to make choices that feel internally aligned rather than

driven by fear, pressure, guilt, validation, or expectation," Saad explains. When you're autonomous, you operate from your internal compass. When you're not, you're overly influenced by the thoughts, judgments, and expectations of others.

It's an important part of the mental health equation because it reflects how confident and competent you feel making decisions. It puts you in the driver's seat and prevents you from chasing approval, fearing judgment, or losing clarity about what you truly need or value. In that sense, autonomy is the basis of self-trust.

To strengthen your sense of autonomy, Saad suggests pausing before reacting to outside influences. "That pause creates awareness and helps you see where you are not free internally," she says. Before responding, ask yourself: *Is this genuinely aligned with me or am I abandoning myself to gain approval, safety, or belonging?* This practice can be especially beneficial for people-pleasers, self-doubters, and those who are prone to social comparison.

In real life, this could look like:

- Skipping alcohol at happy hour because you don't like the way it makes you feel
- Setting boundaries with friends or family members who drain your time or energy
- Leaving a prestigious job for an opportunity more in line with your priorities

6. Happiness

To no one's surprise, happiness and mental health go hand in hand. But it's important to clarify what happiness is and isn't. For starters, happiness isn't measured in promotions, the size of your house, or a number on the scale. It also doesn't require constant positivity or the policing of negative thoughts. It's actually far more subtle and balanced than you'd expect.

Cultivating happiness means cultivating your capacity for joy, psychological ease, and

ability to experience pleasure, and sometimes that can happen right alongside stress, struggle, and hardships. In fact, happiness often comes from rising above challenges, the experts note.

Don’t think happiness is your strong suit? Saad suggests exploring what leaves you energized (say, creating art) versus what creates a fleeting escape (like a sweet treat or late-night Netflix binge). You should also aim to stop chasing happiness as a performance. “Happiness is not something you prove to other people and yourself. It is something you experience internally,” she says.

Habits that support true happiness can include:

- Scheduling downtime for yourself
- Finding mini moments of joy and pleasure throughout the day
- Exploring hobbies unrelated to achievement
- Finding peace in everyday routines
- Spending quality time with loved ones

A helpful reframe: Happiness is neither a personality trait nor a destination. Instead, it’s something built gradually through daily experiences, connections, habits, and perspective. “Happiness grows gradually through small moments of alignment rather than dramatic transformations,” Saad says.

You shouldn’t expect miracles overnight. But the more your daily life reflects your values, important relationships, and sources of joy, the more sustainable happiness tends to become.

A Map of What It Means to Thrive

None of these pillars exist in isolation. Self-acceptance reinforces autonomy.

Connection strengthens happiness. Purpose boosts life satisfaction. That’s a good thing.

Together, they form something more useful than any single metric of mental health, a map of what it actually means to thrive. And increasingly, the evidence suggests that building these qualities isn’t just good for how you feel. It may be one of the most powerful things you can do for how you age.

Read This Next:

*The information provided in this article is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as health, medical, or financial advice. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat any health condition. Always consult a qualified healthcare provider regarding any questions you may have about a medical condition or health objectives.**Read our disclaimers**.*

WRITTEN BY:



Michele Ross