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Double trouble: Smoking and mental health

Many people reach for a smoke — tobacco, marijuana, or both — to relieve stress. Others believe these substances boost mood or ease anxiety.

But, in fact, the opposite is true. Puffing on either nicotine or marijuana poses risks to your mental health. And, together, a new study finds, they're linked to more than double the risk for anxiety and depression.

Fortunately, treatment can improve mental health and help you kick harmful habits. Here's what you need to know.

How smoking drags down your mood

About one in three U.S. smokers already has a mental health condition. And nicotine worsens anxiety, stress, and depression in the long run. Meanwhile, marijuana is also linked to psychiatric problems, including sadness, anxiety, and feeling paranoid or disoriented.

Pairing these substances causes greater harm to mental health than either alone, research now shows.

Why? One reason could be their toxic effects on the brain. A double dose of damage to neurons and other tissues could worsen the impact of each substance. What's more, quitting either nicotine or marijuana may be harder when you're using both.

Ready to quit?

You don't have to do it by yourself. To get help when you need it most, reach out to the **NYS Smokers' Quitline** at **866.697.8487**. For local smoking cessation programs, click [here](#). To take advantage of FREE nicotine patches or lozenges, call **311** or **866.697.8487**.

Coping with withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability and anxiety, are common. These feelings can linger for a few weeks; finding a replacement behavior can help. For tips on coping with the urge to smoke, click [here](#).



PrEP for your future: Protect yourself from getting HIV



PrEP is medicine that helps prevent HIV infection. It's available in two forms: daily pills and long-acting injections. Taken as directed, PrEP can:

- Reduce the chance of getting HIV from sex by about 99%
- Lower the risk of getting HIV from injection drug use by at least 74%

Is PrEP right for you? Here are some key facts to consider, along with tips on how to talk with your doctor.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is a virus that can be passed from person to person in certain body fluids, including:

- Blood
- Semen
- Rectal or vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

The virus spreads through direct contact with these fluids. A person may get or give HIV by:

- Having anal or vaginal sex without a condom
- Sharing injection drug equipment, such as needles or syringes
- Passing it from birthing parent to baby during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding

Who should consider PrEP?

PrEP may be a good fit if you don't have HIV but might be exposed to it. If exposure occurs, the medicine can stop the virus from taking hold and spreading in your body. Discuss PrEP with your doctor if you:

- Don't consistently use a condom during anal or vaginal sex
- Have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection in the past six months
- Share needles, syringes, or other equipment used to inject drugs
- Have a sexual partner with

HIV, especially if they have a detectable or unknown viral load (the amount of the virus that can be measured in their blood)

- Are thinking about getting pregnant and have a sexual partner with HIV

Keep in mind: PrEP is not for people who have been diagnosed with HIV. It can't treat or cure the condition. You'll need to take an HIV test before starting PrEP.

Talking with your doctor

If you think PrEP might be right for you, have a conversation with your doctor. Be clear and direct. Tell your doctor why you're interested in PrEP.

Do you find this a tough subject to discuss? Say so. Sharing how you feel can be a good way to begin the conversation.

You can live well with HIV. For more tips, please click [here](#).

Helping your aging parents

As your parents grow older, you may need to help one or both with the details of daily living, finances, and independence.

The idea of aiding a parent seems simple. But in reality, this reversal of roles can be complicated — full of chances for hurt feelings, loss of pride, overstepped boundaries, misunderstandings, and other pitfalls.

Adult children who have positive relationships and open communication with their parents are likely to have less trouble in the rocky terrain of caregiving. Still, certain strategies can make providing care and support easier for everyone.

Questions to ask

Have a general discussion with your parents about their expectations on the ways you might help them later in life. These questions can get the conversation started:

- What would you like to do if you could no longer stay at home because of health issues?
- Have you completed **living wills or health care directives**?
- What kind of help will you need to realize your dreams for later stages of life?
- Do you have a plan B in case plan A doesn't work out?

Strategies for adult children

The relationships of adult children and their parents differ. So do their communication styles. That said, these strategies are meant to help adult children find common ground with aging parents:

- **Don't delay.** It's best to bring up concerns before an emergency. For example: Research care providers before a parent needs additional help.
- **Always treat your parents with respect.** Even if it seems your roles have been reversed, they're still your parents.
- **Take a holistic view.** When seeking solutions for future care or living options, consider your parents' physical, emotional, and social needs.
- **Help your parents preserve their independence.** If they can no longer do everything on their own, check into caregiving providers who can help with meals, housekeeping, and medication management.
- **Involve your parents in all decisions that affect them.** Your parents will be more likely to adapt to changes regarding where and how they'll live. Unless your parents have advanced cognitive issues or are putting their own or others' lives in danger, they have a right to make their own decisions.

Strategies for parents

Aging parents can take these steps to improve their relationships with adult children during this trying period:

- Work together to create solutions both you and your children can live with.

- Be cooperative and flexible regarding caregiving arrangements and offers of assistance.
- Take time to understand the problems and challenges your children are facing beyond your care.

Find local resources

To search for resources in your community, including food and nutrition assistance, transportation, friendly visit programs, and more, click [here](#).

Take care when you're the caregiver

Caring for a loved one with ongoing health needs can be deeply satisfying and stressful — all at the same time. Despite the strains, it feels good to care for friends and family, and the extra time together can strengthen your bond.

But caregiving can also cause tension and take away from the time you have for yourself, for your job, and for important relationships. As a result, caregivers are at risk for depression, anxiety, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and chronic disease.

Here are some important ways to take care of yourself while you're taking care of someone else:

Carve out time for yourself by asking for help.

Call on willing family members and friends when you need a hand. And take advantage of services such as adult day care, in-home health care, meal delivery, and transportation services. The NYC Department for the Aging offers many community-based programs to help caregivers. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Make your own wellness a top priority. Compared with noncaregivers, family caregivers are less likely to make medical appointments for themselves and receive preventive care checks. It's important to keep up with doctor visits, screening tests, and vaccinations.

Add exercise to your schedule. Aim for at least 150 minutes (two hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week. You can divide this time into as many shorter sessions as needed. For example, maybe try fitting in a couple of five-minute bursts of exercise a day or taking a walk with a friend so that you can socialize as you move. You'll have more energy and a more upbeat mood, and you'll lower your risk of developing health problems like heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers.

Tend to your feelings and relationships. You may be feeling sad, angry, lonely, or guilty (if you think you should be doing even more). You may grieve the changes in your loved one's health or in your own life. Talking with a close friend, trusted family member, or counselor — or joining an online or in-person support group — can help.



Help heartburn with GERD medications

At some point, you've probably felt the searing discomfort of heartburn — a burning feeling inside your chest that sometimes rises toward your throat. When heartburn becomes so bad and so frequent that it disrupts your daily life, it's called gastroesophageal reflux disease, or **GERD**. The good news is that medicines are available to treat this problem and extinguish heartburn pain.

Rx for GERD relief

GERD occurs when the acid and food in your stomach back up into your esophagus (the food tube connecting the mouth to the stomach). At times, the stomach contents may rise all the way up into your throat and mouth. Here's how different types of GERD medicines can help.

Category	Examples	What they do	How they work	How they're sold
Antacids	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mylanta• Roloids• Tums	Ease heartburn Act quickly, but the effects are short-lived	Lessen the effects of acid made in the stomach	Over the counter (OTC)
H ² blockers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pepcid (famotidine)• Tagamet (cimetidine)	Relieve and prevent heartburn Take a little longer than antacids to work, but the effects last for several hours	Reduce the amount of stomach acid	OTC and by prescription
Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nexium (esomeprazole)• Prevacid (lansoprazole)• Prilosec (omeprazole)• Zegerid (omeprazole and sodium bicarbonate)	Treat frequent heartburn and heal throat damage caused by GERD May take a few days to reach peak effect but provide the strongest relief	Block the production of stomach acid	OTC and by prescription

Before taking OTC medicine, read the label carefully. Don't take more than the recommended dose or use it for longer than directed. Tell your doctor if your heartburn isn't better after two weeks.

Nondrug treatment

Lifestyle changes can be very helpful, too. They may be all you need to control mild heartburn, or they may be combined with medicine. Consider these steps:

- Stay away from foods and drinks that worsen your symptoms. Common offenders include fried or fatty foods, tomato sauce, citrus fruits, coffee, and alcohol. To find tips on nutrition and GERD, click **here**.
- Eat smaller portions, and stop eating three hours before bedtime.
- Quit smoking, if you're a smoker.

3 exercises for low back pain

If you have low back pain, try these spine-strengthening moves two to three days per week. Work up to doing them every day. Warm up for five to 10 minutes with a low-impact activity, such as walking. Get the OK from your doctor before starting.

1 Bird dog



- Start on your hands and knees with your shoulders over your hands and your hips over your knees.
- Engage your abdominal muscles and raise your right arm straight in front of you to shoulder height.
- Slowly extend your left leg straight back behind you in line with your hip.

HOLD 15 seconds
SWITCH to opposite arm and leg
REPEAT for a total of 5 times each side

HOLD
15 seconds

REST
lower hips to floor

REPEAT
for a total of 5 times

- Lie on your back with your arms along the sides of your body.
- Bend your knees and place your feet flat on the floor.
- Engage your abdominal and gluteal muscles and lift your hips away from the floor so that you form one diagonal line from your knees to your hips to your shoulders.

2 Bridge



HOLD
2 seconds

REPEAT
10 times

REST

REPEAT
again 10 times

3

Crunches



- Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
- Place your fingertips behind your head and open your elbows to the sides.
- Engage your abdominal muscles and lift your head and shoulder blades off the floor. Keep your neck relaxed — don't pull on your head.
- Press your back down into the floor and hold.
- Slowly lower down to the floor.

Don't let low back pain get you down! For healthy back tips, [click here](#).

Fight spring allergies without raising your blood pressure

When spring arrives, so do **seasonal allergies**. But think twice before reaching for over-the-counter medicine. It may ease your symptoms, like a stuffy nose, but there are risks.

Some medicines, including decongestants, work by constricting blood vessels in the nose and sinuses. However, they can also narrow other blood vessels throughout your body. This can raise blood pressure. Taking them could be risky if you have high blood pressure or take certain medicines to treat it.

How can you treat allergy symptoms without raising blood pressure? Try these options:

- Antihistamine pills or nasal sprays can help relieve sneezing, itchiness, and runny nose.
- Try a nasal spray. Some sprays reduce the body's reaction to

pollen and other allergens. They take two or more weeks to start working. Many sprays, including nasal steroids, are available without a prescription from your doctor.

- Eye drops can soothe itchy, watery eyes.
- Flush the sinuses with a liquid saline solution. This process, also known as nasal irrigation, is a way to improve allergy symptoms without drugs. You'll find supplies at drugstores.

Not sure if an over-the-counter allergy medicine is safe for you? Ask your doctor.

Spot spring allergy triggers

In the spring, trees, shrubs, weeds, and grasses release billions of tiny pollen grains into the air. Flowering plants usually don't cause allergies. To reduce your exposure:

- Try to avoid outdoor activities in the early morning. This is a peak time for pollen. Allergy symptoms are also more likely to get worse in the late evening.
- Wear a mask when mowing the lawn or doing other outdoor chores.
- If possible, use air-conditioning when pollen counts are high. Be sure to clean filters regularly.
- Keep car windows shut and the air conditioner on when driving.
- Keep pets out of the bedroom. This is because pollen sticks to fur.
- To remove pollen after being outdoors, take a shower, wash your hair, and change your clothes.

How much do you know about allergies?

Allergies are nothing to sneeze at. Learn how to better deal with them by taking this short **quiz**.

