

# A recipe for robust mental health: 13 ingredients

Hello!

I'm so glad you signed up to receive this little PDF.

It says to me that you care about yourself and want to prioritize your mental health and that's wonderful.

I'm honored to be able to support you however I can with that.

In this little guide you're going to find the 13 key ingredients I've found in my 10 years of being a therapist that, individually and collectively, add up to robust mental health, emotional resilience, and enhanced overall well-being.

Some of these ingredients may be familiar to you, and some you may not have considered before.

They're my best tried-and-true tips and they're not just what I recommend to my patients but they're also what I try to practice myself in my own life.

So please, take what you will from this guide and leave out anything that doesn't resonate with you.

Remember at the end of the day, you're the expert of your experience.

You get to craft your own unique robust mental health recipe. And perhaps the tips I offer up in here will, like a good dash of a few spices, enhance your already great dish.

Enjoy!

Warmly, Annie



# Ingredient #1: Know yourself well.

This sounds simple, doesn't it?

Know yourself well. But what do I mean by this?

Well, I'll tell you: I have a bad left knee. The cartilage is a little more worn down on that one than my other due to a combination of genetics and an under rehabbed injury from my high school soccer days.

It doesn't bother me most days but it does mean that when I'm running a 5K I'll wear a knee brace and when workout videos call for jumping lunges, I'm going to sub in another low-impact HIIT move.

I know myself and I know that there is a particular vulnerability I have in my physical body.

The same thing goes for our emotional and mental bodies: we need to know our vulnerabilities (and our strengths) and accommodate them however we can.

Prone to anxiety and catastrophic thinking? Probably don't read the news right before bed and best not check work emails after 7pm lest you lose sleep.

Susceptible to seasonal affective disorder? Perhaps choosing to live somewhere sunny and temperate will be a better long-term mental health move for you than living in a state where it rains or snows 6 out of the 12 months.

Vulnerable to agoraphobia? Maybe avoid the Women's March this year in your city center and choose a non-triggering protest action instead.

Knowing ourselves means honestly and compassionately acknowledging our vulnerabilities and creatively adjusting our lives to accommodate for these things.

When we do this, we support our mental health and overall well-being.

## Ingredient #2: Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries.

If there's another, more foundational element to robust mental health, I don't know that it is.

Boundaries are the unseen but all-important fences of our lives - they protect us from others, protect others from us, and help us move through the world in a way that feels supported and functional.

Boundaries are flexible and ever-changing - a boundary you may hold around one person may not look like the boundary you hold around another.

And indeed, we want to strengthen your capacity to bend and flex your boundaries according to the situation you're in.

We have, I believe, emotional boundaries, physical boundaries, spiritual boundaries, sexual boundaries, financial boundaries, and mental boundaries.

It's very important to know what your boundaries are in each of these arenas, to be clear about how they may be being violated, and how to do something about it.

Think of it this way: if your fridge has a big old energy leak coming from a door that doesn't close fully (a broken boundary!), your electric bill will go up and your food may even spoil.

But put some duct tape on that door, jury rig a little sealing solution, and you'll preserve your energy bill and those organic groceries you work hard to pay for.

Sometimes, people and situations (not to mention the way we speak to ourselves or think about ourselves or the world) represent proverbial fridge door energy leaks.

We may not even realize it's happening and we don't even know what kind of toll it's taking on us until we remedy it.

In this way, being curious about who and what (including yourself!) is violating your boundaries and then taking the action necessary to stop these boundary violations can greatly contribute to enhancing your mental health and probably, too, your overall energy levels.

## Ingredient #3: Eat well.

A huge caveat: I am not a nutritionist and my clinical license doesn't allow me to dish out (pun intended) advice about diet recommendations (nor would I deign to!).

But what I will say is this: in my experience, mental health is an integral business.

Our mental health is influenced by a wide variety of factors and sometimes we can't look at improving our overall mental health without being curious about the role of food and our eating habits has on us.

There's interesting research being done linking mental health to the microbiome and time and more data can illuminate this link more, but, for now, being mindful about the helpful or harmful (or plain old neutral) foods you eat and the way you go about eating your food can be a helpful way to better your mental health.

Pay attention to the foods and food groups that seem to enhance your sense of well-being.

Watch and observe how you eat: Is it mindful? Compulsive? Rigid and fixed or flexible and intuitive based on what your body is craving?

How we do one thing is the way we do many things and so as you pay attention to how you eat, be curious if your eating patterns reflect any other life patterning that you may want to tend to.

As we bring healing to one area of our life, we bring healing to other areas.



## Ingredient #4: Sleep well.

I hear that there are people out there who only need four hours of sleep a night and who feel amazing on that consistently.

That's not me.

I don't think that that's most people, actually.

And, moreover, I think that some of us are more sleep sensitive than others, meaning that when we're deprived of adequate and rejuvenating rest, it takes a greater toll on us, and often on our mental health.

Back to point number one, it's important to know yourself well and to know what you require to function well each day.

Do you need 6, 7, 8 or 9 hours?

Are you designing your life and your routines to help achieve this?

If you're in bed for an adequate amount of time but still don't feel rested have you explored and ruled out any underlying physiological issues with your doctor?

Have you ruled out any psychological and treatable issues with your therapist?

There are times in life, of course, when we will get less sleep than others (fellow new parents, I'm looking at you!).

But even in these times, if we are sleep sensitive and know that our sleep directly correlates to our mental health, it behooves us to seek out, pay for, and hold firm boundaries around whatever actions or interventions we may need to get good sleep.

It's just that important.



# Ingredient #5: Be curious about substances and behaviors.

Especially if they feel compulsive, insidious, and repetitive.

What do I mean by this?

Pay attention to your nightly wine, to your weekend cannabis use, to your weekday evening Netflix binges and multi-hour gaming sessions.

Really get curious about how often you're clicking that Amazon one-click pay button and if you need all those boxes being consistently delivered.

Are you counting down the hours until 5pm? Does it feel habitual and almost default that you turn to certain substances and behaviors when the clock signals the evening?

Do you feel like you have choice and flexibility to abstain or to choose something different to do with your time, body, and money?

Often our repetitive and compulsive use of substances and behaviors can be masking underlying issues that we need to tend to in order to genuinely address our mental health.

Moreover, certain substances and behaviors can disrupt our sleep and take a toll on our physiology.

Practicing mindfulness and cultivating choice around our habits - be it with substances or behaviors - is a critical ingredient for robust mental health.



## Ingredient #6: Move your body in ways that feel good, not punishing.

If there's such a thing as a silver bullet for mental health, exercise may be it.

Now, please don't mistake me: exercise alone doesn't remedy major depressive episodes, panic disorder, bipolar disorder, or borderline personality disorder, etc..

But, for many of us dealing with surges of anxiety, depression, and overwhelm in our daily lives, exercise can be a wonderful adjunctive ingredient in the larger recipe of tending to our mental health.

Importantly, though, I don't think that punishing the "soft animal of our body" as the late poet Mary Oliver would say, is what we're aiming for.

I do think that exercise that feels enlivening and that hopefully accommodates any particular physical limitations we have (see point number one) is what we're aiming for.

The next time you feel inspired (or scheduled) to move your body, ask yourself: what does my body need right now today? Is it up for a jog? Or are we more in a Yin Yoga place?

Be a good friend to your body through regular movement that feels supportive and not punishing and notice what - if any - impact that has on your overall mental health.



# Ingredient #7: Be mindful of how you use social media.

You know what? I was probably one of the first couple thousand Facebook users in the world.

Back in Spring 2004, I was in my senior year at Brown when Zuckerberg launched Facebook at Harvard.

Did you know Facebook was originally designed as an Ivy networking tool? Obviously, it's grown a bit in the last 16 years I've been on it.

And as it's grown, my relationship with it and other social platforms have changed over time as I've aged and become more mindful and self supporting.

In many ways I love social media!

Through it, I connect with my audience, I participate in groups for clinicians and new moms, I get to look at my friends' photos of their beautiful children in Halloween costumes, I get to discover tips and tricks to help my toddler eat veggies, how to move my household more towards zero waste, and so on.

BUT, in many ways, I struggle with social media.

Like almost everyone else, I have to be mindful of when I'm using it in a healthy way or when it's starting to not feel so good.

Am I feeling triggered and "not enough" based on the posts of others? Am I comparing myself to someone else who has hundreds of thousands more followers than me? Am I numbing out versus tuning into myself or my spouse? Am I using it to brag about my life and receive affirmation because I'm honestly not doing that well?

Social media is kind of like a brick.

A brick can be used to build a school or it can be used to break someone's car window and steal their stuff from the backseat.

Be curious about how you're using the proverbial brick and what it would look like to cultivate a more supportive, healthy relationship with it to support your mental health.



# Ingredient #8: Spend time in nature.

Our beautiful Earth.

The great mother to us all.

She's hurting right now but she's still strong, magnificent, and glorious.

I don't know about you but I know I feel emotionally better anytime I open up the windows, flood my house with sunlight and fresh air, and take myself outside.

I've always picked the homes I live in and even the spaces where my therapy offices have been to make sure that I can have good sunlight, fresh air, and views of trees.

Being around and in nature feels like a non-negotiable to me. It's imperative for my own mental health.

If this - spending time in nature - feels like a cliché on a mental health checklist remember that it's a cliché for a reason.

Spending time in nature can connect us to something greater than ourselves. It can calm our racing minds. It can fill our soul with beauty and pleasure.

We don't have to spend an extraordinary amount of time in nature in an extraordinary way (though obviously that's great!).

Spending even a little time outside on a daily basis can contribute to your mental health: walk around the block in the sunlight on your lunch hour, sit in your garden after you get home, before you hop into your car for the morning commute, listen to the early birds.

Make connecting with nature a priority in your life and an ingredient in your mental health recipe.

# Ingredient #9: Cultivate a handful of fulfilling relationships.

A fulfilling relationship is one in which we feel like it's safe and okay to bring all of our parts to it.

A fulfilling relationship doesn't need you to be different from how and who you are.

A fulfilling relationship is reciprocal, there is mutuality and give and take.

A fulfilling relationship can be human or four-legged.

A fulfilling relationship may be with someone in your personal life, or it can be with a paid professional.

You don't need to have 12 best friends

You just need a small handful of people who get you, who love you, and who are there when you're hurting or in need of support. And conversely, you're there for them.

As humans, we are hard-wired to connect. We long for relationship and for contact.

Most trauma and pain we've experienced is relational in nature and so when we're able to find solace and support in another relationship, it can be deeply healing and fulfilling.

Safe, healthy, supportive, and nourishing relationships are a key ingredient in your robust mental health recipe.



# Ingredient #10: Identify what brings you meaning and purpose in your life.

This is so critical.

One of the existential givens of the human experience is that we're tasked with creating meaning in our life to help make our existence as humans more bearable.

Famed psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl posited that man was driven by his search for meaning and when we found purpose, we could bear almost any situation and circumstance.

According to Frankl, we can discover meaning through our works or deeds, by experiencing someone or something, and by the attitude we take towards suffering.

Blessedly, hopefully, none of us will ever have to suffer through what Viktor Frankl did, but the charge and task remains for us to find and make meaning of our lives.

As Frankl points out, you need not only find this in your work or in your deeds, you can also experience meaning in raising children, helping others, or in the orientation you have towards life and perhaps to your own personal spirituality and framework of life.

However you make meaning of your life, it is critical, I think, that we do so for the overall well-being of our mental health.

## We can discover meaning through:

01.

Our works or deeds.

02.

Experiencing something.

03.

The attitude we take towards suffering.

# Ingredient #11: Identify what nourishes your soul, brings you joy, and weave that into your everyday life.

Smaller perhaps than asking and answering the question of how to make meaning of our lives but nonetheless important is the task we face to identify what nourishes our soul, what brings us joy, and then to bring that more fully into our everyday life.

This one is as simple and complex as discovering or re-discovering the things/hobbies/pursuits and places that bring you joy and giving yourself permission - however “silly” they seem to have a place in your days

Reading the historical fantasy novels you fell in love with at 13? Listening to Celtic ballads? Learning Tarot and doing readings for friends? Baking desserts ala GBBO and feeding them to your office mates?

If it brings you joy, if it sparks your soul and doesn't harm another, it deserves to have a place in your everyday life.

Joy is a remarkable buffer to everyday sorrow, despair, and overwhelm.

As seemingly simple as it may seem to think that listening to the 90's pop you grew up on could be a boost to your mental health, sometimes it is!

So as you work on the large stuff of life - boundaries, finding purpose and meaning, seeking out and building nourishing relationships - let this “little stuff” of joy and soul nourishment be important, too.



## Ingredient #12: Be flexible with how all of this looks and recognize things will change.

As soon as you craft the perfect recipe for your robust mental health plan, it will change.

What nourished and supported my mental health at 27 looks very different than it does now at 37, and it will probably look different at 47.

That's okay! In fact, that's good.

Part of what supports our mental health is agility and responsiveness, recognizing when we need to dial up, dial back, or change the supports in our life to meet us where we're at.

That's why the fundamental here is knowing yourself, knowing what lights you up, what brings you meaning and fulfillment, who and what feel like they challenge your boundaries, or even what a supportive and healthy relationship might be, if knowing all of this feels hard, [you can get support around this](#).





# Ingredient #13: Get support when and if you need it.

In our Western world we're doled out a cultural introject - an implicit and sometimes explicit message - that says we should be able to toughen up and figure things out by ourselves.

Man up, buck up, get on with it, go it alone, and all that jazz.

This can be, I think, unhelpful advice in many moments.

There is much to be said for independence as a characteristic and certainly a key task we want to accomplish in therapy is always helping our clients develop internal resources to cope with life stressors.

But there's a lot to be said for reaching out for support, too.

Knowing when you're struggling, knowing when you've eclipsed your own tools and capacities and then reaching out to someone for additional support is a wise, self-supporting move.

Sometimes support looks like working with a therapist.

And sometimes it looks like being evaluated for medication.

Please let these be possibilities for you in your own mental health recipe if you need them.

Some recipes can work well without professional support. And others do not.

Don't let stigma or shame stop you from being self supporting and reaching out for professional support.

You're so, so worth it.

I want to support you in having the best feeling life possible.

Let's talk about that more

# A recipe in summary and a few words in closing:

In my ten years as a therapist, time and time again I land on these 13 tried-and-true tips when working with my patients to improve and enhance their mental health:

1. **Know yourself well.**
2. **Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries.**
3. **Eat well.**
4. **Sleep well.**
5. **Be curious about substances and behaviors.**
6. **Move your body in ways that feel good, not punishing.**
7. **Be mindful of how you use social media.**
8. **Spend time in nature.**
9. **Cultivate a handful of fulfilling relationships.**
10. **Identify what brings you meaning and purpose in your life.**
11. **Identify what nourishes your soul and brings you joy and weave that into your everyday life.**
12. **Be flexible with how all of this looks and recognize things will change.**
13. **Get professional support when and if you need it.**

Not only are these tips key ingredients for many of my patients, they're keys for me, too.

However your own mental health recipe looks, I hope these tips today felt helpful and, like a good, fresh dash of spice, can bring a little more flavor and enhancement to your proverbial dish.

Now, if you enjoyed what you read today and would like to hear more from me or even work together I'd like to share the following:

1) I can work personally with therapy clients residing in California AND I also founded and run [a boutique therapy center](#) here in downtown Berkeley staffed with highly seasoned, warm, and wonderful clinicians who do their best work with the same kind of clients that I do. If you're interested and if you live here in California, we would love to help you out personally via one on one work. You don't even need to live here in the Bay Area since we do online video counseling! You can sign up for [a complimentary 20-minute consult call here](#) or even book a [full first therapy session here](#).

2) If you live outside California and are interested in working with me directly, [sign up here](#) as I'll be launching offerings later this year that you can join no matter where in the world you live.

## A recipe in summary and a few words in closing:

3) In the meantime before the launch of my online offerings, you can explore my current psychoeducational products right away. Did you know that I've been blogging for about 5 years on a large variety of mental health topics? You can [find the archives here](#). Moreover, you can check out my [psychoeducational offerings here](#) (a fancy way of saying digital therapy products) for deep dives into particular issue areas.

4) Finally, come and connect with me here on [Facebook](#) or on [Instagram](#). I actually read and respond to every comment - it's not a virtual assistant, it's actually me getting back to you - and I would love it if you joined my little corners of the internet so we can share life and struggles and kindness and compassion with each other.

I look forward to staying in touch with you through my letters every two weeks, through Facebook or Instagram, and perhaps even on my therapy office couch.

In the meantime, please know I'm sending you all my very best and know that I'm here rooting for you.

Warmly, Annie

PS: Would you be open to sharing with me what you're struggling with and that you might want me to address in a future blog post, workshop, or Instagram video? Just send me an email at [annie@anniewrightpsychotherapy.com](mailto:annie@anniewrightpsychotherapy.com) and I'll get back to you and see what I can create that would support you.