

Mental Health Guide



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Some of the most common mental health challenges for adults are anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Many chefs and food service workers experience symptoms of these conditions at rates higher than in other careers. Workers in food service and accommodations reported increases in alcohol and other drug use during 2008-2012. Alcohol and illicit substance use rates were as high as 19% and outpaced other similar careers such as arts/entertainment at about 14% (SAMHSA CBHSQ Report, 2015). With the long work hours, double shifts, poor eating, and disrupted sleep patterns, chefs and food service workers are at high risk for mental health challenges. This guide will offer a quick reference for those who are concerned about their mental health wellness or interested in facilitating a healthy kitchen environment.

Anxiety

Many chefs and food service workers report high levels of anxiety. In a high-pressured, fast-paced environment, with varying moods from staff and customers, revenues and wages not always offsetting time, anxiety symptoms, and general dissatisfaction, the likelihood of burnout increases. Here are some of the most common symptoms of anxiety¹:

- Persistent nervousness, irritability, or feeling on edge
- Persistent feeling of danger, doom, or expecting something to go wrong
- Rumination, overthinking, and negative self-talk
- Increased heart rate
- Sweating, trembling, or difficulty breathing
- Persistent feeling of being tired, fatigue
- Persistent difficulty concentrating on tasks
- Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- Persistent stomach upset and nausea

If you or anyone you know experiences any of these symptoms, it might make sense to speak to someone. Self-awareness is key. Recognizing that you need help or that something needs to change either within yourself or in the work environment, starts a change process.

¹ Adapted in part from Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

The good news is that most people who seek help for anxiety symptoms report improvement in their emotional well-being. Mindfulness approaches that focus on acceptance, staying present in the moment, sitting with feeling versus a rush to change feelings, have helped to lower anxiety symptoms. As one chef stated, “just learning to wait out the feeling instead of raging, helped change the mood in his kitchen.

If you would like to try a mindfulness breathing exercise, simply find a quiet place and a comfortable seat. Sit with your back pressed against the backrest, close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so, and slowly pay attention to your inhale and exhale. Notice the rhythm of your breathing. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth. Inhale and exhale for a beat of 3 seconds each. This will allow for a deeper inhale and exhale than usual. Complete about 3 repetitions. Many have credited this simple breathing exercise for calming their mind and relieving some of their anxiety.

For further information on mindfulness click on the following link:

<https://www.mindful.org/mindful-youre-anxious/>

Depression

Trying to balance work and personal life demands are challenging for most of us. Chefs and food service workers who work many late hours often: lose time with family and friends; create wonderful meals under stressful, fast-paced, and sometimes very tight, unpleasant conditions; can feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and unhappy. These common experiences can lead to more serious symptoms of depression. Here are some of the most common symptoms of depression²:

- Persistent sad mood
- Persistent feeling of hopelessness
- Feeling guilty, worthless, and helpless
- Loss of interest in things that once were pleasurable
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering things, and making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Thoughts of death, suicide, or self-harm
- Irritability or restlessness

Suicide and Self-harm

When depression is left untreated or worsens, suicidal thoughts and self-harming behaviors may feel like the only way to deal with painful emotions and difficult situations, particularly those that have persisted for some time.

The good news is that most people who seek help for depression, report improvement in their emotional well-being. If you or anyone you know experiences any depressive

symptoms, it might make sense to speak to someone. Some might feel like “it’s not a big deal or don’t want to burden anyone” but persistent low moods, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts are a recipe for danger. Recognize these signs and seek help. Here are resources that offer additional information about depression and how to get help:

For information about depression click on the links below:

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9290-depression-overview>

For information on suicide and immediate help click on the following link:

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/11352-recognizing-suicidal-behavior>

Or call the National Hotline: **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** Available 24/7, 365 days a year

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-TALK**

Crisis Text Line is a United States not-for-profit organization providing free crisis intervention via SMS message. The organization’s services are available 24 hours a day every day, throughout the US by texting **741741** or Canada by texting **686868**. It is available internationally via their Facebook page. [crisistextline.org](https://www.crisistextline.org) and [facebook.com/crisistextline](https://www.facebook.com/crisistextline).

Substance Abuse & Addiction

Chefs and foodservice workers report some of the highest rates of alcohol abuse compared to other industries. When asked, chefs often report that long work hours in very tight, not well-ventilated spaces, fast pace of cooking and plating to perfection, difficulty balancing work and personal life demands, and difficulty managing their own emotions contribute to reaching for a drink. Further, in most restaurants there is immediate access to alcohol. Alcohol and drugs such as marijuana and heroin are often used to quiet negative thoughts, relax, or help go to sleep. Cocaine might be used to get through long work hours. For some substance use was recreational, for others it helped get through work. The late-night culture created from long work hours ending in the early morning and the difficulty going to sleep has led some to pick up a bottle or smoke. This cycle of reliance on a substance to get through the night and relax after a long work day, can become a pattern of behavior that develops into an addiction. As one chef put it, “I got home at 3am. No one was awake but me and I wasn’t sleepy. I was still emotionally wired from the kitchen. I needed to do something just to chill out. So, I drank. A lot.” Here are some of the most common signs of addiction:

Use of alcohol or drugs despite the consequences

- Consumed more alcohol or drugs than planned
 - Inability to stop using even when discontinuance is desired
 - More time thinking about drinking or planning use
 - Use of alcohol or drugs in larger amounts just to get the sought after feeling
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- Increased risk taking
- Secrecy about alcohol and drug use such as having a “stash”
- Problems at work related to alcohol or drug use
- Changes in mood, work performance, appearance, and overall functioning
- Withdrawal symptoms such as cravings, sweats, nausea, tiredness
- Repeated legal problems
- Disconnecting from people or activities due to alcohol and drug use
- Difficulty sleeping without using

If you or anyone you know experiences any of these symptoms, it might make sense to speak to someone. One of the biggest barriers to getting help are the stories we tell ourselves about our alcohol or drug use. One chef commented, “I had to crash and burn before I was willing to admit my use.” Denial or minimization of use is often an attempt to conceal use from others to prevent judgement and shaming. However, after a while, it’s easy to start believing there really isn’t a problem or not as bad as everyone says. Substance use worsens existing mental health problems. Alcohol is a depressant so if you already experience depression, you may feel worse the next few days and struggle at work. Worse, addiction can be fatal. An estimated 88,000 people die annually from alcohol-related causes³. Drug-related overdoses killed 63,000 people in 2016⁴ largely driven by synthetic opioids.

The good news is addiction is treatable. The first step is to be aware of the problem. Fight off denial of the problem. Connect with others who understand the struggle to quit and seek understanding as to why alcohol and drug use became part of your life.

For information on treatment, click on the links below:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/treatment-approaches-drug-addiction>

<https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/treatment/treatment.html>

Take home message

You don’t have to suffer alone! The idea of having to “tough it out” and bear the mood swings, verbal aggression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and alcohol or drug use alone is being gradually replaced with compassion, understanding, self-care, and awareness that restaurant life is a community of talented, dedicated people who work to enrich the lives of others through food. If anyone experiences any of the symptoms discussed in this guide, help is available, and the symptoms are treatable.

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Alcohol and Public Health: Alcohol-Related Disease Impact (ARDI). Average for United States 2006–2010 Alcohol-Attributable Deaths Due to Excessive Alcohol Use. Available at: https://nccd.cdc.gov/DPH_ARDI/Default/Report.aspx?T=AAM&P=f6d7eda7-036e-4553-9968-9b17ffad620e&R=d7a9b303-48e9-4440-bf47-070a4827e1fd&M=8E1C5233-5640-4EE8-9247-1ECA7DA325B9&F=&D=. Accessed 1/18/17.

4 <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0329-drug-overdose-deaths.html>