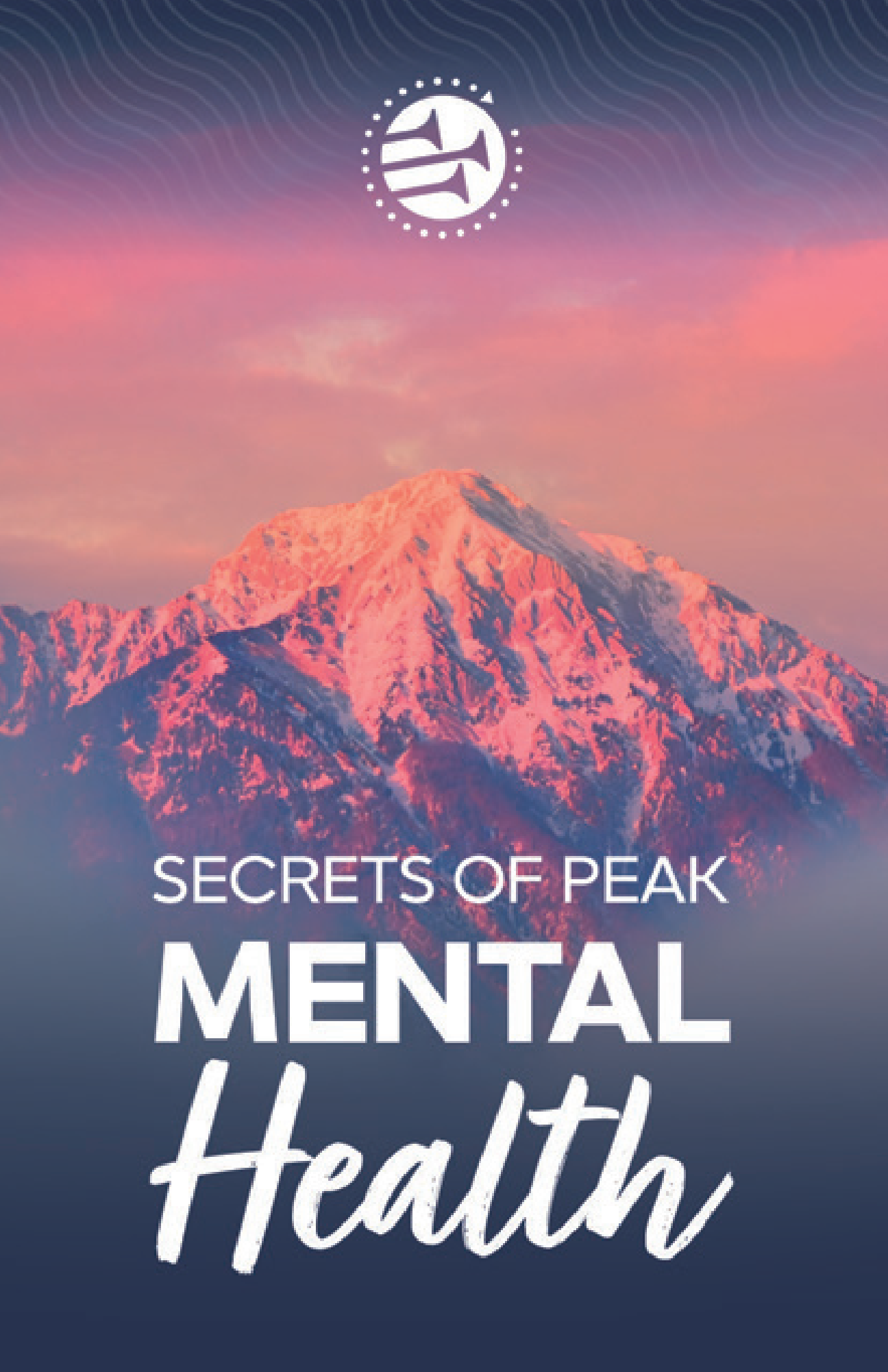

SECRETS OF PEAK
MENTAL
Health

In 1944, at the age of 16, Edith Eger was taken by the Nazis from her home in Hungary and sent to the infamous Auschwitz death camp. Although spared the gas chambers used on her parents, the already-thin Edith gradually wasted away as she was transferred from one camp to another. In May 1945, Edith fell into an unconscious stupor. The guards assumed she was dead and threw her into a mass grave in the woods behind the Gunskirchen concentration camp. Miraculously, an American soldier saw Edith's hand moving amidst the corpses and rescued her from certain death.[1]

If anyone had reason to be controlled by her environment, it was Edith Eger. Despite her horrific experiences, she didn't succumb to emotions of bitterness, hatred, or despair. She not only survived; she thrived. She married, raised three children, and earned a doctoral degree in psychology. If you ever met Dr. Eger or heard her speak, you would likely rank her among the most positive, uplifting individuals you know. Her message is simple: "Contrary to popular belief, there are no victims in this world—only willing participants. You can't always control your circumstances, but you can control how you respond to them."[2]

## Psychology's New Emphasis

Dr. Eger's life speaks eloquently to a growing realization among mental health professionals: We all have the capacity to cultivate an optimistic attitude—even in the middle of setbacks and difficulties.[3] Indeed, while many of us believe our emotions are determined by our circumstances, the evidence indicates otherwise. You can control your emotions in spite of your surroundings!

However, our emotions are affected by more than our thoughts. Most notably, our daily lifestyle choices profoundly impact our emotional state. Let's look at several factors that can help us manage this important realm of mental health.

## Healthful Dietary Practices

Scientific studies reveal that unhealthful dietary practices impair the brain's emotional circuitry—during development as well as in maturity. Examples include nutritional deficiencies, excessive salt intake, and high-fat diets.[4] The bottom line is this: Choose a diet that emphasizes low-sodium, nutrient-dense whole plant foods (fruits, whole grains, vegetables, nuts, and seeds) and limits or eliminates animal products and added fat.

## Avoidance of Addictive Drugs

Alcohol has a short-term effect in promoting anger, rage, and violence.[5] Cells in the frontal lobe, which are responsible for executive control in the brain, are numbed.[6] As a result, the circuits for violence in the lower brain are unrestrained, as millions of abused family members can testify. The long-term effects of alcohol are even more serious. The frontal lobe can degenerate over time, while the more resilient lower brain fares far better. This results in a brain imbalance favoring the lower emotional centers.

Other brain drugs can also impair brain control mechanisms. Long-term marijuana use has been correlated with cognitive dysfunction,[7] specifically that of the frontal lobe.[8]

## Exercise

No program for optimizing emotional health should neglect regular physical exercise. We recommend making physical activity part of your *daily* routine. Research links exercise to decreased stress levels and enhanced emotional health (including less depression and anxiety).[9] Studies have also shown exercise to markedly increase levels of powerful mood-boosting hormones, such as dopamine and serotonin.[10]

## Adequate Sleep

Many feel that they can accomplish more if they sleep less. But the sense of accomplishing more may come at the cost of emotional health. One study that looked at data from 273,695 U.S. adults found that getting less than six hours of sleep was correlated with a two-and-a-half times greater likelihood of feeling stressed or depressed or struggling with emotions.[11] Lack of sleep can lead to a poorer mood and greater anxiety, whether a person sleeps less or experiences disrupted sleep.[12] Give your mind the rest it needs by establishing a consistent bedtime and sleeping for at least seven hours each night in a cool, dark, quiet room.

## Caution With Screen Time

What we watch (on TV or the Internet) can influence us toward unbalanced emotions. One principle of human behavior is this: You grow in the direction of what you focus on. Indeed, our minds are molded by what we regularly view. Therefore, if we're interested in optimal emotional health, we'll exercise serious restraint in what we choose to watch. If you have trouble exercising such restraint, consider a several-week (or longer) break from TV, the Internet (other than what you need to do for work), and other

visual media. As impossible as that may seem, much of the world throughout history has survived—and often thrived—on just such a program.

## Quality Time With Family

Time spent on electronic media can also weaken the family bond. Excessive media use is of great concern because strong family connections are powerful predictors of enhanced emotional health.[13] We need to prioritize interactive activities with our families. Go places and do things together that are fun, interesting, and fulfilling.

## Trusting Relationships

When we have trusting relationships, electrical and chemical "trust signals" from the higher brain centers, particularly the frontal lobe, can shut down the fear system coursing through our lower brain centers. This trust aids in the control of anxiety and stress.[14] Among the chemical messengers of trust is the hormone oxytocin.[15] Increased oxytocin levels also improve a host of interpersonal dimensions—all of which tend to bolster our emotional state.

Consequently, one strategy to boost emotional health is to develop more trusting relationships. "Horizontal trust" in others is highly

beneficial; "vertical trust" in a loving God is especially powerful.

Humans instinctively respond well to honesty and reliability in another person, especially when they sense that person has a genuine interest in their welfare. Such trust is developed by spending time together and undergoing shared experiences. Similarly, we develop trust in God by testing His promises in the Bible and experiencing His faithful leading in our lives. The Psalmist captures the importance of entering into an experiential relationship with God: "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" (Psalm 34:8). God Himself invites us: "Come to Me . . . . learn from Me . . . and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28, 29).

Why not carve out some time in your day to read from the Bible, perhaps starting with the Gospel of Mark? You might be surprised to find a God who is far more trustworthy than many humans are. Along with that discovery, you will realize your emotions are coming under better control.

For references, visit our website: t.awr.io/ref/eng/mh

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

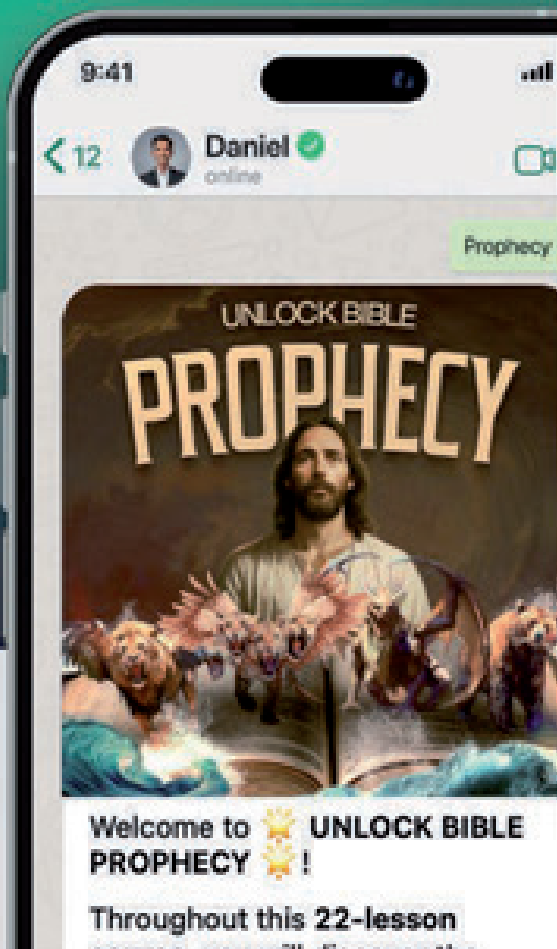
# Want to learn more?

Chat with our virtual instructor to study the Bible at your own pace, for free.

AVAILABLE ON:

WhatsApp | Messenger | Web

SCAN NOW!




GLOBAL BIBLE SCHOOL

glow
GIVING LIGHT TO OUR WORLD