

# Four things ancient Greeks and Romans got right about mental health

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Galen, a famous doctor, believed mental problems were caused by some idea that had taken hold of the mind. Credit: [Pierre Roche Vigneron/Wikimedia](#)

According to the World Health Organization, about [280 million people](#) worldwide have depression and about [one billion](#) have a mental health problem of any kind.

People living in the ancient world also had mental health problems. So, how did they deal with them?

As we'll see, some of their insights about mental health are still relevant today, even though we might question some of their methods.

## **1. Our mental state is important**

Mental health problems such as depression were familiar to people in the ancient world. Homer, the poet famous for the Iliad and Odyssey who lived around the eighth century BC, apparently [died](#) after wasting away from depression.

Already in the late fifth century BC, ancient Greek doctors recognized that our health partly depends on the state of our thoughts.

In the Epidemics, a medical text written in around 400BC, an anonymous doctor [wrote](#) that our habits about our thinking (as well as our lifestyle, clothing and housing, [physical activity](#) and sex) are the main determinants of our health.

## **2. Mental health problems can make us ill**

Also writing in the Epidemics, an anonymous doctor [described](#) one of his patients, Parmeniscus, whose mental state became so bad he grew delirious, and eventually could not speak. He stayed in bed for 14 days before he was cured. We're not told how.

Later, the famous doctor [Galen of Pergamum](#) (129-216AD) [observed](#) that people often become sick because of a bad mental state:

"It may be that under certain circumstances 'thinking' is one of the causes that bring about health or disease because people who get angry about everything and become confused, distressed and frightened for the slightest reason often fall ill for this reason and have a hard time getting over these illnesses."

Galen also described some of his patients who suffered with their mental health, including some who became seriously ill and died. [One man](#) had lost money: "He developed a fever that stayed with him for a long time. In his sleep he scolded himself for his loss, regretted it and was agitated until he woke up. While he was awake he continued to waste away from grief. He then became delirious and developed brain fever. He finally fell into a delirium that was obvious from what he said, and he remained in this state until he died."

### **3. Mental illness can be prevented and treated**

In the [ancient world](#), people had many different ways to prevent or treat mental illness.

The philosopher Aristippus, who lived in the fifth century BC, used to advise people [to focus on the present](#) to avoid mental disturbance:

"concentrate one's mind on the day, and indeed on that part of the day in which one is acting or thinking. Only the present belongs to us, not the past nor what is anticipated. The former has ceased to exist, and it is

uncertain if the latter will exist."

The philosopher Clinias, who lived in the fourth century BC, [said](#) that whenever he realized he was becoming angry, he would go and play music on his lyre to calm himself.

Doctors had their own approaches to dealing with mental health problems. Many [recommended](#) patients change their lifestyles to adjust their mental states. They advised people to take up a new regime of exercise, adopt a different diet, go traveling by sea, listen to the lectures of philosophers, play games (such as drafts/checkers), and do mental exercises equivalent to the modern crossword or sudoku.

For instance, the physician Caelius Aurelianus (fifth century AD) [thought](#) patients suffering from insanity could benefit from a varied diet including fruit and mild wine.

Doctors also advised people to take plant-based medications. For example, the herb [hellebore](#) was given to people suffering from paranoia. However, ancient doctors recognized that hellebore could be dangerous as it sometimes induced toxic spasms, killing patients.

Other doctors, such as Galen, had a slightly different view. He believed mental problems were caused by some idea that had taken hold of the mind. He believed mental problems could be cured if this idea was removed from the mind and [wrote](#): "a person whose illness is caused by thinking is only cured by taking care of the false idea that has taken over his mind, not by foods, drinks, [clothing, housing], baths, walking and other such (measures)."

Galen [thought](#) it was best to deflect his patients' thoughts away from these false ideas by putting new ideas and emotions in their minds:

"I put fear of losing money, political intrigue, drinking poison or other such things in the hearts of others to deflect their thoughts to these things [...] In others, one should arouse indignation about an injustice, love of rivalry, and the desire to beat others depending on each person's interest."

## 4. Addressing mental health needs effort

Generally speaking, the ancients believed keeping our mental state healthy required effort. If we were anxious or angry or despondent, then we needed to do something that brought us the opposite of those emotions.

This can be achieved, they thought, by doing some activity that directly countered the emotions we are experiencing.

For example, Caelius Aurelianus [said](#) people suffering from depression should do activities that caused them to laugh and be happy, such as going to see a comedy at the theater.

However, the ancients did not believe any single activity was enough to make our mental state become healthy. The important thing was to make a wholesale change to one's way of living and thinking.

When it comes to experiencing [mental health problems](#), we clearly have a lot in common with our ancient ancestors. Much of what they said seems as relevant now as it did 2,000 years ago, even if we use different methods and medicines today.

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