



# RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

Welcome to 2026! Often, we make resolutions to usher in each new year. These generally focus on our own well-being, whether the focus is mental, emotional, or physical. Whether your goals this year are to lose weight, get fit, avoid toxic people or environments, or just be kinder to yourself or others, they are worthy! We wish you a happy and healthy year this year and every year.

Your team at RSI

## **New Year, Fresh Start: Prioritizing Prevention and Mental Wellness**

As we welcome 2026, January provides a meaningful opportunity to reflect, reset, and recommit to prevention and mental wellness. Recognized as Mental Wellness Month, January reminds us that emotional well-being is foundational to healthy decision-making, resilience, and overall quality of life. Normalizing conversations around mental health and promoting early, preventive supports are critical strategies for strengthening individuals, families, and communities.

Mental wellness and substance misuse prevention are deeply interconnected. Prevention professionals rely on structured, evidence-based frameworks to guide this work, including the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF). Through systematic assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation, communities can address substance use and mental health challenges by targeting both risk and protective factors in culturally responsive and sustainable ways.

Local data from the 2024 Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment (APNA) for Region 4

highlight the importance of early intervention. More than 12% of 10th graders reported alcohol use in the past 30 days, over 22% reported vaping nicotine, and the average age of first alcohol use was 10.5 years old. These indicators reflect early risk factors such as favorable attitudes toward substance use, early initiation, and peer influence—factors that are well-documented and modifiable through prevention. The positive outlook is clear. Evidence-based prevention strategies that strengthen protective factors—such as social and emotional skills, family and school connectedness, positive peer norms, and healthy coping strategies—are proven to delay initiation and reduce substance use. When communities invest in early, developmentally appropriate prevention education and supportive environments, outcomes include improved mental wellness, reduced youth substance use, stronger resilience, and healthier community norms.

By using local data to inform action and aligning efforts with established prevention frameworks, Region 4 communities are positioned to achieve measurable, population-level impact. Prevention is most effective when it begins early, is sustained over time, and is supported by informed, engaged communities.

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### **Breathe Into the New Year**

The start of a new year is an ideal time to focus on mental wellness and healthy habits. While physical health often receives the most attention, mental health is just as vital to overall well-being. Intentional breathing is a simple yet powerful tool that can support emotional regulation and stress management. The following breathing exercises can be practiced at any time to help reduce stress, enhance focus, and promote mental clarity.

#### **Box Breathing**

Best for: Stress relief, grounding, and calming anxious thoughts

Box breathing is a structured technique used to bring balance to your nervous system.

How to Practice:

- ② Inhale slowly through your nose for 4 seconds
- ② Hold your breath for 4 seconds
- ② Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds
- ② Hold again for 4 seconds
- ② Repeat this cycle 4–6 times

Tip: Imagine tracing the sides of a box as you breathe. This exercise is especially helpful during moments of overwhelm or before important tasks.

4-7-8 Relaxation Breath

Best for: Relaxation, emotional regulation, and better sleep

This breathing technique helps signal your body to slow down and relax.

How to Practice:

- ② Inhale quietly through your nose for 4 seconds
- ② Hold your breath for 7 seconds
- ② Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds
- ② Repeat 3–4 times

Tip: Practice this exercise in the evening or when your mind feels restless. With consistency, it can help promote calmness and improve sleep quality.

Remember: Pause. Breathe. Care for yourself. Your mental health matters