



Healthy at Home

A guide to
supporting
your child's
mental health



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The content of this manual is informational in nature and is not intended to be, and should not be, used as a substitute for medical care, counseling, peer support or treatment of any kind.

Why do I need this guide ... and how do I use it?

We live in stressful times. While we all feel it, families — especially kids — see some of the greatest impact.

Just as their bodies get banged up on the playground, children also hurt when their mental well-being takes a hit. But, this kind of pain can be harder to spot — and harder for parents and caregivers to soothe.

**20% of American children
are diagnosed with a mental
illness each year**

– [Mental Illness in Children \(WebMD\)](#)

The State of Iowa Department of Administrative Services (DAS) — in partnership with your health plan administrator, Wellmark® Blue Cross® and Blue Shield® — presents the **Healthy at Home** mental health guide. Created to help you face mental health challenges together as a family, this guide contains important information to connect you and your child with the right resources and services.



HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS STRUGGLING?

In this guide, we'll show you how to monitor and manage your child's mental well-being in times of stress — and share ways to help your child maintain a healthy, resilient mind. We'll also spotlight signs that might indicate a child you love may need extra support.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Take note of what you find useful in the following pages. Then, use those notes to start conversations with your partner and extended family, your child's doctors and teachers — and anyone who has your family's best interests at heart.

If your child is doing well right now, we hope this guide gives you ideas to keep them healthy. If they are struggling, we hope this guide serves as a valuable resource and an important reminder:

You are not alone.

Who struggles with mental well-being?



Any child can have mental well-being challenges.

Some are more likely to experience issues because of heredity. (For example, depression, anxiety and ADHD run in families.)

Others may struggle after experiencing traumatic events.

And others are simply prone to mental health issues. These are part of the body your child was given, just like if they had diabetes or asthma.

We all have different susceptibilities to mental health concerns. But the trigger for what brings those issues to the surface for kids and adults of all ages is almost always the same: **STRESS**.

THE BRAIN ON STRESS

A little stress can be a good thing, even for a kid; it can motivate them to try new things and to do well. In times of short-term stress, their body's fight-or-flight response kicks in and helps them focus on the task at hand, like when they're writing a story, climbing a tree or running a race.

But chronic stress isn't good, or healthy.

When stress becomes chronic, your child can't turn off the fight-or-flight response. Unable to recognize that a threat isn't present, their body is flooded with stress hormones.

Over time, this can damage their brain and body and contribute to issues like depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns.

WHAT STRESSES KIDS OUT?

- Parents feeling stressed
- A parent's divorce or remarriage
- Feeling left out
- Fighting with friends
- Bullying
- Moving or changing schools
- Birth of a sibling
- Tests or grades
- Being overscheduled
- Juggling responsibilities
- A negative body image
- Social media pressures
- Worrying about the health/ well-being of a loved one
- High-visibility news events (e.g., mass shootings)

ACES AND TRAUMATIC STRESS

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are particularly traumatic forms of stress that can impact childhood and family health for years — even across generations.

These can include:

- Extreme poverty or neglect
- Witnessing or experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Living with someone with untreated mental illness or substance abuse problems

If your child has experienced ACEs, it's smart to monitor their well-being, as they may be more prone to physical or mental health challenges as they age. If you experienced ACEs in your own childhood, you may want to talk with your doctor or therapist about strategies to reduce the impact on your long-term health.

Find more information and resources at [CDC.gov/aces](https://www.cdc.gov/aces).

**2.7 million
children and
adolescents
are living with
severe major
depression**

– 2023 [Mental Health
America report](#)
([MHAnational.org](#))

Know your kiddo: **Signs of stress and struggles**

Even on their best days, kids can be sad, angry, anxious and irritable — and that’s okay. Their brains are growing and changing constantly, and those big feelings help them learn to navigate the world around them.

However, unlike adults who are more experienced at talking through their emotions, kids don’t have the words to express what they feel — so they communicate through behavior instead.

While acting out is often an age-appropriate response to stress, some behaviors are more concerning than others. Read the checklists below to learn some of the behaviors that may indicate your child is struggling.

YOUNG CHILDREN MAY ...

- Have frequent tantrums or seem intensely irritable
- Have difficulty making or keeping friends
- Struggle in school or see falling grades
- Talk often about worries and fears
- Feel overly frightened of being separated from you
- Complain frequently of headaches or stomachaches
- Be in constant motion
- Have frequent nightmares
- Repeat actions or check things many times out of fear that something bad may happen
- Scratch their skin, pull out their hair, bang their head or bite themselves
- Act aggressively towards family, peers or pets

OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENS MAY ALSO ...

- Lose interest in things they used to enjoy
- Have low energy
- Sleep/eat too much or too little
- Spend more time alone and avoid activities with friends or family
- Lash out at people they care about
- Strive to be “perfect”
- Diet or exercise excessively
- Have periods of very high energy and activity and require much less sleep than usual
- Smoke, drink or use drugs
- Engage in self-harm behaviors, then wear long sleeves, pants or makeup to cover the marks
- Exhibit risky or destructive behavior

The Q-TIP method

Kids and teens communicate stress and big feelings through behaviors ... and those behaviors can be incredibly challenging. As you work to help your child, it's important to keep your own emotions in check.

If you or your partner are struggling to keep cool when your child is acting out, try reminding yourself to Q-TIP:

Quit. Taking. It. Personally.

It may feel like your child is being disruptive, disrespectful, ungrateful or selfish. It may feel like they are doing these things *to* you.

They are not. They have a need that's not being met, or a hurt that's not being soothed, and they don't have the words to tell you — or the tools to fix it.

Remember:
They're not *giving*
you a hard time ...
they're *having*
a hard time.



Care **YOU** can do at home

“You can’t pour from an empty cup.”

“Please secure your own mask before helping others.”

Do these phrases sound familiar? Chances are you’ve heard them before — and they’re important reminders that we aren’t much help to others if we’re emotionally drained ourselves.

This is an essential concept for kids to embrace, too: They can’t be a good friend, student or teammate if they’re running on empty.

One way both adults and kids can help themselves feel refreshed and replenished is by practicing self-care: Activities we can all do each day to take care of our mental, emotional and physical health.

When children incorporate self-care into their daily routines, they learn to be mindful of their own needs and they build a foundational skillset that will help them stay healthy now and into adulthood.



TYPES OF SELF-CARE FOR KIDS AND FAMILIES

When your child is feeling stressed, or if they are prone to mental well-being challenges and you want to keep a relapse at bay, here are some things you can work on together to improve their mood and overall health.



Sleep

To help manage stress, make sure your child is getting the recommended number of hours of sleep per night for their age. Their brains and bodies need sleep to grow, and their health will suffer if they are operating on a sleep deficit.



Nutrition and exercise

Provide nourishing foods including proteins, fruits and vegetables; encourage them to drink plenty of water; and perhaps most importantly, help them get their body moving. Active kids are happy kids, and even a quick family walk around the block can improve their mindset.



Stillness

Help them set aside time each day to be alone with their thoughts and away from all electronic devices. Model for them how they can use that time, whether its meditating, relaxing while taking deep breaths, writing in a journal or spending quiet time in nature.



Social time

One of the best predictors of a healthy life is strong social connections, so help them find ways to be with people they enjoy. Encourage them to join a team or club, bring them with you to volunteer or schedule regular meetups or phone calls with friends and extended family.



Purpose

Finding purpose is a little different for everyone, but for kids, it usually means figuring out what brings them joy. Is there a productive hobby, skill or activity they can lose themselves in for hours? Find ways to support and encourage that joy.

Where to go

when your child needs more help

Recognizing that your child needs more help for their mental health than you can provide can be overwhelming. Although mental health challenges hurt, one of the most loving things you can do for your child is finding them the care they need to feel their very best.

Here's who you can call for **SUPPORT**.

1 Start with their pediatrician

Pediatricians or family doctors are skilled at screening for common mental health concerns. If needed, they can make referrals, write prescriptions, coordinate your child's care team and monitor their progress as they receive treatment.

2 For young children, consider play therapy

Play therapists use toys, games, art projects and other forms of play to help kids relax, open up and express what's on their mind. They can reframe your child's thinking and teach you and your child coping skills to practice at home.

3 For older kids and teens, try talk therapy

In talk therapy, your child will have conversations with a trusted provider who can help them overcome negative thoughts, reframe personal challenges, improve relationships and generally feel better. Psychologists, counselors, social workers (LISW/LCSW) and advanced psychiatric nurses can all provide talk therapy.

4 If medication is recommended, you have several options

Your child's pediatrician or therapist may prescribe medication to help treat the symptoms of depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns. He or she may also refer you to another medical professional, if needed, to pinpoint the right medication and dosage that fits your child best.



VIRTUAL CARE WITH DOCTOR ON DEMAND®

If your child prefers to video chat with a licensed provider from the privacy of home, talk therapy and medication management with Doctor On Demand is an easy, affordable choice. Visit [DoctorOnDemand.com/Wellmark](https://www.DoctorOnDemand.com/Wellmark) to get started.

Treatment pitfalls

Making an appointment with a trusted health care provider is a great first step on your child's journey to mental well-being. But — *it is* a journey, and there will be bumps along the way.

As you tackle some of the more common challenges, here are a few key points to keep in mind.

**60% of
American
youth with
major
depression
receive no
mental health
treatment**

— 2023 Mental Health
America report
([MHAnational.org](https://mhanational.org))

This is embarrassing.

It's common for your child or another family member to feel uncomfortable about seeking out mental health care — but there is nothing shameful about it. Remind them: You'd call an optometrist if your eyesight was going fuzzy. You'd call a cardiologist if your heart was fluttering. So why not call a doctor to help your brain stop feeling bad? From glasses, to pacemakers, to therapy and prescriptions, we all use health care to help our bodies work their best.

Friends are suggesting alternative treatments.

When you're going through a health journey, well-intentioned friends, family and social media will often offer up alternative care suggestions. Some of these suggestions, like yoga and other relaxation techniques, may be harmless or even helpful. But some suggestions, like eliminating certain food ingredients or giving your child supplements, are unproven and could even be dangerous to your child, especially if they are taking other medications.

Bottom line? Always check with your child's doctor before adding another treatment to their care plan.

I can't get an appointment.

Unfortunately, this is a big problem all across the U.S. As long as there is a provider shortage, the best thing you can do for your child is invest time and energy into being their advocate.

Search the lists. There are multiple resources (see [page 15](#)) that can help you find mental health providers near you, including ones in your network who are accepting new patients.

Call, then call again. The squeaky wheel really does get the grease. Call every provider available. Take notes on who you talk to. Ask to be put on waiting lists. Check in regularly to ask about cancellations.

Use your resources. Sometimes, it's not who you call but who you know. Ask your contacts for suggestions and referrals. Reach out to your doctor, school counselor, clergy person and The State of Iowa's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

My child is having side effects from their medication.

Most side effects will eventually fade. But if they are intolerable or upsetting, tell your child's doctor right away. It's important that you don't stop the medication suddenly without a doctor's permission, as this can lead to serious withdrawal symptoms.

My kid doesn't like their therapist.

Choosing a therapist is all about finding the right fit. Explain to your child it's kind of like picking a partner for a group project. Do they trust them? Respect them? Feel comfortable working with them? If not, find another therapist.

School is not going well.

Did you know kids with diagnosed mental health conditions may qualify for an individual education plan (IEP) or a 504 plan. This means, you can partner with your school to determine what accommodations and adaptations can be made to the curriculum, schedule or classroom environment to best help your child succeed. Contact your child's guidance counselor or principal to get started.



Talking to kids about suicide

Suicide can be a scary topic for kids and caregivers alike. But talking about it is key to prevention. If your child confides in you ...



SAY THIS:

- “I love you.”
- “I am here for you.”
- “How can I help?”
- “What is the best way I can support you?”
- “Your feelings are valid.”
- “That sounds hard.”
- “I’m sorry you’re going through this.”
- “I may not understand how you’re feeling, but you’re not alone.”



NOT THIS:

- “Think positive!”
- “Snap out of it.”
- “I know exactly how you feel.”
- “It could be worse.”
- “It’s just in your head.”
- “Why can’t you get it together?”
- “It’s your fault.”

THE DOS AND DON'TS

If you’re a concerned caregiver or parent, use the following dos and don’ts to help further guide your conversation and next steps:

DO have honest, age-appropriate conversations.

If your young child asks why someone would choose suicide, frame it in terms they understand: “Their brain was sick, and the sickness was stronger than the treatment.” For tweens and teens, ask what they have heard or what they know about suicide and follow their lead into deeper conversation.

DO ask direct questions.

If they are in a good headspace, ask: “What will you do when you or someone you know has thoughts about suicide?” If they are struggling, ask: “Are you thinking about hurting yourself, or about suicide? Have you thought about it at all in the last few weeks?”

DO be vigilant.

Watch your child for warning signs of suicide. If you think they are in crisis or acute danger, don’t leave them alone. Take them to the nearest emergency room or call 911.

DON'T worry about putting ideas in their head.

Having conversations with your kids will not make them depressed or suicidal. Rather, by demystifying the subject, you’re making it easier for your child to ask for help when they need it.

DON'T judge.

If your child shares they have experienced these thoughts, keep your emotions in check. Kids will shut down if you react strongly. Don’t try to convince them they are wrong for feeling this way. Instead, ask gentle questions, listen carefully and talk about a plan to keep them safe and get them help.



WARNING SIGNS

Combined with the behaviors on [page 6](#), a child may be in acute danger of attempting suicide if they ...

- Suddenly give away possessions
- Make comments about feeling trapped, wishing they were dead or being a burden to others
- Have a detailed suicide plan covering how and when they plan to act
- Are preoccupied with suicide or dying in their writing, drawing or online activity
- Show rage or talk about seeking revenge
- Suddenly seem happy or at peace after a long bout of depression; this can indicate relief after coming to a decision to end their life



GET HELP NOW, CALL OR TEXT 988

Is your child experiencing a serious crisis that requires immediate help? Text or call the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** to quickly connect with a trained counselor.

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the Lifeline provides fast, free and confidential emotional support to anyone in a suicidal crisis or emotional distress. The Lifeline also counsels loved ones and caregivers worried about a friend or family member.

Comprised of a nationwide network with over 200 community-based crisis centers, the Lifeline works closely with local care and service providers to connect those in need with attention that can help.

Visit [988Lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org), or call/text 988 to connect with someone you can trust.

Care for the caregiver



Loving and advocating for a child with mental health concerns can be a rollercoaster of emotions. You feel intense joy and gratitude on the good days. But on the bad days, it's easy to become overwhelmed, especially if you're pouring from an empty cup. Here's how parents and caregivers can take care of themselves.

- **Think small.** Brief walks, power naps and short conversations with people you enjoy can make all the difference.
- **Get help from trusted friends and family.** It's vital to have a safety net of people you can call when you need a break.
- **Find a local parent support group.** Both the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) and [Mental Health America \(MHA\)](#) have groups who meet across the country, as do many hospitals and houses of worship.
- **Remember: Your child is not their diagnosis.** Kids who struggle with their mental health will often lash out at those they care about most.

- **Remind yourself it's their condition talking, not them.** However, maintain your boundaries. Mental health challenges are an explanation — not an excuse — for mean or cruel behavior.
- **Take care of your love life.** Many caregiver parents report marital strain. Call on your trusted friends and family so you can enjoy regular date nights.
- **Make time for your other kids.** Your child who is struggling will require a lot of your time and energy. Be sure to schedule one-on-one outings with your other kids, too; even a quick ice cream run can be memorable and fun.

- **Find your own therapist.** Long-term caregiving is a journey, and you're going to have a lot of big feelings of your own along the way. Finding a trusted therapist you can confide in will help to protect you from developing depression and burnout.



40%-70%
of caregivers
report symptoms
of depression

— [Family Caregiver Alliance](#)
([Caregiver.org](#))

Resources

Wherever you and your children are in your mental well-being journey, you can access tools, resources and benefits to support you and your family. Don't hesitate to reach out — you've got lots of people ready to help.

STATE OF IOWA MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Mental health support: Download the [Healthy Everywhere employee guide](#) for more mental well-being tools for you and your family.▶

Employee assistance: Check out the State of Iowa Employee Assistance Program (EAP): Administered by Acentra Health 1-800-833-3031; [EAPhelpLink.com](#) (Company code: IOWA)

Substance abuse support: Connect confidentially 24/7 with [YourLifelowa.org](#)



WELLMARK RESOURCES

Wellmark Care Finder
Research in-network providers, including those who offer evening and weekend hours, who speak your language and who are accepting new patients. [Wellmark.com/Finder](#)

Doctor On Demand
Schedule affordable talk therapy and medication management visits from home. [DoctorOnDemand.com/Wellmark](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Psychology Today® Therapist Finder
Search for therapists by insurance accepted, gender, therapy type, issues they specialize in and more. [PsychologyToday.com/US/Therapists](#)

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator
Find facilities that treat substance abuse, addiction, and mental health concerns. [FindTreatment.samhsa.gov](#)

EMERGENCY SUPPORT

Text or call the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** to connect with a trained counselor 24/7. See [page 13](#) for more information.

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