**What does it mean to have good mental health?**

Taking care of your mind is just as important as taking care of your body. While no formula exists for stopping someone from developing a mental health concern, there are ways to protect your mental and emotional wellbeing, and give them a boost in difficult times.

Use the overview below to learn more about what good mental health is. You’ll also find tips for nurturing your own wellbeing and helping the youth in your life set a stronger foundation.

**What is mental health?**

For a person of any age, mental health is a state of mind. When you’re mentally healthy, your feelings, actions and relationships are in a good place.2 You’re able to love, learn, work and enjoy your downtime.

You can have good mental health and still have stress and sadness from time to time. But then you’re mentally healthy, you’re able to cope with the ups and downs of life. And adapting to change comes easier, too.

**What is mental illness?**

A mental illness is a health problem that has a large effect on thinking, actions, emotions and mood. It often impacts day-to-day life and relationships. And it can cause problems at school, work, home and in social settings. Like diabetes or heart disease, a mental illness is a medical problem that can be treated.

Mental illnesses are more common than you may think — and affect people of all ages, genders, income levels and races. Globally, about 1 in 8 adults and 1 in 7 youth ages 10–19 have some type of mental illness.1 Depression and anxiety are most common.

Several factors cause mental illnesses. Some include:

* Genes/family history
* Brain chemicals
* Something that happened in the womb (such as exposure to drugs or an illness)
* Physical trauma

Sometimes a major life event hits hard, like a divorce, move or new diagnosis. Other times, a medical problem can lead to symptoms of mental illness. Thyroid disease can lead to depression, for example. Any of these can change the brain chemicals that manage emotions and control thought patterns.

Fortunately, mental health conditions are very treatable. With the right support, many people can get well and thrive. People also can take steps to nurture well-being and be better prepared to get through difficult times.

**How mental health changes as you age**

Mental health problems can crop up at any age, as each stage of life brings changes to our minds, bodies and emotions. Here’s how some of them can impact mental health.

**Childhood.** Good mental health helps children reach milestones, grow social skills, learn and enjoy life. Because they’re still learning to manage emotions, children may overreact to even small changes. This is natural.

**Teenage and young adult years.** About half of people who have a mental illness in their lifetime will show signs of it before age 14. A few reasons:

* Changes in roles and responsibilities
* Peer pressure
* A deepening awareness of self and identity

Anxiety is most common in this age group. Eating disorders and other serious mental health problems tend to show up in the late teens and early 20s.

**Middle age.** From the 40s through the 60s, adults face plenty of changes. They may be caring for their kids and their older parents. They may be restless or bored with their job or relationships. On the other hand, people in this age group often start caring less about what others think. That often leads to more confidence and happiness.

**Older adulthood.** Once people are in their 60s or older, there are a few common issues that raise the risk of mental illness, particularly depression, including:

* Health conditions
* Life events, such as divorce or death of loved ones
* Loneliness
* Retirement

**Signs of mental illness**

Each type of mental illness can have its own symptoms, and children often have different symptoms than adults do.

Possible symptoms during childhood:

* Changes in schoolwork, study habits and grades
* Changes in behavior, such as being more hyper, difficult or angry than usual
* An increase in tantrums
* Having a lot of nightmares

Possible symptoms during adolescence and adulthood:

* Trouble going about daily life and coping with everyday stress
* Changes in emotions, such as strong feelings of worry, fear, sadness or anger, mood swings or losing interest in things you used to enjoy
* Changes in habits, such as sleeping or eating more or less than usual, avoiding social settings and using drugs or alcohol more often
* Changes in thinking, such as being confused, having trouble concentrating or remembering, or hallucinating or having paranoid thoughts
* Physical issues without a clear cause, such as headaches, stomachaches and generic aches and pains

Different people may have different levels of these symptoms. And, as with most health concerns, the sooner they get support, the better. There is a wide array of treatment options available. The most common approaches used today are talk therapy, medications and support groups. They tend to work well for a variety of mental health concerns.

**Quick guide to helping youth**

If you’re concerned about the mental wellbeing of a young person in your care, consider talking to them about it calmly and with compassion.

To begin, find a good time to talk when neither of you feels stressed and both of you can focus. Let them know it’s natural to have ups and downs, and that you’re concerned they may be feeling down. Explain why using examples they can understand, like they no longer show interest in activities they used to enjoy or they stopped hanging around their friends.

Ask them what they think and how they feel. Keep in mind, children and adolescents have limited ways to talk about or deal with emotions and problems. It may be hard for a young person, especially a child, to explain what they’re going through. For a young child, consider having them draw or act it out, such as with toys. For an older child, give them time to share. In both cases, keep their perspective in mind, and listen (or watch) with empathy and without judgment.

As you learn more about what they’re going through, resist the temptation to give them advice or fix their problem right away. Also be careful not to overreact or underreact. Keep their age and life experience in mind.

If what they’re experiencing appears to be a natural part of life’s ups and downs, ask them what they think may help. Listen to their ideas. And if they have trouble coming up with any, suggest a few from the list below.

Please note: If what they’re experiencing seems to go beyond life’s natural ups and downs or lasts for an extended period of time, consult with a medical or mental health professional. If they are in crisis, seek professional help right away.

**Ways to support good mental health**

Many things impact mental health. Your physical health, school, work and home life all matter. The healthy habits below can play a role in mental and emotional health for people of all ages:

**Be active.** Movement is good for the mind and body. Even walking for 30 minutes each day can boost your mood. And spending time in nature also has been shown to reduce stress and bring up energy levels.

**Eat healthfully.** Getting the right balance of foods can improve mental energy and focus. People who eat mostly fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, fish and unsaturated fats (such as olive oil) are 30% less likely to be depressed than those who have meat and dairy more often.3

**Get enough sleep.** Sleep is essential for overall health. It’s the time when your body and mind recharge and repair.

**Limit screen time.** Blue light from screens (such as on phones, TVs and tablets) can make it harder to fall asleep. And watching violent or upsetting shows, including news programs, can weigh on mental health. So can social media.

**Make time for mindfulness.** Meditation, muscle relaxation and breathing exercises all work very well. Keeping a journal to jot down what you’re doing, how you feel and what you appreciate for can also be helpful.

**Focus on your relationships.** When you feel connected to your loved ones, hard times can be easier to bear. And the good times can feel that much better when you have people to share them with. In fact, having close relationships plays a big part in health overall.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, seek safety and get help right away. **If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 or go to the closest emergency room.**

To reach a trained crisis counselor, call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (previously known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) at 988 or **1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)**. You may also text 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org/). The lifeline provides 24/7 free and confidential support.\*

\* The Lifeline provides live crisis center phone services in English and Spanish and uses LanguageLine Solutions to provide translation services in over 250 additional languages for people who call 988.

**Sources:**

Revised from[**Good mental health: What does it mean to have it? | Optum**](https://www.optum.com/health-articles/article/healthy-mind/what-does-it-mean-have-good-mental-health/)

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