

Seeking Mental Health Support for a Teen or Young Adult

A 4-step guide for compassionate caregivers

Step 1. Assess the situation.

You've noticed changes in your loved one's behavior that concern you. You suspect they need mental health care, but you aren't sure how to support them. This four-step Caregiver Guide is designed to help you figure out how best to take care of them, yourself, and your family.

The first thing to do is determine whether they're in immediate danger. Do their recent actions seem completely out of character? Did they tell you that they want to hurt themselves or others? If so, seek medical attention right away. (Call 911 in an emergency.)

The next thing to do is look for signs of a mental health concern:

- *Withdrawing.* They feel disconnected from family and friends or have lost interest in everyday activities.
- *Problems with sleep.* Trouble sleeping can be both a signal and a cause of emotional health concerns.
- *Difficulty with school or work.* A sudden change in grades or trouble at work can sometimes be the result of struggles with concentration, cognition, strong emotions or trauma.
- *Changes in mood.* This includes noticeable changes in levels of irritation, anger, or moods that are highly changeable and unstable.
- *Troubling beliefs.* They think other people want to hurt them, are against them, or can read their mind. Or they think they have special powers or abilities.

- Perception problems. They are experiencing greater sensitivity to sights or sounds, or they're hearing, seeing, feeling, or tasting things that other people don't.
- Disorganized thinking. They're having a hard time concentrating, thinking clearly, staying organized, reading, or understanding what other people are saying.

Once you've identified what you think their symptoms are, **talk with your loved one**. You might start a conversation simply by saying: "You don't seem like yourself lately. I love you, and I'm concerned. Can we chat about what's going on?" Let your loved one direct the discussion. Listen with unconditional acceptance and offer support. Do not try to "fix" them or the situation. Be open about your lack of knowledge and make learning a joint process.

Try to **build a thorough understanding of what they're experiencing**.

Write down a list of observations — isolating, poor hygiene, angst, etc. — as well as their frequency and duration. Ask your loved one, "When did you start feeling this way?" Consider the month or season, such as whether you were observing a holiday or celebrating an achievement where the symptoms occurred. Create a timeline if you can.

Strive to meet your loved one wherever they are on the path to acknowledging, understanding, and coping with their circumstances. Encourage them to seek help, but let them navigate the process. Ask questions such as, "How would you like to proceed? What do you need? How can I help you?" Before moving forward, **identify the biggest concerns**, theirs and yours. These may include barriers such as anxiety, stigma, or embarrassment about their potential diagnosis. To ease these factors, figure out who will support your family in an accepting way and start building a community of supportive allies.

Step 2. Ask for help.

Seeking mental health care, from coping with emotions to navigating systems, can be a difficult process. You can make things easier for your loved one by being a strong ally. When they're ready, research and discuss the options available to them. The following types of support exist to help identify and ease their symptoms.

HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Doctors, therapists, and other practitioners can identify (and rule out) the root causes of mental health issues. They also can work with your loved one to lessen troubling symptoms.

A visit to the **family doctor** for a basic checkup is often a good place to start. Your loved one's general practitioner can rule out any physical causes for their mental health concerns, make treatment recommendations, and refer them to a psychologist or a psychiatrist. **Psychologists** are licensed therapists who treat mental health conditions as disruptions caused or exacerbated by harmful thought processes or patterns. They use talk therapy for treatment but cannot prescribe medication.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who can additionally treat mental health symptoms with medications, such as anti-anxiety medications, antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotics. Like psychologists, psychiatrists use talk therapy for treatment, and they also can prescribe medication to support recovery.

Both psychiatrists and psychologists can help your loved one get a handle on what's going on. Sometimes they work together as members of a larger care team. A registered **nurse practitioner** can assess needs, request and

read lab tests, diagnose conditions, and put together a treatment plan, including prescribing medication. A **case manager** can support your loved one in making appointments, coordinating their team treatment, and developing a self-care routine. A **social worker** can provide assessment, therapy, and treatment planning, as well as help them manage home life, including applying for financial assistance, finding a place to stay, and making sure they're safe.

Different types of mental health care may (or may not) be available in your community. Treatment varies based on how severe your loved one's current symptoms are, and how much they are disrupting their typical functioning (i.e. relationships, school, work or hobbies). The most basic type of treatment is **talk therapy**, which is pretty much exactly what it sounds like: A person talks about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with a licensed professional for an hour or so each week. While there are a number of evidence-based talk therapies that are highly effective, one that is commonly offered for a range of mental health conditions is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Another type is an **intensive day program**, which spreads talk therapy out over the course of a few hours and may involve other activities, such as expressing emotions through art or music. An **in-patient treatment program** involves staying overnight at a hospital for a set period of time while working with doctors on finding the right medications and coping skills to improve quality of life. For some people, medication will become a lifelong tool for managing their well-being in recovery; others may only need it for a short period of time or not at all.

Concerned about access to or affordability of care? See Step 3.

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Peer-led groups offer a **safe space** in which participants — you, your loved one, or your whole family — can share firsthand experiences, coping strategies, and other insights. Interacting with others can prove helpful and empowering. [Strong 365](#) offers 24/7 online peer chat support. [Students with Psychosis](#) offers weekly online support groups. The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) organizes groups that meet weekly, biweekly, or monthly.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

[FindHelp.org](#) runs a database of free and low-cost services from verified agencies, including mental health care providers, that's searchable by zip code. [Strong 365](#) links to **specific resources** for young people and their families on its [Find Help](#) page. These include a directory of early intervention services for young people, links to [state mental health care agencies](#), and a short list of providers focused on specific communities and identities.

The [Family Caregiver Alliance](#) maintains a [Family Care Navigator](#) to help **locate public, nonprofit, and private programs, and services** nearest your loved one, whether they live with you at home, on their own, or in a residential facility.

SCHOOL RESOURCES

Strive for open communication with school personnel, including teachers, administrators, and support staff. Encourage them to touch base with your loved one regularly but informally to see how they're doing. Ask them to let you know of any changes in their behavior.

Federal law guarantees students with disabilities, including those caused by mental health conditions, free education specific to their needs. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, public schools must set up an Individual Education Program (IEP) for each qualifying student. If your

loved one is experiencing symptoms that interfere with, or are exacerbated by, typical classroom situations, they may benefit from an IEP. Seek guidance from your loved one's mental health care providers to **shape the modifications or accommodations in appropriate ways.**

For more information about supporting students with psychosis, [download this guide](#) from the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

One of the most powerful things family and friends can do for their loved one is to offer to be there, no matter what. It's also important to ask for practical ways to provide support. Consider inviting your loved one and a small group of their most trusted allies — siblings, close friends, the parent of a close friend, etc. — to meet. Give your loved one an opportunity to share what they need, when they need it, and how others can help make it happen. Discuss how each ally can provide support in appropriate ways. Encourage each of these caregivers to “call for backup” when they need a break for whatever reason.

Let your loved one guide you as to how they'd like to be supported, but also look for clues that they may need encouragement to seek mental health support from a professional (and also look for self harm including drugs/alcohol, suicidal feelings, abuse and bullying).

Step 3. Understand your health insurance benefits and the alternatives.

Health insurance often can be used for annual check-ups, specialist visits, medications, and, if needed, emergency care and hospital stays. Your insurer is **required to supply you with an easy-to-understand summary of benefits**, including mental health coverage.

Of course, you may still have some questions — and, honestly, who doesn't? Call your health insurance company for answers specific to your policy. Here are some **specific questions you can ask**:

- What are the policy's individual and family deductibles, co-pays, out-of-pocket maximums, and prescription benefits?
- Are there annual limits on the number of office or therapeutic visits? What types of inpatient and outpatient services are available, and how much is covered?
- How many in-network mental health care providers are accepting new patients? Request a list of providers and facilities.
- At what age does a child need to have their own insurance?
- Does your insurance company have case managers? If so, request one (a registered nurse, social worker, or other licensed professional) who can directly support you.

If your insurer ever denies a claim, you're entitled to ask for a review and a reversal of that decision. Federal parity law requires most health insurance plans to offer comparable benefits — deductibles, co-pays, yearly visit limits, etc. — for mental and physical health conditions. That

means your plan's coverage for mental health care must be similar to its coverage for physical health care. Think you're being treated unfairly? Resources are available to help you file an appeal.

Perhaps you don't have insurance, or your policy leaves gaps in coverage. **Your family may be eligible for assistance.** Depending on your household's size and income, free, subsidized, or sliding-scale services could be an option. Resources include:

- Federal programs such as Social Security Disability Insurance, Supplemental Security Income, and Medicaid are available in New York state for children, adolescents, and young adults coping with a diagnosed mental health disorder. The requirements differ for each program.
- The state of New York offers low-cost health coverage for youth under the age of 19 through a program called Child Health Plus. It's available to families that earn too little to pay for private insurance but too much to qualify for Medicaid.
- Community health centers, programs, and organizations also provide financial assistance or free or discounted services to families with low incomes or youth with special circumstances (such as artists, military, living with HIV/AIDS) who've been diagnosed with a mental health condition.
- Grant-funded research programs give patients access to specialized treatment centers. For example, services provided by many (but not all) specialized coordinated specialty care programs for first episode psychosis are available to everyone, regardless of insurance coverage or ability to pay, thanks to federal support of these programs.

Step 4. Put together a wellness toolkit.

FOR YOU

Supporting a loved one presents as many challenges as it does rewards. It's essential to take care of yourself first. Staying well — physically, emotionally, and mentally — and making sure your own needs are met will enable you to show up for your loved one when they need you the most. Here are some ways to promote your own well-being:

- **Make time for yourself.** Prioritize some personal space by blocking out 15- or 30-minute breaks on your calendar throughout the week. Schedule a regular yoga class, read a book, enjoy a cup of tea, see a movie, or whatever else restores your energy.
- **Strive for a healthy lifestyle.** Eat balanced meals, with plenty of fruits and vegetables, daily. Exercise (walk, swim, bike, etc.) at least three times a week. Limit your caffeine and alcohol use. Schedule regular preventive care appointments with your doctor(s).
- **Find ways to reduce your stress.** Caregivers often feel as if they're responsible for their loved one's circumstances and outcomes. Recognize the things you cannot control or change and work to let go of them. Give yourself credit for what you are able to do. Say no to requests that overwhelm you.
- **Seek and accept support.** Your loved one may need a lot of attention and compassion. Do you really need to provide all of it yourself? Enlist others whom you and your loved one both trust to expand your circle of confidants and helpers. Call on them for a boost. Join a peer support group of families to share insights and inspiration.

Organize essential information. Create and maintain a file of essential information about your loved one's health and care plan. This [Patient File Checklist](#) is a great place to start.

FOR YOUR LOVED ONE

Compile a short list of effective coping strategies for stressful times. Here are a few activities you can suggest and perhaps try together or apart:\

- **Breathe deeply.** Take a moment to focus on breathing. Exhaling longer than inhaling can calm the nervous system. As you do so, notice subtle sensations: breath coming in and out of your nose, the weight of your body on whatever surface you're standing or sitting on. Want more? Apps such as [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#) offer guided meditations for beginners.
- **Listen to music.** Research shows that music can not only help relieve stress, but also influence brain chemistry and the immune system in positive ways. Any genre can do this effectively; it really depends on individual taste. Compile a playlist that makes you feel good inside, and maybe even inspires you to sing or get your moves on -- and have it ready to go when needed.
- **Write some affirmations.** Break the cycle of negative thoughts with positive self-talk. Post affirmations on notecards in visible places. Develop a favorite mantra. Here are a few ideas to get you started: "I've got this!" "I'm safe. I can get through this!" "I am not in danger. My brain is creating trouble where there isn't any." Remind yourself that everyone struggles sometimes. One awful moment, day, or week is part of the journey: There will be brighter ones ahead!
- **Find a distraction.** The options for this abound. Scroll through happy pics on a smartphone. Call or text someone who makes you laugh, draw or paint a favorite object or pet, or soak in some sunshine on a walk. (If possible, walking through a park or getting out into nature

can be extra soothing. The exercise can help with stress, too.) Anything that redirects thoughts in a productive way will do.

- **Catch some Z's.** Studies show that sleep helps promote mental and emotional resilience. Take a 20-minute nap or go to bed one hour earlier than usual and see how it affects your mood. Having trouble dozing off or staying asleep? Getting regular exercise and maintaining a healthy diet — especially one that avoids caffeine and alcohol — may relieve insomnia.

FOR YOUR FAMILY

It's important to limit stress and be aware of risk factors. Here are a few places to start:

- **Reassure siblings and address their needs.** Helping a loved one cope with a health challenge inevitably changes the family dynamic. Siblings are bound to feel conflicting emotions — fear, sadness, anger, resentment, guilt, stress — that need validation and support.
- **Seek family counseling or peer support.** Talking about your situation can help. Ask your loved one's mental health care provider for suggestions and referrals. Or search the [FindHelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org) database, which includes peer support groups among its free resources.
- **Identify culturally competent resources.** Race, gender identity, religion, and other factors influence how you perceive and receive mental health care. Look for service providers who make you feel respected, understood, and comfortable. Don't be afraid to advocate for yourself, your loved one, and your family.



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