

How to find the right mental health support for you

A tip sheet on finding strength through struggle

You've got this.

If you've landed here, congratulations! No, seriously. Reaching out for help can be hard, especially if it took you a while to realize you were struggling. **You are not alone.** Mental health concerns are more common among 13- to 25-year-olds than older people, and yet teens and young adults are less likely to receive treatment. So, what now? You've decided you want to seek support, but you aren't sure how or where to begin. Or maybe you've already confided in a friend or started seeing a counselor, but you have some doubts or feel like you aren't being heard. Confused? Frustrated? Overwhelmed? It's OK. Take a deep breath. You've got this!

And we've got your back with this tip sheet, which packs a ton of advice into three basic steps, brought to you by our team of young people with lived experience and mental health professionals:

- Recruit a trusted ally.
- Know your mental health care options.
- Ask all the questions.

Step 1. Recruit an ally.

First off, talk with an adult you trust. This could be a parent, another family member, a teacher, a guidance counselor, a mentor, a close friend, or a neighbor — anyone who you believe cares about you and will look out for your best interests. Navigating the health care system can be challenging, and it's good to have an ally.

Yes, sharing your thoughts and fears is often scary. But it's important to tell someone else what's going on inside your head. Your ally needs to know how you're feeling so they can support you and help you make smart choices about the kind of care you need.

When you're ready to open up to someone, start the conversation by saying something like:

"I haven't been feeling myself lately."

"I have way less/more energy than usual."

"I've been feeling nervous/very sad a lot."

"I've been crying/getting angry for no reason."

"I'm hearing things that I don't think other people hear."

"I'm seeing things that scare me."

"I don't enjoy my friends/hobbies anymore."

"I feel like I could hurt myself."

If that last sentence rings true for you — if you feel like hurting yourself right now — please stop reading this and reach out to a free crisis hotline by texting [HOME to 741-741](text:HOME) or calling [1-800-273-8255](tel:1-800-273-8255). Hotlines are staffed 24/7 by people who know what you're going through because they've been there too. They can offer heartfelt, non-judgy support when you really need somebody to talk to.

And, although you may have heard otherwise, doctors and therapists generally do not share what you tell them with your parents or anyone else if you are 18 or older. A law called HIPAA (say "HIP-uh") protects your right to keep your medical records private — unless you give permission or are in imminent danger. If you're 17 or younger, doctors and therapists do share information with your legal guardian or parent in most situations. However, the good ones will keep things confidential when it is important (and not harmful) to you.

Step 2. Know your options.

When you're ready, talk with your ally about your mental health care options. A visit to your family doctor for a basic checkup is often a good place to start. Your general practitioner can rule out physical causes for your mental health concerns, make treatment recommendations, and refer you to a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

CARE TEAM

What's the difference between the two? **Psychologists** are licensed therapists who treat mental health conditions. They use **talk therapy** (see next page) for treatment and do not prescribe medication. **Psychiatrists** are medical doctors who use talk therapy for treatment, and can also prescribe medication to support your recovery. Medications may be effective for stabilizing moods and easing anxiety and depression, among other things.

Both psychiatrists and psychologists can help you get a handle on what's going on inside your head. Sometimes they work together as members of a larger care team. Your team may also include a nurse practitioner, a case manager, and/or a social worker. Here's what each one can do for you: A registered **nurse practitioner** can assess your needs, request and read your lab tests, diagnose your condition, and put together a treatment plan, including prescribing medication. A **case manager** can support you in making appointments, coordinating your treatment among team members,

and developing a self-care routine. A **social worker** can help you manage your home life, such as applying for financial assistance, finding a place to stay, and making sure you're safe.

CARE TYPES

Treatment for mental health concerns varies based on severity: In other words, how much you feel your mental health is disrupting your life. The most basic type of treatment is **talk therapy**, which is pretty much exactly what it sounds like: You talk about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences with a psychologist or psychiatrist for an hour or so each week. Another type is an **outpatient program**, which can be tailored for specific kinds of mental health conditions, and may offer a variety of care options, such as support with staying in school or getting a job, group therapy with your family or peers, or expressing your emotions through art or music. An **inpatient program** involves staying at a hospital for while you work with doctors on finding the right medications and coping skills to improve your quality of life. (For some people, medication will become a lifelong tool for managing their well-being; other people may only need it for a short period of time or not at all.)

You may also want to look for a **peer support group** in your community that could help you better understand what's going on. Ask your ally to help you figure out what's available locally and works best for your specific situation. Depending on where you live, different types of mental health care may or may not be available nearby. Remember that you may need to factor travel time, due to distance or traffic or public transit, into some or all of your appointments.

CARE COVERAGE

For many people, the most difficult part of seeking treatment is dealing with **health insurance**. If you are covered by a private policy, either your

own or a parent's, you'll often save money by choosing providers in its in-network. **In-network** means a doctor is on the list of providers approved by your insurance company. You get to pick which one you see. You may choose a doctor who isn't on that list, someone who's out-of-network, but your insurance will pay less for your visit(s) — and you or your family will pay more. Some insurance policies require what's called a **referral**, which means you need your general practitioner (primary care doctor) to recommend that you see a specialist, in this case a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

If you are covered by a public policy, such as Medicaid, you'll need to ask the doctor's office whether they accept this type of insurance. Many private practices don't. If you don't have health insurance, look for a doctor's office, clinic, or hospital that offers sliding-scale fees, payment plans, or other types of affordable care. You may need to fill out an application. Sliding-scale fees are discounted based on your ability to pay (how much money you or your parents earn).

You can find free or reduced-cost mental health care services, as well as racial/ethnicity and issue-specific support, at strong365.org/find-help.

Step 3. Ask all the questions.

Doctors can be very intimidating, but no matter what they say, the most important person involved in your treatment and recovery is *you*. Your needs and well-being matter more than anything else. If you don't like a therapist or feel uneasy about a treatment plan, speak up — or ask your trusted ally to speak for you.

Whether it's your first visit or a follow-up appointment, put together a list of the questions you have for your doctor or therapist. Do this before you go, because you may not get much face time with your physician, and you deserve answers. What are your doubts and concerns? Don't hold back. Not sure? Here are some things you may want to ask.

FIRST VISIT

- Where can I get more information about what I am experiencing?
- What changes could I make in my daily routine to improve my mental health? What are good goals for me to work toward?
- When it comes to therapy, what are my options?
- When it comes to medication, what are my options?
- What makes this medication the best option for me? How does it work to help my brain? What are the short- and long-term side effects? What happens if I miss a dose?
- How much does the medication cost? Does the manufacturer have a subsidy or reimbursement program?
- What should I do if I start to feel worse or need help immediately?
- How soon (realistically) can I expect to start to feel better?
- What types of therapy or community/online support groups are available for people my age? Where can I find them?
- How long should my treatment last? What are the benefits and drawbacks? Why are you recommending it? What are my options?

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Today if you feel like the world is against you, tomorrow might be a better day - a day where you can look to the future and it looks a little brighter than yesterday.

- AMBAR

NEXT VISITS

- What should I do if I start feeling worse? What signs should I be looking for?
- What additional changes can I make to improve my overall well-being?
- What can my friends and family do to support my well-being?
- What changes can we make to my medication so I won't have so many side effects?
- What other things or alternative treatments could support my recovery?
- How do I get assigned a case manager who will help me keep track of things and feel less overwhelmed?
- How can we coordinate treatment with my other health care providers?

One more tip: It can be tough to remember everything a doctor tells you, especially when you're feeling down or vulnerable. Bring a pen and paper with you to every appointment, so you or your ally can take notes. Or ask your provider if it's OK to record your conversation (audio) with your phone, so you can review the details later.

Still looking for info? You can find more resources at our website, strong365.org, including our free, confidential 24/7 peer chat community. Check out our [Find Help page](#) to learn about things like getting support in school or at work, and helping a friend who might need it too. You can also read stories from our community about finding strength through struggle.

Congratulations again on taking the first steps! We meant it when we say: **You've got this.**



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