

BACK TO SCHOOL

OUTREACH TOOLKIT



www.mentalhealthamerica.net

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FOREWORD

We all know the key to success for our children and young adults. We just have to give them the support they need to succeed. For many, this comes naturally through family, school, and peer interactions. But for young people with mental health concerns, we have to do a little more. We need to identify these concerns early, provide the services and supports to counteract them, and make sure that we adjust our expectations until we have these health concerns under control. But before we can do any of these things, we need to be comfortable having conversations with our children about mental health.

This year, Mental Health America's Back to School toolkit has a host of resources that will help youth and parents to start conversations about mental health. These resources will help them understand the basics about mental health issues in youth and stimulate them to identify issues early and take appropriate actions to address symptoms before they worsen. Our primary goal is to foster dialogue and discussion so young people can get the services and supports they need.

In short, this toolkit will help you to change the trajectories of some lives. As the parent of a child who has struggled with a major illness for years, I know how much this matters.



Paul Gionfriddo
President & CEO

INTRODUCTION

The 2015 Back to School Toolkit is designed for MHA Affiliates, advocates, and organizations of all types to use with parents, youth and school personnel to raise awareness of the importance of talking about mental health.

By using the toolkit materials, you will help members of your community:

- Be aware of the risk factors and early warning signs for mental health disorders in youth;
- Access tools to assess the mental health of young people through use of MHA's scientifically proven, free, anonymous, and confidential screening tools for youth and parents;
- Learn strategies for starting conversations about mental health concerns; and
- Increase understanding of next steps and treatment options available to help young people address their mental health.

This year's toolkit includes:

Media Materials

- Key Messages
- Drop-In Article for Parents
- Drop-In Article for Students
- Radio PSA Scripts
- Morning Announcement Scripts

Social Media and Web Components

- Sample Twitter and Facebook Posts
- Social Media Images/Youth Mental Health 101 Infographic

Items for Advocates

- Sample Letter to School Administrators
- Sample Letter to Policymakers

Fact Sheets and Handouts

- Time to Talk: Uncomfortable, but Important! A Guide for Adolescents and Teens
- Time to Talk: Uncomfortable, but Important! A Guide for Parents and Other Adults
- "Fortune Teller" Mental Health Quiz Activity

Questions?

If you have further questions about Back to School, please contact Danielle Fritze, Director of Public Education at dfritze@mentalhealthamerica.net.

KEY MESSAGES

- Heading back to school can be tough on young people, but you can help them cope.
- Mental Health America has developed tools and resources to inform both students and parents about why youth mental health matters, what parents need to know about mental health issues in their children, and how to best support their child.
- Sometimes it's tough to talk about mental health, but the conversation is too important not to have.
- We need to treat a young person's mental health just like we do their physical health, by giving it thought and attention and, when needed, professional help.
- If there is concern that a young person may be experiencing a mental health problem, it is important for adults to seek appropriate professional help.
- Promoting a young person's mental health means helping them feel secure, relate well with others and foster their growth at home and at school. Parents are pivotal in this support.
- For students, taking good care of your body and mind can make a difference in how well you do in school, how well you manage change, your productivity, and overall health.
- Half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14. About 75 percent begin by the age of 24. Early identification and early intervention in children and young adults is essential to their current and future mental wellbeing.
- Good mental health strengthens a young person's ability to cope with everyday problems, and tackle the more serious ones.
- But when someone just doesn't "feel right" and aren't sure why, it's important to know the signs and symptoms and seek help.
- Screening tools are available at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhascreening.org) for parents and youth to learn the signs and find out if a young person may have symptoms of a behavioral, emotional or cognitive disorder.
- Young people should find someone they trust and start a conversation. Parents, be ready to listen and let them know you understand.

Feel free to supplement these key messages with language from the "Time to Talk" guides or statistics cited in the Back to School infographics.

DROP IN ARTICLE: PARENTS

Use this article in your next e-blast or share with your local schools to include in their next parent newsletter.

If your child's thoughts, feelings or behaviors were causing them to struggle, would you know how to talk to them about it? If they came to you looking for help, would you know what to do? You might be surprised to find out that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that as many as 1 in 5 young people under the age of 18 will experience a diagnosable mental health problem in a given year, so it's important to be able to address signs and symptoms early.

All parents strive to do right by their children. Being an aware and engaged parent plays a pivotal role in your child's mental health, and maintaining open and honest communication with your child is one of the best ways to notice when something begins to go amiss. When you are in touch with what is "normal" in your child's life, it becomes clear when changes emerge, like problems with friendships or loss of interest in activities he or she used to get excited about. Encourage your child to talk to you about his or her feelings, and let them know that there is nothing he or she can say or tell you that will stop you from loving him or her. More easily said than done—especially when it comes to teenagers—but telling them out loud (and often) saves them the trouble of worrying about whether or not they can confide in you and how you might react.

Not so different from "the birds and the bees," when the time comes to have a talk with your child about mental health, it may be uncomfortable, but it's too important to avoid. Don't feel like you should wait until something is wrong to start talking. See how much your child knows about mental health—ask them directly, or share with them the story of a friend or relative who has had mental health problems. You may even have your own story to share. If you're sharing a story or experience, avoid judgmental language and focus on the fact that mental health problems are treatable.

One way of identifying mental health problems early is to take an online screen. A screen is a scientific questionnaire used to determine if signs and symptoms indicate risk of a disorder. Mental Health America has a screen for young people ages 11-17, and a corresponding screen for parents of young people, to help identify risk. Since its launch in spring of this year, over 1,200 parent screens have been taken at mhascreening.org. Nearly 63 percent of those screens indicated that a young person was showing signs of risk for a behavioral, emotional or attention disorder.

Just like physical illnesses, treating mental health problems early can help to prevent a more serious illness from developing in the future. If you are concerned that your child may be experiencing a mental health problem, it is important to take action and to address the symptoms early. Start the conversation. Seek help from a doctor or mental health professional, and show your child there is nothing to be ashamed of. Listen. It could mean all the difference in the world to your child, and to their future.

DROP IN ARTICLE: STUDENTS

Share this article with your local schools to include in their next student newsletter.

If your thoughts, your feelings or the things you are doing just don't feel right, would you know how to talk to someone about what you are going through? If a friend is having problems and comes to you to talk, would you know what to do? You might be surprised to find out that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that as many as 1 in 5 young people under the age of 18 will experience a diagnosable mental health problem in a given year, so it's important to know if you or someone you care about is starting to show signs.

Being aware about mental health begins with being informed. Some of the most common signs and symptoms include unexplained changes in appetite, loss of interest in things a person used to enjoy, or a constant feeling of being worried or sad. While it is normal to not be hungry or not feel like doing something every once in a while, when these and other signs happen together and last for more than a few weeks, it's time to talk.

One way of identifying mental health problems is to take an online screen. A screen is a scientific questionnaire used to determine if signs and symptoms indicate risk of a disorder. Mental Health America has a screen for young people ages 11-17 to help identify risk. Since its launch in spring of this year, over 5,000 young people have taken the youth screen at mhascreening.org. More than 1 in 5 screeners indicated they would share the results with a family member, friend or professional to start a conversation about their risk for a behavioral, emotional or attention disorder.

So how do you start a conversation about your mental health? What do you do if a friend comes to you with a problem? Let's face it—pretty much any conversation about a health or body related issue can be a little awkward. Mental Health America has tips and information to help you get started in, *"Time to Talk: Uncomfortable, but Important—A Guide for Adolescents and Teens."* Get the guide at www.mentalhealthamerica.net/timetotalk.

There are also serious signs that someone is in crisis and needs more immediate help. These include thoughts or plans of hurting oneself or another person. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741 or call 911.

Just like physical illnesses, treating mental health problems early can help to prevent more serious problems from developing in the future. If you are concerned that you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health problem, it is important to take action and to address the symptoms early. Start the conversation. Seek help from a trusted adult. Remember there is nothing to be ashamed of and that there is help and hope.

RADIO PSA SCRIPTS

ANNOUNCER V/O: Has your child been falling behind in school? Acting sad, hopeless or irritable? Struggling to pay attention? Remember, your child's mental health is important. As many as 1 in 5 children and adolescents may have a mental health problem that can be identified and treated. If you are concerned about your child's health, take the parent screen at www.MHAscreening.org or visit the Mental Health America website for more information. Remember: mental health is just as important as physical health, so if you are concerned about your child, take action! This message is brought to you as a public service of [Affiliate] and [this radio station].

ANNOUNCER V/O: With new routines, teachers, and classmates, the beginning of the school year can be stressful. As a parent, you can make this transition easier for your child. Establishing routines, promoting healthy eating, and spending time each day talking to your child are just a few things you can do to ease the stress. Remember, mental health is just as important as physical health. If you are concerned that your child may be struggling with a mental health issue, take the parent screen at mhascreening.org and make time to talk with your child. Visit the Mental Health America website at mentalhealthamerica.net for tips on how to start the conversation. This message is brought to you as a public service of [Affiliate] and [this radio station].

ANNOUNCER V/O: Losing sleep. Feeling tired for no reason. Feeling low or anxious. Struggling to focus on school work. If you have noticed these symptoms in your child or teen, they shouldn't be ignored or brushed aside in the hopes that they go away. Like other diseases, we need to address mental health concerns early. Start a conversation about mental health today. For tips on how to get started, visit MentalHealthAmerica.net. This message is brought to you as a public service of [Affiliate] and [this radio station].

MORNING ANNOUNCEMENT SCRIPTS

Feeling stressed? The start of school can be stressful, but if you are feeling overwhelmed, there are many resources available to you. Your mental health is important, and here at ____ school, we want to make sure you are supported. Your parents, teachers, and counselors are here to help. So if you want to talk about something that's bothering you, they are here to listen.

Do you know how to be a good friend? If you have a friend who is suffering with a mental health or substance abuse problem, listen. Be supportive. And encourage them to talk to a trusted adult or mental health professional. Go with them, even.

For more information, visit mentalhealthamerica.net/back-school.

Stress is the number one factor that can hurt you in the classroom. But you can beat it: plan your schedule carefully, get plenty of sleep, get involved in other activities and talk it out. A small amount of stress is unavoidable, but if your life feels out of control, ask for help.

For more information and stress-beating tips, visit mentalhealthamerica.net.

If you just haven't been feeling right and can't figure out why, take the Youth Screen at mhascreening.org to see if you're experiencing signs of an emotional, behavioral or attention problem. It's quick, free and confidential.

SAMPLE TWEETS

Do you know how to #StartTheConversation about #mentalhealth with your teen? Learn more at: bit.ly/learnmh

Calling all teachers! Do your students know how to talk about their #mentalhealth? #StartTheConversation <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Talking to your parents about #mentalhealth can be difficult & scary. Here are tips on how to #StartTheConversation: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

If you're concerned about your child's #mentalhealth, don't be afraid to #StartTheConversation. Find resources here: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

LGBTQ youth are 2x more likely to experiment with drugs & alcohol and 4x more likely to attempt suicide. Be a resource: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

50% of all #mentalhealth disorders begin by age 14. Get the #BackToSchool toolkit to learn how to intervene early: bit.ly/learnmh #B4Stage4

Children's #mentalhealth matters! Get informed, be prepared, & #StartTheConversation. bit.ly/learnmh #B4Stage4 #BacktoSchool

Other ideas:

Share infographics from the toolkit
Retweet @MentalHealthAm

Use these hashtags to join the conversation:

#B4Stage4
#BackToSchool
#MentalHealth
#StartTheConversation
#TimeToTalk

SAMPLE FACEBOOK POSTS

Are you and your kids ready to go #backtoschool? We know what it takes to keep a child physically healthy- but the basics for good #mentalhealth aren't always as clear. Learn more, get resources, and be prepared #B4Stage4 with our #BacktoSchool toolkit: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Uncertain of how to #starttheconversation about #mentalhealth with your parents? Don't worry, you're not alone. Talking about your #mentalhealth concerns can be scary - here are tips on how to #starttheconversation: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14. Early identification and early intervention in children and teens is essential to their current and future mental wellbeing. Download our #backtoschool toolkit to get informed, be prepared and know how to #starttheconversation #b4stage4 <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Children's #mentalhealth matters! With the start of a new school year, get informed, be prepared and know how to #starttheconversation about #mentalhealth with your children, other parents, and your local community #b4stage4 <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Calling all teachers! Check out our new #BacktoSchool resources to promote #mentalhealth in your classrooms <http://bit.ly/learnmh> [image]

Talking about #mentalhealth concerns can be scary, but the help available is worth it. The sooner you address things, the sooner you can feel better and the better you will be in the long-run. Don't be afraid to #starttheconversation. Get some tips on how to get started: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

FACT: LGBTQ youth are 2x more likely to experiment with drugs & alcohol and 4x more likely to attempt suicide. Be a resource: <http://bit.ly/learnmh>

Other ideas:

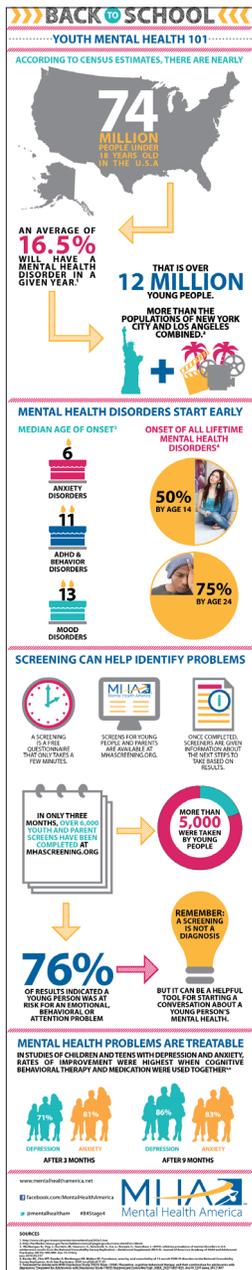
Share infographics from the toolkit

Share posts from [facebook.com/MentalHealthAmerica](https://www.facebook.com/MentalHealthAmerica)

IMAGES/INFOGRAPHIC

Download and save the images provided for use on your social media platforms or websites. All images (including social media profile and cover pics and the infographic) can be downloaded by visiting mentalhealthamerica.net/back-school-2015-toolkit-download, then right-clicking on the image and selecting "save picture as."

Infographic (700 x 3587 px)



Facebook Profile Photo (180 x 180 px)
Twitter Profile Photo (240 x 240 px)



Facebook Cover Photo (851 x 315 px)
Twitter Header Photo (1500 x 500 px)



SAMPLE LETTER TO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Dear [Insert Name Here]:

Schools are not only a place where information is taught, but a place where learning happens. In order to learn, children and teens need a safe, healthy, supportive space, and I believe more can be done within the school system to make this a reality—especially for those who are struggling with emotional, behavioral and cognitive difficulties.

Too many parents are left saying, “If only.” Right now, children and teens with emotional, behavioral and cognitive difficulties struggle in school as parents, teachers, and other members of the community scramble to help. Without comprehensive, integrated ways to address these difficulties, young people drop out of school, or in some cases, end up in hospitals or jails. However, with early intervention and access to services, we can correct this trajectory and support achievement of the full potential of children and teens.

Mental Health America recommends the following policy changes, which I am in support of:

Integrate Mental Health and Schools. Collaborate with provider groups, like community mental health centers, hospitals, Accountable Care Organizations, and others who bill public and private insurance to:

- Screen children for mental health needs and assist families in getting follow-up care;
- Train teachers in recognizing early warning signs of mental health disorders and in fostering mental health in the classroom; and
- Integrate with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) so children have access to treatment that reinforces their learning.

Keep Children and Teens Engaged in Learning. When children are excluded from school, it disrupts their learning and the classroom as a whole. Children should receive the help they need to engage with learning by implementing these measures:

- Prohibit excluding children from school for more than one day unless they received a mental health screen; and
- If the child receives a screen and a need is indicated, the child should receive additional support from an IEP and remain in school.

I urge you to act now and change policy to make sure that this school year we do everything we can to set children and teens up for success.

Sincerely,

[Your Name Here]

SAMPLE LETTER TO LEGISLATORS

Dear [Insert Name Here]:

As you are aware, September marks the beginning of a new school year, and I hope that you will act now to improve supportive services in schools. My child and his/her classmates are so bright and curious, but they need help. My child is already showing signs of mental health problems and is starting to struggle; other parents at my child's school are seeing the same thing with their children. There are services out there that can help our children and we need them in our schools.

Mental Health America recommends supporting these two bills:

Mental Health in Schools Act of 2015 (H.R. 1211/S. 1588)
Student Support Act (H.R. 2375)

Each bill would provide the help my child needs at school to really harness his/her potential. The Mental Health in Schools Act provides funding for comprehensive school mental health programs, which could support our teachers and parents in creating a healthy environment for children at school and make sure that they are ready to learn.

The Student Support Act sets minimum ratios for students per school mental health support staff, such as counselors, social workers, and psychologists, and provides funding so that school districts can meet these standards. These staff members are essential in attending to children with emotional, behavioral and/or cognitive difficulties and in helping them to thrive in their education.

I urge you to support either or both of these bills. My child wants to do well in school, and we need to act now to help him/her excel.

Sincerely,

[Your Name Here]

BACK TO SCHOOL

TIME TO TALK: UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT IMPORTANT!

A GUIDE FOR ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS



It's time to talk about your mental health when:

- You just don't "feel right" and aren't sure why.
- Your thoughts or things you do just don't seem the way other people think or behave.
- Your thoughts, feelings or behaviors are starting to affect your life at home, school or with friends in a bad way.
- You've had some of the signs and symptoms below for more than a few weeks:



Feeling sad, empty, hopeless or worthless



Sensitivity to sound, sight, smell or touch



Feeling overly worried



Not being able to do school work



Feeling like your brain is playing tricks on you and hearing knocking or scratching sounds, or your name being called



Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, or withdrawal from others



Changes in sleep patterns or energy levels



Irritability or restlessness



Problems with concentration, memory or thinking



Loss of appetite or overeating

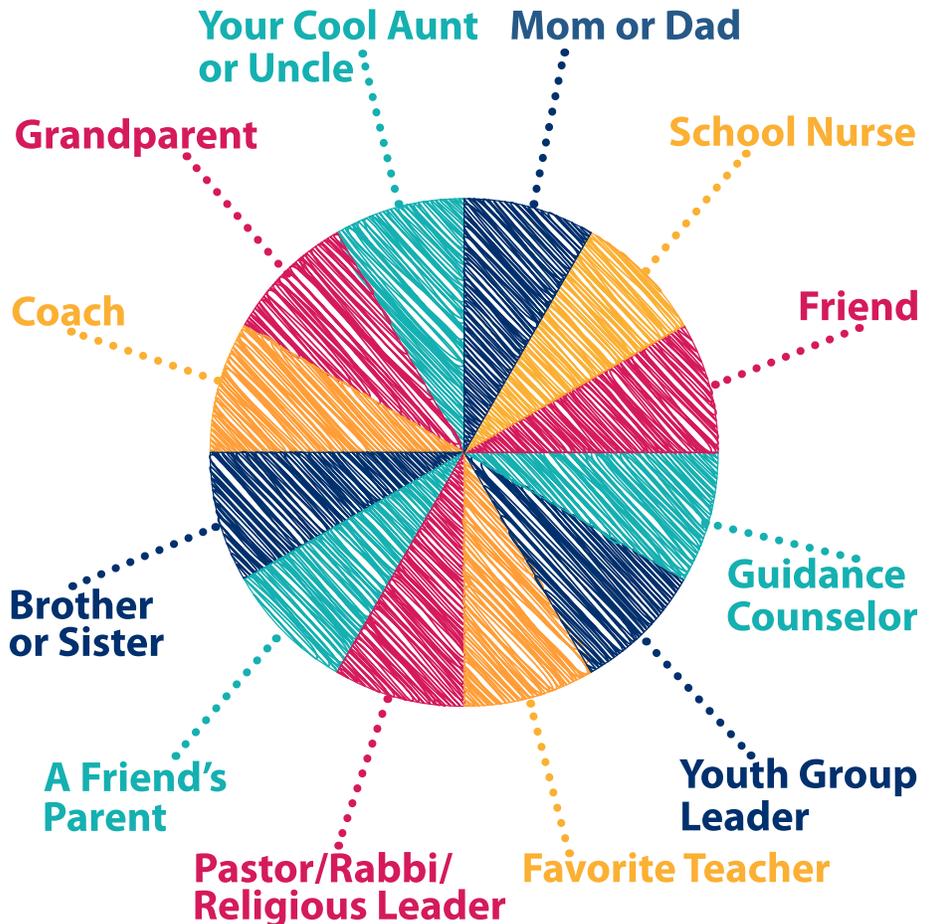
Signs and symptoms that you shouldn't ignore:

- Thoughts or plans of killing or hurting one's self or another person
- Hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see
- Unexplainable changes in thinking, speech, or writing
- Being overly suspicious or fearful
- Serious drop in school performance
- Sudden personality changes that are bizarre or out of character

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741, go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

WHO CAN YOU TALK TO?

Find a person that you trust. Someone who will listen to you, and help you plan your next steps.



TIPS FOR TALKING

Start a conversation about mental health when there is an open window of time to have an in-depth discussion, and neither you or the person you're talking to will have to cut the conversation short to take care of other obligations. Plan to set aside *at least* 30 minutes to an hour.

Not sure how to bring up the topic of your mental health?

Here are a few ways to get started:



Start with a text if a face-to-face talk is too intimidating. It could be a plain old text message with a note that says, "I have some important things on my mind and need to make time to talk to you about them."



Find & share info. Find important information online that might help you explain what you're going through. Print it and bring it with you when you're ready to talk.



Take the Youth Screen at mhascreening.org. Print out your results to share with the person you plan to talk to.

STILL STUMPED ABOUT HOW TO GET STARTED?

Use the letter below and fill in the blanks. Pick from the options we've listed or use your own words.



Dear _____,

For the past (*day/week/month/year/*_____), I have been feeling (*unlike myself/sad/angry/anxious/moody/agitated/lonely/hopeless/fearful/overwhelmed/distracted/confused/stressed/empty/restless/unable to function or get out of bed/*_____).

I have struggled with (*changes in appetite/changes in weight/loss of interest in things I used to enjoy/hearing things that were not there/seeing things that were not there/feeling unsure if things are real or not real/my brain playing tricks on me/lack of energy/increased energy/inability to concentrate/alcohol or drug use or abuse/self-harm/skipping meals/overeating/overwhelming focus on weight or appearance/feeling worthless/uncontrollable thoughts/guilt/paranoia/nightmares/bullying/not sleeping enough/sleeping too much/risky sexual behavior/overwhelming sadness/losing friends/unhealthy friendships/unexplained anger or rage/isolation/feeling detached from my body/feeling out of control/thoughts of self-harm/cutting/thoughts of suicide/plans of suicide/abuse/sexual assault/death of a loved one/*_____).

_____). Telling you this makes me feel (*nervous/anxious/hopeful/embarrassed/empowered/pro-active/mature/self-conscious/guilty/*_____), but I'm telling you this because (*I'm worried about myself/it is impacting my schoolwork/it is impacting my friendships/I am afraid/I don't want to feel like this/I don't know what to do/I don't have anyone else to talk to about this/I trust you/*_____).

I would like to (*talk to a doctor or therapist/talk to a guidance counselor/talk to my teachers/talk about this later/create a plan to get better/talk about this more/find a support group/*_____) and I need your help.

Sincerely,
(Your name _____)

WHAT IF SOMEONE TALKS TO YOU ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?



LISTEN.

Let them finish their sentences and complete thoughts without interrupting. After they have finished you can respond.



LET THEM KNOW IF YOU UNDERSTAND.

If someone has just spilled their guts and you've gone through something similar—tell them. It helps a lot for someone to know they aren't alone. Make sure you don't switch the topic of conversation to your struggles though; focus on their needs.

AVOID BEING JUDGMENTAL.

Don't tell them they are being weird or crazy; it's not helpful at all.

TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY.

Try not to respond with statements that minimize how they are feeling or what they are going through, such as, "You're just having a bad week," or "I'm sure it's nothing."

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE TO TALK TO AGAIN IF NEEDED.

While it can be a big relief for someone to share something they have been keeping secret, mental health struggles usually aren't solved with one conversation. Let the person who has spoken with you know that they can reach out to you again if they are having a tough time.

It's ok to let them know if there is a time of day or certain days of the week that you aren't available. For instance, "I'm here for you if you need to talk, but my parents don't let me use the phone after 9 on school nights, so call before then."

DON'T TURN WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TOLD INTO GOSSIP.

If someone is talking to you about their mental health, it was probably tough for them to work up the nerve to say something in the first place and you shouldn't share what they tell you with other students at school. Let them share on their own terms.



IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO SOME RESEARCH AND LEARN ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TOLD.

Make sure that your information is coming from reliable sources like government agencies and health organizations.



TELL AN ADULT IF YOU HAVE TO.

It's important to have friends that trust you, but if a friend indicates they have thoughts or plans of hurting themselves or another person, have been hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see, or have any other signs and symptoms that shouldn't be ignored (see page 1) then you need to tell an adult what is going on. That doesn't make you a bad friend; it just means that the problem requires more help than you can give.

If someone you know is in crisis and needs help urgently, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741, go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

NOW WHAT?

If you've made the decision to talk to someone about your mental health, you may be nervous about how things will go and what could happen. Check out the list below to find out more about what you can expect.

Things might be a little awkward at first for both people in the conversation.

For a lot of people, talking about anything related to their health or body can be kind of tough at first.

You'll probably feel relieved.

Being able to open up and share something you've been keeping to yourself for a long time can feel like a weight has been lifted. You might learn that the person you're talking to has had some personal experience or knows someone in their family who has gone through something similar, which will help you to feel less alone.

You may encounter someone who doesn't understand.

While it's likely that a person will know someone who has struggled with their mental health, they may not understand what it's like—especially if they haven't struggled themselves.

Expect to be asked questions.

Some questions might include: How long has this been going on? Did something difficult happen before you started feeling this way? Can you describe what it's like? You don't have to answer every question that you're asked if you don't want. Remember that the person you're talking to is probably asking questions to help them better understand what you're going through.

It's possible that you might not get the reaction you were hoping for.

It can be discouraging if you work up the nerve to speak up and are then told, "you've just got the blues" "get over it" "stop being silly" or "you worry too much." Sometimes this kind of reaction has to do with culture or expectations. Try to explain how it is really having an effect on your ability to live a healthy and happy life and you aren't sure how to make things better. If for some reason the person you chose to talk to still isn't "getting it" someone else will. Think about someone else you could talk to that would give you the help you need. Don't stop or go back to ignoring your situation or struggling alone.

The conversation is the first step in a process.

Congratulations for getting the ball rolling.

If your first conversation isn't with your parents, you'll probably need to talk to them at some point.

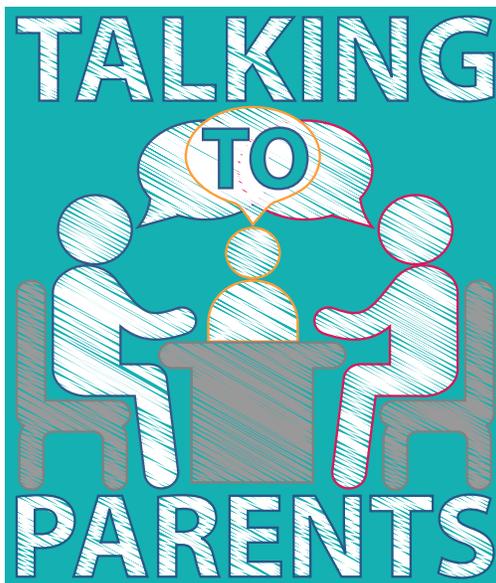
See the following page for tips and common concerns about talking to parents.

Your next step might be going to an appointment of some sort.

It may start with someone at school like the guidance counselor or school psychologist, a visit to your regular family doctor or psychiatrist, or with another kind of treatment provider like a therapist or social worker. These professionals can help figure out what exactly is going on and how to start getting you the help you need. You might need to talk to more than one person to find someone who can be the most helpful.

It takes time to get better.

You could be going through something situational, which can improve with time to process feelings (for example, grief after the death of a loved one or a tough break-up) or adjustments to your environment (like switching lockers to get away from someone who is a bully), or you could have a more long term mental health issue. Mental health issues are common and treatable; however, you may have to try a few different things to find right type of treatment or combination of strategies that works best for you.



Talking to a parent about mental health can be scary for a number of reasons.

Many people report being afraid to tell their parents because they do not want to upset them. Sometimes we don't understand where troubling feelings or thoughts are coming from and feel guilty for having them. A good question to ask yourself in this situation is how would you feel if someone you love were suffering and came to you? Likely, you would be upset that they were struggling, but you would not be upset with them. You would be glad they confided in you and ready to help them in any way you could.

Here are some of the most common concerns people give for not talking to their parents and some tips for overcoming them.

I don't know how my parents will react.

Talking can be scary, but the help available is worth it. The sooner you address things, the sooner you can feel better and the better you will be in the long-run. If you are concerned about how your parents will respond, one option is to schedule a meeting with both of them or with one parent at a time. Instead of a sudden, potentially unexpected conversation, choose a time and place where you are comfortable and plan what you want to say beforehand. You can plan by researching information online, taking a mental health screening and printing the results, or just by writing out a script for what you'd like to say.

On that note, you could also write a letter if you are not as comfortable with a conversation. A letter allows you to express exactly what you want to say without the pressure of an immediate response. Check out our sample letter on page 2. Remember, even if it seems scary or if your family never discusses these things, you are doing what is right for you. Be honest with where you are and think about the specific support you need from them. Focus on actions they can take or things they can change.

My parents will be sad or disappointed.

It might be hard for your parents not to show that they are sad, upset or disappointed. They might be sad that you are suffering, but this does not mean they are upset with you. In fact, many parents are upset because the care about you. Parents often wonder if there was something they could have done differently that would have prevented you from struggling.

Maybe you feel that there are high expectations of you and you're afraid that having mental health problems will be a disappointment. It's important to ask where these expectations come from and whether the expectations are real (have you been told certain things are expected, or are you assuming they are expected) or reasonable. Thinking through and explaining your fears about their sadness or disappointment might help them to respond in a way that is more helpful for you.

My parents will be angry or won't take me seriously.

Another concern many people have is that their parents will become angry or dismiss their feelings, both of which are painful experiences when you are already hurting. When dealing with a potential conflict, it is helpful to plan a meeting or to write a letter saying that you are worried about anger or dismissal. Explain to your parents that you are struggling and believe you would benefit from extra support. If they dismiss your concerns, tell them that you are trying to take care of yourself and would like to at least have a discussion with a professional. You can also support your desire for treatment with information and mental health screening results.

A lot of the time, reacting with anger or dismissal is about fear. Your parents might not know how to react or may have preconceived notions about what it means to get help for mental health concerns. Even if they do not know the best way to respond, it is important that you speak up for yourself, as we know the earlier a person gets help the better they are in the long-run. You may have to turn to other trusted adults or mental health resources if needed.

My parents will ask too many questions.

Sometimes parents will get upset and afraid and want to know all of the details of what you are experiencing. While only you know your parents and level of comfort, do not feel that you have to share every detail of your experience. You may be unsure of how to describe what you're feeling or afraid of getting in trouble for certain behaviors. Your thoughts or concerns about how your family relates to one another might also be playing a role in what you're going through. There are reasons why you may not want to tell your parents every single detail of what is going on, and it makes sense to want some privacy when first opening up about your struggles.

It might help to plan or review what you are comfortable sharing beforehand. You can tell your parents that you would really like to speak to a mental health professional, as an outside input with knowledge and experience in what you are dealing with. While it is unhealthy to hold things in, it is important to make sure you are in a safe space when beginning to open up.

My parents already have enough to worry about.

All adults have responsibilities and stress. While some families may be dealing with more stressful or serious situations than others, your wellbeing and health is important and deserves attention—regardless of what else may be going on with your parents. If you're worried about stressing out your parents, pick a time to talk when things are calm, and bring information about what you're going through and what kind of help you would like.

One or both of my parents are part of why I am struggling.

If one or both of your parents contribute to your desire to seek help, there are several options for what you can do. If you trust one parent, you can explain how you are feeling and ask that they either tell or do not tell the other parent. Often parents may not be willing to keep things of this nature from one another so make sure to check beforehand.

This might be an opportunity to reach out to another trusted adult in your life. Guidance counselors in particular can be very helpful in these situations, as they have experience and expertise with students in similar situations. Other trusted adults may be able to help you as well, particularly in creating a plan to talk to your parents. While speaking with a trusted adult is not a substitute for a needed treatment program, outside resources can guide you to the help or support you need.

If you are currently experiencing physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect, inform a trusted adult. You can visit www.dorightbykids.org to find out more information on definitions of abuse and neglect, reporting, and what happens after you report.

My parents do not believe me.

Even if your parents care for you, sometimes it's hard for them to see what is actually going on. This could mean they label your struggles as typical "growing up" experiences, or they dismiss the entire possibility of getting help for mental health. Ignoring problems because they are unpleasant does not make them go away, and it is important for you to continue to ask for what you need. You can explain to them that, even though you hear their beliefs, you would like the chance to speak to a mental health professional based on your experiences and research.

If it is unlikely that you will change their minds, you may have to reach out to other resources. This includes teachers, relatives, and guidance counselors. These individuals could help you talk to your parents and/or put you in contact with resources to help. Even though your parents are not validating your struggles, it does not make them unreal or unimportant. If you need professional help, put together a list of reasons why this is the help you think you need. You can also lean on friends, online communities, and other accessible mental health resources like apps and online education.

For more information and resources in your area contact your local MHA affiliate. Find one near you at mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate

Take the Youth Screen



www.mhascreening.org
Anonymous • Free • Confidential



Mental Health America
www.mentalhealthamerica.net

facebook.com/mentalhealthamerica
@mentalhealtham #B4Stage4

BACK TO SCHOOL

TIME TO TALK: UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT IMPORTANT!

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS



It's time to talk to your child or teen about their mental health when:

- You've noticed something just doesn't seem right, but aren't sure why.
- Your child/teen's behaviors seem different than others in their peer group.
- Your child/teen is starting to have difficulties at home, school or with friends.
- You've noticed some of the signs and symptoms below for more than a few weeks:



Feeling sad, empty, hopeless or worthless



Sensitivity to sound, sight, smell or touch



Feeling overly worried



Not being able to do school work



Your child hearing knocking or scratching sounds, or their name being called or seeing things that you don't hear or see.



Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, or withdrawal from others



Changes in sleep patterns or energy levels



Irritability or restlessness



Problems with concentration, memory or thinking



Loss of appetite or overeating

You should seek assistance immediately if you become aware that your child/teen is:

- Having thoughts or making plans of killing or hurting them self or another person. If your child is showing signs of suicidal or self-injurious thoughts, seek immediate assistance. If you are not present or able to get them right away, ask them calmly to promise you that they will not act on those thoughts until you are with them or can get them help. It is a well-known phenomenon that most people will honor these "promise contracts" for a defined period of time.
- Hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see.
- Experiencing unexplainable changes in thinking, speech, or writing.
- Being overly suspicious or fearful.
- Showing a drastic and sudden decline in school performance.
- Having sudden personality changes that are bizarre or out of character.

If your child or teen is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

If you're still not sure whether your child or teen is showing the early warning signs of a problem, take the parent screen.



www.mhascreening.org
Anonymous • Free • Confidential

TIPS FOR TALKING

The first step in starting a conversation is to choose a good time. It's really important to make space to be together without an agenda or pressure. Conversation tends to flow best when it naturally occurs. Consider bringing up the topic of mental health when doing chores, cooking, hanging out, or in the car. Be aware of changes in your child's willingness to engage with you. If they are busy, or having a bad day you may want to wait until they are less preoccupied.

CONVERSATION STARTERS



OBSERVATIONS

In a non-judgmental way let your child/teen know that you've noticed:

- They don't seem to be hanging out or talking to their friends as much as usual.
- That their school work seems to be suffering. This may be indicated by slipping grades, assignments going undone, or a general lack of interest in anything school related. Offer extra help if it's simply trouble with the subject matter.
- Their mood seems to have "darkened." For instance, they may be talking about death or dying, giving away belongings, or posting pictures (or other signs of interest) in dead celebrities or other morbid topics.



SCREENING RESULTS

If you took the parent screen at mhascreening.org and the results indicated your child/teen may be showing signs of an emotional, behavioral or cognitive disorder print out the results and share them. You can also ask your child/teen to take the youth screen at: mhascreening.org.



EXPERIENCE

Maybe you have a mental health disorder yourself and recognize some of the symptoms you've struggled with in your child/teen. Perhaps you have a friend or family member who has struggled and notice similarities in your child/teen. Be sure to keep the tone of the conversation hopeful, and remind your child/teen that these disorders are common and treatable.



INFORMATION

Do some research online on health organization or government websites and print any pertinent information you want to bring up during your conversation.

WHAT IF A CHILD OR TEEN TALKS TO YOU ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?



DO

Listen. Really listening means stopping the voice in your own head and actively paying attention to the person who is speaking. This is hard for everyone, but practice helps!

Ask if they've thought about what they might need to get better. If they haven't, offer to support to listen and talk it out with them. If they have, support them in following through with their needs.

Learn. If they bring you information, read it. Learn as much as possible about your child's condition and the realities of mental health disorders. The MHA website (www.mentalhealthamerica.net) is a good resource for information about symptoms and treatment options.

Make sure to keep things confidential, unless it is life threatening.

Normalize. Assure your child that having a mental health issue is common, and does not mean that they can't get better.

Acknowledge your fear, but don't let it rule your behaviors. As a parent it is important to confront stigma or discrimination directly.

Offer an impartial counselor, and assure your child that information will be confidential.

Prepare to be an advocate. Finding the right mental health treatment is like finding the right medical provider. It takes time and effort to make sure you're getting the best care for your child or teen.

DON'T

Minimize how they are feeling or tell them "you shouldn't think that way." It's difficult for a young person to start the conversation; remember that they probably worried about it for some time before coming to you.

Let your emotions rule your response – especially if you're angry. Negative words ("You're never gonna get it together, are you?") can set someone back for a long time and add to stress and problems. It's also not uncommon for parents to feel guilt and blame themselves. If your child has a brain-based illness, it is not your fault, but you can be part of the solution.

Use the word "crazy".

Tell your child what they SHOULD do; instead, ask what they want you to help them with.

Delay action. Especially if your child shares that they have bizarre thoughts or asks about strange sounds, PAY ATTENTION and EXPLORE. These experiences are early warning signs of more serious mental health problems. Acting early can change the trajectory of their lives.

Make excuses or blame others. "This is the school's fault, they should have given you more individual attention."

Compare your child to their siblings. "Your brother doesn't have these problems. Why can't you be more like him?"

WHAT IF IT'S NOT YOUR CHILD?

Ask if the young person has told their parents yet. If not, delicately try to figure out why. You may hear reasons like, "My parents have too much going on" or "They won't believe me." MHA's *Time to Talk: Uncomfortable, but Important – Guide for Adolescents and Teens* has more information about common concerns young people have about talking to their parents and tips for talking. Offer to help the young person start a conversation with their parents if they would like. Explain that you can provide advice and information, but only a parent or guardian can get them certain kinds of help, like a visit with a doctor or mental health professional. If you suspect abuse or neglect, call the Childhelp National Abuse Hotline at 800.422.4454 to get guidance from a trained volunteer about what steps you should take.

NOW WHAT?

Now that you've had a conversation it is important to follow up appropriately. Your next steps are largely going to depend upon what you've been told. Some problems may require professional help, and others may be situational or temporary requiring your emotional support and advice. Some considerations to keep in mind are:

WHAT KIND OF SYMPTOMS IS THE CHILD/TEEN EXPERIENCING?

If there is self-injury (such as cutting or hair pulling), threat of harming self or others (including discussion of suicide), or a disconnection with reality (hearing or seeing things that aren't there, or having strange thoughts), then you should seek help from a mental health professional as soon as possible. Symptoms like irritability, changes in sleep or appetite, and loss of interest in certain activities that the child/teen used to enjoy, could be associated with puberty or be early signs of a mental health problem. For a comprehensive look at the changes associated with adolescence, check out, *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*, from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

HOW LONG HAVE THE SYMPTOMS BEEN GOING ON?

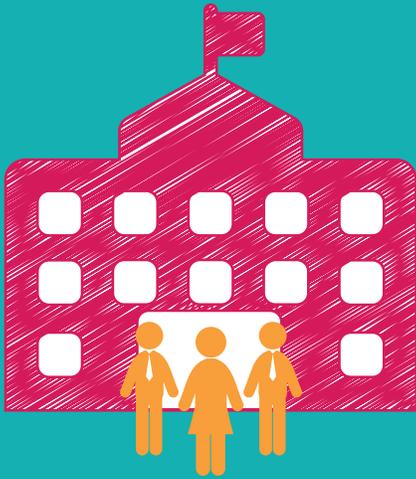
Has your child been struggling over the last few days? Weeks? Months? Now that you've determined what symptoms your child is experiencing, it's important to establish when symptoms started, whether they are persistent or come and go, and if they have gotten worse over time. Mental health problems tend to last for longer than 1-3 days. Feeling consistently "off" for weeks is a good sign that you need to seek a professional assessment.

WHEN ARE THE SYMPTOMS THE WORST, AND DO THEY FOLLOW PATTERNS?

As you learn about your child's symptoms, you may notice that they are associated closely with certain situations. For instance, if your child/teen is worried every morning before school and sad afterward, but seemingly better on weekends, this could be a sign of bullying or other difficulties with their peer group and be best addressed by finding a way to improve their school environment. In cases of girls and young women, mood swings may align with hormonal cycles and require little or no action, or an evaluation from a gynecologist. Maybe changes in mood are due to a triggering event, like a fight with a friend or trauma. In these moments, it's important to identify the triggering event and provide a safe space for your child to express and work through thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, some events or situations may trigger signs or symptoms of a mental health problem. For instance, if your child/teen has a minor physical problem (i.e. ache or bump), obsesses over the problem and seems convinced they are dying because of it, or struggles to breathe when worrying, they could be showing signs of an anxiety problem. Taking notice of details can help determine the nature of problems and what kind of actions you should take to best address them.

WHERE TO START GETTING HELP

SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF



If you feel like your child needs accommodations in school, it's worthwhile to start early in soliciting support from the school system. The process of obtaining an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be daunting and complicated, but hang in there. You will first have to request an evaluation. It is best to do this in writing. Having prior treatment or testing through a psychologist might help you to talk about why your child is eligible and conceptualize the kinds of changes that can help in school. Until then, other school support staff (guidance counselor, school social worker, or a teacher) might also provide extra support and guidance. Learn more about IEPs at: www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html.

YOUR LOCAL MHA AFFILIATE



Mental Health America has over 200 affiliates in 41 states that are available to help you find information and resources around mental health disorders, treatment and support strategies. Find the affiliate in your area at mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate.

YOUR FAMILY DOCTOR



Pediatricians and primary care doctors are not mental health professionals, but some are trained to recognize the symptoms of mental health disorders and can help to distinguish between other health problems. You may want to start by calling your child's doctor to discuss symptoms over the phone. They can decide based on your conversation whether you should bring your child in for an office visit, or make a referral to another doctor/mental health professional.

DEALING WITH YOUR OWN FEELINGS

FEAR AND ANXIETY

You're not sure what to do. You knew someone with a mental health condition and life was rough for them. It's ok and normal to have these thoughts, but important to remain composed during a conversation with your child. Do your best to focus on your child's needs and concerns as they confide in you. They are likely already fearful and nervous about what they have been experiencing and are looking to you for support, guidance, and reassurance. Once you've finished having a conversation with your child, get informed. Visit mentalhealthamerica.net to learn more about symptoms, conditions, and treatment and support options.

Keep in mind that almost 60 million Americans have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year and media coverage disproportionately focusses on those instances with the worst outcomes. The vast majority of people with mental health conditions live full, productive, healthy lives with proper treatment.

DISBELIEF

"Not my kid." "How can this be happening?" Confusion and disbelief may be your initial reaction to hearing that your child is having problems, but pretending like it isn't happening doesn't make it any less real. Mental health conditions are real, and common, and most of the time symptoms start during youth. It is important to take your child seriously if they've come to you in need of help, because the sooner you are able to address their problems, the more likely they will be to get better.

GUILT

It can be easy to think about all the "what ifs", and things you should have or could have done when your child tells you they are struggling with their mental health. While it can be easy to think this way, it certainly isn't helpful. Keep your focus on what your child has told you and how you can help him or her moving forward, rather than dwelling on the past. You can't change what has already happened, but you can make a big difference in what will happen.

It's a parent's job to raise their child, but ultimately that child is or is becoming his or her own person (especially during and after puberty). Parents cannot control genetic expression, or every element of the environment that affects the child. Even so, just as there are risk factors for development of mental health conditions, there are also protective factors that help to combat risk, and prevent symptoms from becoming more severe or frequent. Do your part to learn more about protective factors and ways to foster resilience in your child and put them into action. Don't forget about the good that you've done as a parent. Think about the qualities you've instilled in your child to make them strong, and help them cope with problems. Thank them for placing trust in you, which led to their feeling safe and able to seek help. Think about how you can continue to reinforce those qualities as you provide support to your child in their time of need.

SADNESS OR DISAPPOINTMENT

It hurts to see your child hurting. Life can be hard enough, and as a parent, naturally you don't want life to be any more difficult for your child than it has to be. It's ok to let your child know that it's hard for you to learn that they are struggling, but reassure him or her that their struggles don't mean that they have let you down. Reserve any further expression of sadness for a separate conversation between yourself and another adult. Getting early and proper support and treatment for mental health problems can help get your child back on a better path.

Regardless of which particular feelings you have after a discussion with your child about their mental health, it is important to seek support for yourself as you seek support for your child. Talk to friends and loved ones. Join an online support group. You are not alone and may be able to glean valuable lessons from others who have sought help for their children.



Mental Health America
www.mentalhealthamerica.net

facebook.com/mentalhealthamerica

[@mentalhealtham](https://twitter.com/mentalhealtham) #B4Stage4

"FORTUNE TELLER" QUIZ ACTIVITY

Part origami, part quiz, this activity can be used between an adult and a child/teen, between children/teens, or in groups in the classroom.

1. To get started, print out the template and directions on the following page and fold the "Fortune Teller" as indicated.
2. Designate one person to be the "holder" and another to be the "picker."
3. Using the thumb and pointer finger on each hand, the holder should pick up the "Fortune Teller" under the four colored flaps.
4. The picker should then choose a color. The holder will spell out the color and alternate opening the "Fortune Teller" vertically and horizontally as they say each letter.
5. The picker will then choose a number from those visible after the color has been spelled out. They should have an option between 1,2,5 and 6 OR 3,4,7 and 8.
6. The holder will then alternate opening the "Fortune Teller" vertically and horizontally as they count out the number that was selected.
7. The picker will then choose another number from those visible after their first number selection has been counted out.
8. The holder will then lift that flap and read the "Fortune" (which is this case is a mental health quiz question).
9. The picker should then answer the quiz question. If being done as a group activity, students should write down answers on a separate sheet of paper so the group as a whole addresses all 8 questions.
10. The holder and the picker should now switch roles and repeat the activity.

ANSWER KEY

List 4 different mental health conditions:

Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar disorder, Schizophrenia, Anorexia, Bulimia, ADHD/ADD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Name a celebrity with a mental health condition:

Demi Lovato, Mary Lambert, Pete Wentz, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Brooke Shields, Michael Phelps, Jon Hamm, Lana Del Rey, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, Brittany Snow (and more!)

What are 3 symptoms of depression?

Sleeping more or less than usual; Feeling bad about yourself or feeling guilty; Feeling sad and hopeless; and/or Lack of energy, enthusiasm, and motivation
(Find more at mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/depression)

What are 2 things you can you do if you are concerned about your mental health?

Take a screening at mhascreening.org; Talk to your parents; and/or Talk to your doctor (Other correct answers at adult's discretion)

In the United States, what percentage of students in grades 9-12 have reported seriously considering suicide?

16% (Source: cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth_suicide.html)

Approximately what percentage of American youth will have a diagnosable mental health condition at some point before the age of 18?

50% - the actual is 49.5%

(Source: Merikangas, K., Hep, J., Burstein, M., Swanson, S., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benejet, C., Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication—Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 49(10): 980-989. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017)

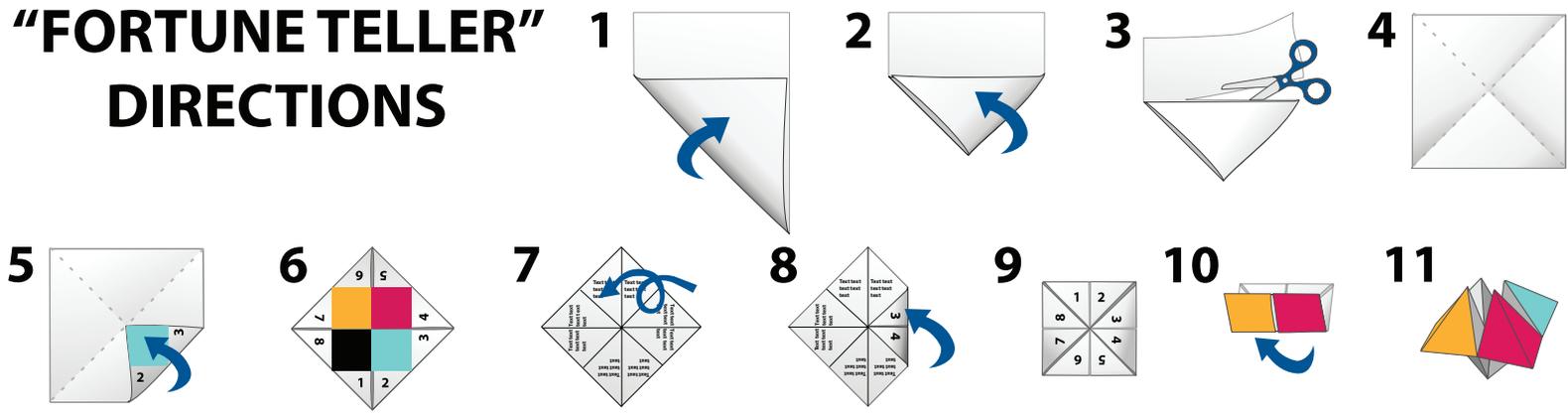
What are 3 symptoms of anxiety?

Feeling tense, edgy, restless, or jumpy; Constant worrying about things that are unlikely to happen; Difficulty concentrating or focusing; and/or Inability to relax
(Find more at mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/anxiety-disorders)

Name 3 staffers at your school that you can talk to if you are having trouble with your mental health.

Teacher, School nurse, Guidance counselor, School psychologist (if applicable), Coach, Safety officer (if applicable)

"FORTUNE TELLER" DIRECTIONS



BLACK

AQUA

1

LIST 4 DIFFERENT MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

2

NAME A CELEBRITY WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

3

WHAT ARE 3 SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION?

4

NAME 2 THINGS YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

5

IN THE UNITED STATES, WHAT PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN GRADES 9-12 HAVE REPORTED SERIOUSLY CONSIDERING SUICIDE?

6

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF AMERICAN YOUTH WILL HAVE A DIAGNOSABLE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION AT SOME POINT BEFORE THE AGE OF 18?

7

WHAT ARE 3 SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY?

8

NAME 3 STAFFERS AT YOUR SCHOOL THAT YOU CAN TALK TO IF YOU ARE HAVING TROUBLE WITH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

YELLOW

MAGENTA