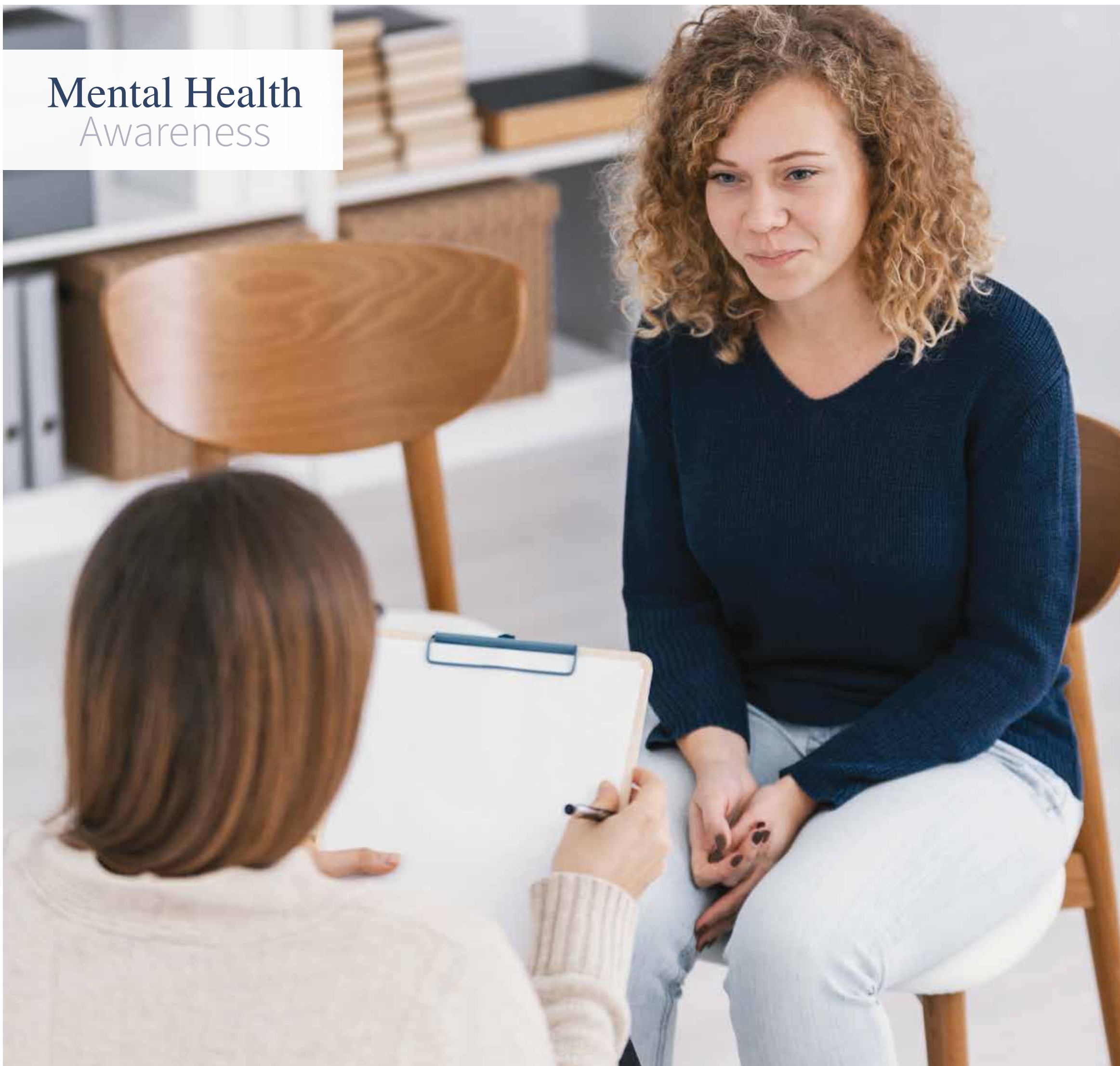


Mental Health Awareness



Mental Health and the Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event. Most of us have never experienced anything like it, and it's OK to feel a little challenged right now.

You may have noticed you're extra irritable, anxious and stressed. It doesn't feel normal, and that's because nothing right now is normal. Know that you're not alone, and keep reading more about managing your mental health during a pandemic.

WHAT IS STRESS?

High stress levels can cause:

- Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness or frustration.
- Changes in appetite, energy, desires and interests.
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Nightmares.
- Physical reactions such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems and skin rashes.
- Worsening chronic health conditions and mental health conditions.
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances.

COPING WITH STRESS

It may seem like all the news you hear is bad. So take a break. It's OK to put a pause on watching, reading or listening to news stories, including



social media. Hearing about the pandemic constantly can be upsetting. If you have to watch, consider only watching once or twice a day.

Set aside time to unwind with other activities that you may enjoy. Talk to people you trust about your concerns and how you're feeling, including perhaps some community- or faith-based organizations through virtual meetings or

over the phone.

It's important to set aside time to take care of your body. Make sure you focus on breathing and stretching, and learn meditation techniques. Eat healthy, well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. Get some exercise and fresh air.

Continue your pandemic precautions, such as wearing a mask and washing your hands, and get a vaccine as

soon as you can.

HELPING OTHERS

In addition to taking care of yourself, take care of those around you. As we're all social distancing, it can be isolating to some people. Be sure to stay connected with friends and family, even if it's virtually. Helping other people to cope with their own stress through phone calls or video chats can

help you feel less lonely or isolated.

GET HELP

Call your health care provider if the stress becomes difficult for you to handle. If you're in crisis, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK or 888-628-9454 for help in Spanish. If you're a veteran, you can text 8388255.

How to Find a Therapist

Finding a qualified therapist can help you cope with mental health issues and grow as a person.

It can be overwhelming, especially if you're already dealing with mental health problems. Friends, colleagues and health care providers can all help you find a qualified therapist with whom you can connect. Think about and make sure you can clearly articulate your questions and goals, Healthline says, so that you can make sure you and your therapist are a good match and can agree on an appropriate treatment plan.

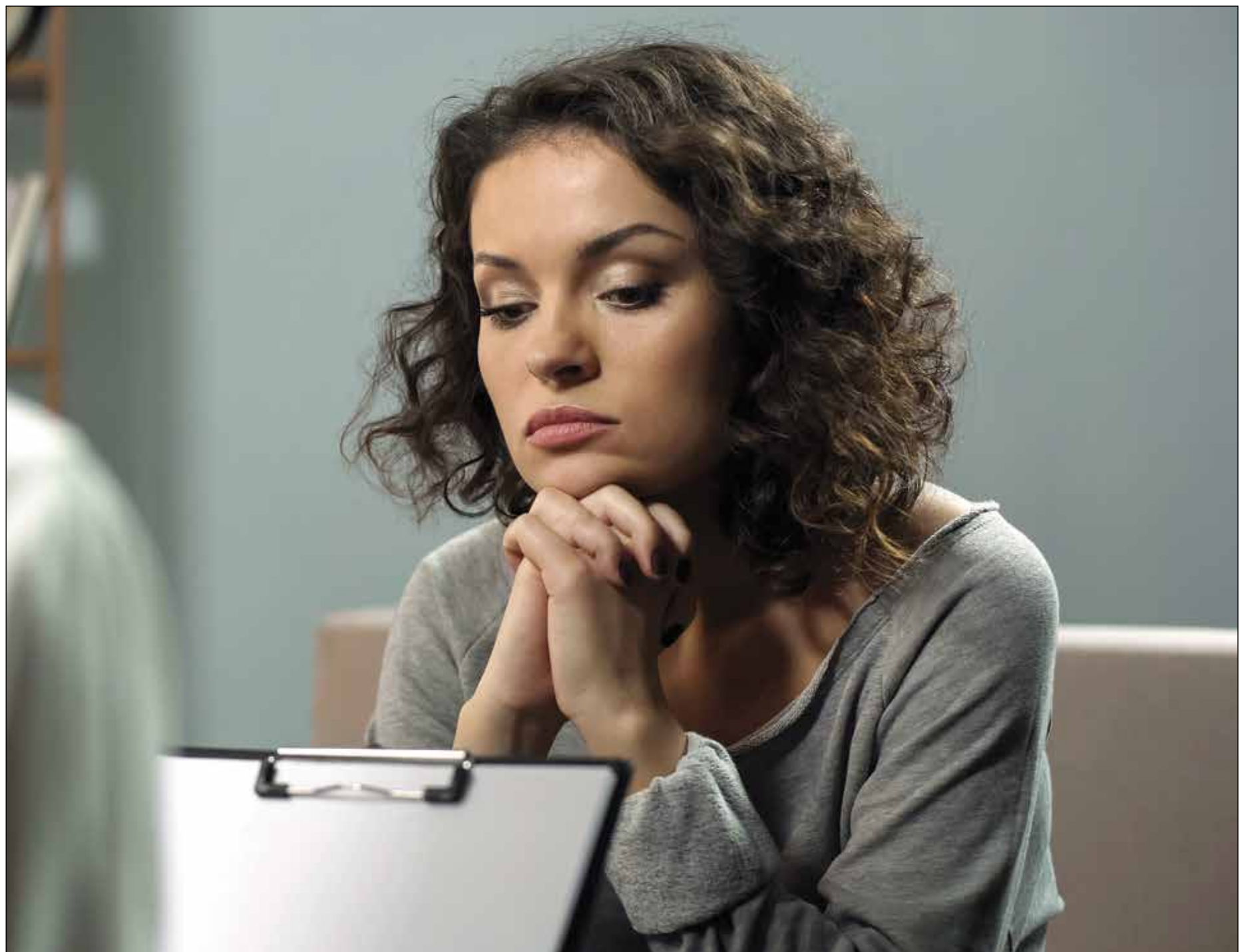
Here are three other ways Healthline suggests for you to find a good therapist to help you on your road to a healthy outlook on life.

USE AN ONLINE DATABASE

Several mental health organizations maintain searchable databases of licensed therapists. It can be as easy as searching by your ZIP code or even filtering by specialty, such as marriage counselors or therapists who focus on substance abuse.

SCHOOL, WORK AND CHURCH

You also can reach out to your community organizations. If you're a student, your school or university may have resources you can use for free.



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Some workplaces also offer employee assistance programs that are both free and confidential for you to use. If you're involved in a religious community, there may be faith-based resources you can use for low or even no cost.

Some groups may offer therapies related to certain issues,

such as domestic violence, sexual abuse or eating disorders. Look for local advocacy groups or organizations to get help today.

ONLINE HELP

Especially during the COVID pandemic, some people are uncomfortable visiting health

care offices. That's OK. There's an app for therapy, too. Some insurances and practices now have a significant telehealth practice, sometimes with copays and fees waived during the pandemic. Healthline also recommends apps like Talkspace and Betterhelp that will allow you to find therapists

you can access online. Fees range from \$35 to \$80 for weekly sessions.

The right therapist — one with a good connection with you and in touch with your issues — can make a huge difference in your mental health journey. Even though it's overwhelming, take the first step.

When to Get Emergency Help

One in five adults, about 43 million people, experience mental health issues in a given year, the National Mental Health Institutes says.

The consequences of not getting help are severe. NAMI says that people with mental illnesses face an increased risk of treatable chronic health conditions, and adults in the U.S. with mental illness die an average 25 years earlier than others.

Those consequences also include death. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. More than 90% of children who die by suicide have a mental health condition, and every day, around 20 veterans die by suicide. Keep reading to learn more about the signs it's time to get help.

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others, NAMI says. Some warning signs of a mental health crisis include:

- An inability to perform daily tasks like bathing, brushing teeth or hair, changing clothes.
- Rapid mood swings, an increased energy level, inability to stay still, suddenly depressed or withdrawn, or



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suddenly happy or calm after a period of depression.

- Increased agitation, verbal threats, violent, out-of-control behavior.
- Abusive behavior to themselves or others.
- Isolation from work, school, family or friends.
- Loss of touch with reality, including being unable to recognize family or friends, confusion, strange ideas and not understanding what people are saying.

RISK OF SUICIDE

People who attempt suicide usually feel overwhelming emotional pain, frustration, loneliness, worthlessness, guilt, rage or hopelessness, according to NAMI. Social isolation is a common feeling, with people with mental illnesses feeling like no one cares if they live or die.

Any mention of suicide should be taken seriously. Common warning signs of suicide include:

- Giving away possessions.
- Talking as if they're saying goodbye.
- Taking steps to tie up loose ends, like organizing personal papers or paying off debts.
- Making or changing a will.
- Stockpiling pills.
- Getting a weapon.
- Preoccupation with death.
- Sudden cheerfulness or calm after a period of despondency.
- Withdrawal from friends, family and normal activity.

If you think that someone is thinking about suicide, start the conversation. Start off by saying what signs you've noticed. Then be frank, and ask if you've been thinking about suicide. If the answer is yes, call a therapist immediately. Take away any potential means of action by removing weapons and medications. Call the National Suicide Prevention line at 800-273-8255.

Focus on being understanding, caring and nonjudgmental.

Talking to your Doctor

Mental health issues can be a difficult subject to broach with your doctor.

Don't be embarrassed. Mental health problems are more common than you think and your doctor is there to help you. If you don't feel like your doctor is listening to you, here are some tips from Mental Health America on how to open good lines of communication with your health care professionals.

PREPARE

Before your appointment, write down your questions and concerns so that you can talk to the doctor about how you're doing and what you need to move forward. Some organizations offer a checklist you can print out to organize your thoughts in advance. You can give it to the doctor if you feel like it would save time.

You can also ask a trusted friend or family member to come with you to your appointment. This person can help you and your doctor talk to and listen to each other. Then, after the appointment, go over what you heard and understood with your friend. Ask them to be a sounding board for what they heard you say and what they heard the doctor say.

AT THE APPOINTMENT

If you believe you're not being heard, talk to your doctor about why your concern is



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important to you and ask the doctor about treatment plans. If you have doubts about that plan, express them clearly and ask for more information. Ask about any other options for treatment.

You might disagree with your

doctor. That's OK. You can still reach an agreement on what treatment plan to try. You're more likely to follow and have success with a treatment plan you agree with. Discuss the pros and cons of each treatment idea with your doctor.

Whatever you do, don't stop seeing your doctor right away. If you don't agree with their plan, explain what you would like to do and promise to keep them updated on how you're feeling. Make it clear what your objections are. It's also possible

you misunderstood what your provider said. Try saying something along the lines of, "I heard you say ...," and give the doctor a chance to clarify.

It's perfectly fine to seek a second opinion. Just keep your provider updated.

Meditation and Mental Health

Meditation is a set of techniques that are intended to encourage a heightened state of awareness and focused attention.

It can teach practitioners to focus on the present moment, breath by breath. Studies show that meditation can help people sleep better, improve mental health and help with cognitive function.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Anxiety and depression will affect many Americans at one time or another. Psychology Today says mindfulness meditation in particular can improve depression and anxiety disorders. A study in the American Journal of Psychiatry found that meditation can reduce anxiety and depression significantly. Researchers also found that the practice was relatively easy to maintain and continue, even after the study ended.

MEDITATION PRACTICES

Anyone can practice meditation, the Mayo Clinic said, and you can practice it anywhere. Ways to meditate include:

Guided meditation. You form mental images of places or situations you find relaxing. Maybe it's a picture of the



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beach, with the waves lapping at the sand, or maybe it's a crisp high mountain meadow, covered in a tapestry of wildflowers. While you're meditating, use as many senses as possible. Smell the salt air, hear the hiss of the waves on the sand, see the startling blue of the water. Feel the rush of the waves past your

fingertips.

Mantra meditation.

Silently repeat a calming word, thought or phrase to yourself to prevent distracting thoughts.

Mindfulness meditation.

This practice involves being mindful or having an increased awareness and acceptance of living in the

present moment. You broaden your conscious awareness by focusing on what you experience during the meditation, such as the flow of your breath. Observe your thoughts and emotions, but let them go by without judgment.

No matter what kind of meditation you choose to practice, remember that

there's no right way to meditate. The right way is the way that lowers your stress level, suits your lifestyle and helps your situation. It can be an hour or a minute, it can be in a formal class or on your couch in your PJs.

Don't let the worries of meditating properly add to your stress.

Journaling for Mental Health

Journaling is the same thing as keeping a diary. It's a way to let out your thoughts and feelings without judgment, punishment or fear.

Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you understand them more clearly and can help you gain control of your emotions. Here are some tips on how to journal for mental health from the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Try to journal every day. Set aside a few minutes that you can dedicate to your writing.

Make it easy. Always keep a pen and paper with you. Consider keeping your journal on your smartphone or tablet so that you'll always have it with you.

Write — or even draw — whatever feels right. You don't have to follow any certain structure. Your journal is your private place to express whatever feelings you have. Let your words and ideas flow and don't worry about spelling or grammar.

BENEFITS OF JOURNALING

Journaling can help you manage anxiety, reduce stress and cope with depression. Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you prioritize your problems, fears



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and concerns. It will also help you track your symptoms so that you can recognize triggers and learn ways to better control them.

Your journal is also a place for positive self-talk that can buoy your mood. It can help you identify the negative thoughts and behaviors that

affect your mood. Use your journaling time as your personal relaxation time. Consider it your time to de-stress, maybe in a quiet spot with a cup of tea. Once you've identified the stressors in your life in your journal, you can work on a plan to reduce your stress.

COMBINED WITH OTHER STRESS-REDUCERS

Journaling is a powerful tool when combined with other techniques to building better mental health. You can also relax or meditate every day, eat a healthy diet, drink plenty of water, get regular exercise, get plenty of rest and stay

away from drugs and alcohol.

Bring your journal with you when you visit your health care provider to help clarify your symptoms and moods. A therapist or doctor can help you identify negative patterns in your life and keep your mental health journey on track.

Children and Mental Health

Children can suffer from a full range of mental illnesses, just like adults.

It can be difficult to tell if a child's behavior is just normal childhood behavior or signs of mental illness. In general, the National Institute of Mental Health says, if a child's behavior lasts for a few weeks or more, causes distress for the child or their family and interferes with their school, consider seeking help. You should seek help immediately if a child's behavior is unsafe or if the child talks about wanting to hurt themselves or others.

SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN CHILDREN

Once again, it's important to remember that some of these are normal childhood behaviors. If you are concerned at any point, it's worth talking to your pediatrician just for peace of mind. Here are some signs that should cause concern:

- Frequent tantrums or being intensely irritable.
- Often talking about worries or fears.
- Complaining about frequent stomachaches or headaches without a medical cause.
- Sleeping too much or too little, having frequent nightmares or seeming sleepy during the day.
- Not being interested in playing with other children.



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- Struggling academically or having difficulty making friends.
- Spending more time alone and avoiding social activities with friends or family.
- Engaging in self-harm behaviors, or risky or destructive behaviors.

MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS FOR CHILDREN

Health care professionals can help you understand

what's behind your child's behavior and give you a treatment plan and way to move forward. A comprehensive assessment may include talking to the child's parents about their developmental history, temper, relationships, medical history, interests, abilities and prior treatments. They'll also gather information from school, such as any standardized tests, reports on behavior and other details. Of course, they'll also talk to the

child to get their take and experiences. There may also be some testing and behavioral observations.

CHOOSING A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Your pediatrician may have recommendations, or you can talk to friends or family for recommendations. It's important to choose a mental health professional who has training and experience treating your child's particular problem.

Here are some questions you might ask a potential provider:

- Do you use treatment approaches supported by research?
- Do you involve parents in the treatment?
- Will there be homework between sessions?
- How will progress from treatment be evaluated?
- How soon can we expect to see progress?
- How long should treatment last?