



# Kids Need Mental Health Help



**February  
2022**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

*“The number of youth suffering from serious mental health problems was growing before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Doctors say the pandemic has made matters much worse.”*  
www.everydayhealth.com: <https://bit.ly/345XQK0>

Doctors have expressed concern over the pandemic's effect on children's mental health. In an October 2021 joint statement by a coalition of 70,000 U.S. doctors, they say that COVID-related isolation, uncertainty, fear and grief have taken an enormous toll on children and teens around the country. <https://bit.ly/3EDk0Ql>

We know this is a difficult time for young people, and alarms are sounding by healthcare experts who are members of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association.

When the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Lee Savio Beers, says, “The mental health of children and teens is at a critical tipping point,” we know we need to take action to help them.

### **Mental health tips**

The following mental health tips from the Columbia University Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry are helpful for overall wellbeing. Parents can discuss these activities with their children as a starting point:

1. **Be nice to yourself:** To counter the critic in our heads, especially when we are feeling down, try to be compassionate with yourself. If that seems difficult, focus on doing a good deed for someone else.
2. **Exercise:** This really does help. Take a short walk, climb a flight of stairs. Regular exercise can improve mood, concentration and sleep, and it can ease symptoms of depression and anxiety.
3. **Eat healthy:** Another tried-and-true tip is to eat a balanced diet, drink water and plan social meals with friends. Don't obsess about food. Food-related disorders are closely tied to mental and physical health issues.
4. **Sleep well:** The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends between 8–10 hours of sleep per night for teenagers and over 7 hours for those ages 20 and up. Focus on quantity and quality by following a sleep schedule.
5. **Turn off screens:** Digital screens can affect sleep quality. Try to turn off digital devices at least an hour before falling asleep. Disruptions from blue light can affect melatonin, the hormone that regulates your sleep/wake cycle.
6. **Focus on breathing:** Breathing exercises can be remarkably

- calming. Take a slow breath, starting from your stomach. Expand through chest and lungs while breathing out slowly.
7. **Connect:** Social connections have been difficult during these periods of isolation, but they are essential. Focus on friends, family, and even pets. Find ways to connect occasionally with others. Deeper friendships are a goal, but a friendly word with an acquaintance can also help.
  8. **Make a plan to relax:** Finding moments of calm and relaxation are not always easy. Plan ahead for destressing activities that can provide a mental and physical break. Good choices are walking, spending time with pets and reading.
  9. **Find supporters and be supportive:** We all need help sometimes, especially when we are struggling. Reach out to a friend or family member or seek professional support from a counselor, a primary care doctor, or a mental health professional. If it isn't helping, find other support options for your needs. The demand is high for mental health services, so it could be challenging to find a counselor or therapist, but keep looking. These services are only effective if you get the right support.
  10. **Start small:** Set goals and plan to reach them in manageable, and then draw that dotted line from point A to B to C. Stop and rest along the way. You will see a difference.

### **Social media and mental health**

Research is showing that there is a link between increased anxiety and high social media activity. More than half of teens and young adults report symptoms of anxiety and depression, and about the same number are online almost constantly. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, an estimated 84% are active users of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and other platforms. <https://bit.ly/3qrgvas>

### **Healthy social media use**

Social media platforms are not going away. As we learn more about the connections between mental health disorders and regular social media activity, we need to continually reassess how it makes us feel. The following recommendations are helpful reminders for moderating social media use among all age groups.

- **Take a social media break.** Delete apps from your phone without deleting your account to refocus on school, work, or in-person relationships.
- **Understand that social posts are not real.** People share the best version of their lives online — not the struggles. Avoid comparing what you see to your own life.
- **Spend time with friends “IRL” (in real life).** Balance in-person and online interactions. Focus on face-to-face relationships. Plan in-person get-togethers with friends, and reach out to people you know whom you would like to befriend.
- **Disconnect at night.** Early studies have suggested that nighttime social media use is worse for mental health and can disrupt sleep.
- **Delete social apps and your accounts.** If you are struggling with how social media use makes you feel, consider disconnecting completely. Many people have done this and found that they feel better for it. For high-activity users, it may seem extreme, but it could also resolve many chronic mental health concerns.