

Caring for a child with mental illness

As a parent or caregiver, you want the best for your children or other dependents. You may be concerned or have questions about certain behaviors they exhibit and how to ensure they get the help they need.

What to look for

It's important to be aware of warning signs that your child may be struggling. You can play a critical role in knowing when your child may need help.

Consult with a school counselor, school nurse, your child's doctor, mental health provider, or another health care professional if your child shows one or more of the following behaviors:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Seriously speaking about the desire to be dead, or trying to harm or kill himself or herself, or making plans to do so
- Experiencing sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or fast breathing
- Getting in many fights or wanting to hurt others
- Showing severe out-of-control behavior that can hurt oneself or others
- Not eating, throwing up, or using laxatives to make himself or herself lose weight
- Having intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Experiencing extreme difficulty controlling behavior, putting himself or herself in physical danger or causing problems in school
- Using drugs or alcohol repeatedly, or trying to hide those behaviors
- Having severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships, school, activities or jobs
- Showing drastic changes in behavior or personality
- Having a significant change in grades or performance at school

Because children often can't understand difficult situations on their own, you should pay particular attention if they experience:

- Loss of a loved one
- Divorce or separation of their parents
- Any major transition—new home, new school, etc.
- Traumatic life experiences, like living through a natural disaster
- Teasing or bullying
- Difficulties in school or with classmates

What to do

If you are concerned your child's behaviors, it is important to get appropriate care. You should:

- Talk to your child's doctor, school nurse, or another health care provider and seek further information about the behaviors or symptoms that worry you
- Ask your child's primary care physician if your child needs further evaluation by a specialist with experience in child behavioral problems
- Ask if your child's specialist is experienced in treating the problems you are observing—if not, ask for a referral
- Talk to your medical provider about any medication and treatment plans

What to ask your child

Do you need help starting a conversation with your child about mental health? Try leading with these questions. Make sure you actively listen to your child's response.

- Can you tell me more about what is happening? How you are feeling?
- Have you had feelings like this in the past?
- Sometimes you need to talk to an adult about your feelings. I'm here to listen. How can I help you feel better?
- Do you feel like you want to talk to someone else about your problem?
- I'm worried about your safety. Can you tell me if you have thoughts about harming yourself or others?

Tips for talking about mental health

- Communicate in a straightforward manner
- Speak at a level that is appropriate to a child or adolescent's age and development level (preschool children need fewer details than teenagers)
- Discuss the topic when your child feels safe and comfortable
- Watch for reactions during the discussion and slow down or back up if your child becomes confused or looks upset
- Listen openly and let your child tell you about his or her feelings and worries

Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)

Source: [MentalHealth.gov](https://www.MentalHealth.gov)

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.

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