

Mental Health

A guide for caregivers

How do I identify signs of anxiety and depression in my child?

Importantly, youth may not report symptoms of anxiety or depression. It is important that your child goes to their annual well-child checks so that your pediatrician can screen for these concerns. If no mental health screening is completed at the well-visit, ask for one.

Two common signs of anxiety and depression in youth are **avoidance** and engaging in **safety-seeking behaviors**. Additional signs of anxiety may be frequent **somatic complaints**:

- headaches,
- stomachaches,
- heart palpitations,
- and/or difficulty breathing.

Signs of depression may include:

- sadness,
- withdrawal,
- irritability,
- loss of interest in activities once enjoyed,
- and changes in sleep and/or appetite.

For children with developmental disabilities (DD) who may have less insight into how they are feeling, mental health problems may not be as obvious. In addition to some of the symptoms listed above, they may engage in more **self-soothing behaviors**, they may **regress** in skills, they may act out more **aggressively** toward themselves or others, and they may refuse to engage in activities they used to enjoy.

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A guide for caregivers

Supporting Management of Mental Health Disorders

Research has shown that behavioral therapies as well as cognitive-behavioral therapies are an effective treatment for anxiety disorders and depression. If seeking treatment for your child, ask whether a mental health clinician provides this type of intervention and has experience working with youth with developmental disorders. It is appropriate for caregivers to be involved in this type of therapy to the extent that they learn how to support and reinforce use of coping skills, social skills, and adaptive behavior.

Strengthening the Family

It is important to foster **positive parent-child interaction** at an early age. Communicate openly, honestly, and respectfully with all family members. Some families find benefit in scheduling a weekly or biweekly meeting to discuss both individual and family successes, as well as to problem solve any challenges.

Siblings should be given age-appropriate psychoeducation on developmental disorders. Siblings can often serve as advocates. They may also benefit from receiving individual support. This may come in the form of participation in support groups and/or counseling.

To promote **sibling harmony**, identify individual time that can be spent with each child. Taking a healthy perspective and discussing positive aspects of parenting a child with ASD helps model prosocial interactions.

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Self-Care for Caregivers

Caregivers need to take time to engage in self-care. Strategies for **stress management** include regular physical activity, adequate sleep, daily relaxation (for example, mindfulness), time with friends, and acceptance of experiencing a range of emotions and that there will be some challenging days. It is important to have individual hobbies and to maintain a multidimensional identity.

Some caregivers find support groups or discussion forums to be helpful. National support options include:

- Nancy's House
 - <https://nancys-house.org/>
- Complex Child E magazine
 - <https://complexchild.org/>
- Caregiver Action Network
 - <https://www.caregiveraction.org/family-caregiver-toolbox>

Just as we recommend that your child go to annual well-child checks, so should you! It is important to take time for yourself to maintain positive physical and mental health.

Research has shown that there are commonalities in **resilient caregivers**. Some of these characteristics include:

- viewing the child with unique needs as a source of joy,
- having a sense of accomplishment for providing the child with the best care,
- deepening of perspective on what is important in life,
- and an increased sense of spirituality.

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Call to Action!

Your child's mental health

How does your child act when they are happy? What are some healthy things that your child can engage in daily to promote their happiness? Jot down some thoughts here:

How does your child act when they are sad or depressed? What kinds of warning signs should you and others who are in your child's life be aware of? Jot down some thoughts here:

Mental Health

A guide for caregivers

Make a list of professionals you can speak to if you are worried about your child's mental health (such as pediatrician, school educator, etc.) here:

Your mental health

What makes you happy and content? What kinds of self-care can you engage in every day (even if just for two minutes) that can promote your happiness and well-being? Jot down some thoughts here:

Who can you talk to if you are in distress or need some support?
Make a list here:
