

What Parents can do while waiting for Mental Health Services



Mental health problems are common in children and youth. Unfortunately, it can take months or more for an appointment with a mental health professional. Even though this can be a frustrating time, there are many things you can do to help while waiting for mental health services.

1. Keep in touch with your mental health service providers

- **Ask to be put on a cancellation list** (if your provider has one). This gives you the possibility of being seen more quickly. Make sure they have all your contact information. If it turns out you can't make it to an appointment you are offered at the last minute, you can just turn it down and ask to still be kept on the cancellation list.
- **Let your mental health service provider (or family doctor) know if your child or youth is getting worse.** If you can't contact them directly, call your family doctor who will be able to do so on your behalf. Your child's place on the wait list depends on many things, including your child's needs, so be sure to let your service provider know if your child or teen:
 - is feeling more depressed or anxious
 - has more trouble functioning at home or school
 - expresses thoughts that life is no longer worth living
- **Ask about support services.** Many organizations have information about 'wait-list supports', such as reading material, public information sessions, or support groups.
- **Always keep your family doctor or pediatrician in the loop.** If your child or youth's needs increase, he/she may be able to advocate on your behalf. Ask your doctor if he/she is aware of other helpful mental health services.
- **It's a good idea to politely check in with the wait list administrator every so often.** Occasionally, parents have waited months for a call only to discover that they were never on the wait list at all, that crucial information was incorrect or missing from their file, or that they were on the wrong wait list.

2. Get informed

Most of us know very little about mental illness, so try to educate yourself. This will improve your ability to cope with and care for your child, and will also help you engage more productively with your child's mental health professionals and know what questions to ask. There are many excellent websites that can assist you, as well as informative books and videos. Be cautious: avoid chat lines and make sure you're consulting reputable sites.

www.ementalhealth.ca

A bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.

www.cheo.on.ca

Be sure to check out information on health topics from A-Z and the mental health information section.

www.offordcentre.com

The Offord Centre for Child Studies in Hamilton, Ontario

www.kidsmentalhealth.ca

Children's Mental Health Ontario.

takingcare.knowledge.ca

The Knowledge Network streams free videos for teens and parents on mental health promotion. Created in part by the National Film Board of Canada, the videos include perspectives from teens, parents, and health professionals and topics include psychosis, drug abuse, depression and anxiety.

www.teenmentalhealth.org/blog

Dr. Stan Kutcher, Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre in Mental Health, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

www.iwk.nshealth.ca

The IWK Children's Hospital in Nova Scotia provides free access to streaming videos of parenting advice seminars recorded by mental health professionals. A wide range of child and youth mental health topics are covered. Look under: Care Services > Psychology > Psychology for You (Parenting Videos).

www.pleo.on.ca

Our website lists many additional resources and allows you to subscribe to our newsletter, which will notify you about upcoming courses, resources and community events for parents.

3. Keep a journal

Record any events, situations, behaviours or worries that you want to share with your service provider. We love our children and imagine that we won't ever forget what they're going through, but this can be a very confusing time, and a clear, chronological written record helps immensely. Keep a record of their medications as well. Your child may see more than one health care provider over time, and comprehensive medical records are not necessarily transferred from one doctor or system to another.

4. Prepare for the first appointment

Make notes of the issues and questions you want to discuss with the service provider. Your journal will make this easier. This kind of preparation will help you describe the progression of your child's illness, which is very important. Otherwise, you may tend to simply focus on your child's current situation. Let your service provider know that you not only have information to share, but also questions to ask.

5. Connect with a support group

Other families who have experience supporting their own child can be a great source of knowledge about community resources that they have found helpful. In Ottawa, PLEO offers several parent support groups. Please call our office or visit our website for more information.

6. Explore other mental health services

Even though you might be waiting for services at one agency, you can still contact other services. Most agencies will list their referral criteria and processes on their websites - if not, you can call their intake group.

School services. Many high schools have mental health resources available including psychologists, mental health nurses and addictions counsellors. Contact your child's principal or vice-principal to access these services. Ask about the MHAN (Mental Health and Addiction Nursing) program, which serves students aged 3 to 21. Schools may also be able to help refer you to other services.

Employee Assistance Programs. Your employer may have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which usually provides at least a few meetings with a mental health professional. These services are confidential, and your employer will not know if or why you contacted EAP.

Private services. Wait lists are more common for publicly funded services like hospital clinics or mental health agencies (this care is covered with your health card). You can make an appointment with a psychologist or social worker in private practice if you can pay the fee yourself or if you have work benefits that will cover the cost. You may not have to wait at all to see a professional in private practice.

Professionals in private practice:

Psychologists and psychological associates. They are qualified to assess, diagnose and treat mental health conditions, and focus on talk therapy (psychological treatments), and do not prescribe medications. Some universities provide mental health services to their community at a reduced cost, often based on income. To find services:

www.ottawa-psychologists.org

Ottawa Academy of Psychology

www.crhspp.ca

Canadian Register of Health Service Psychologists

www.cpo.on.ca

College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388

Social workers. They do not diagnose mental health conditions, but they can provide counseling and therapy to help you and your family cope with mental health concerns. To find a social worker, visit The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers website at www.ocswssw.org

Certified counsellors. In many places, anyone can call themselves a therapist or counsellor without formal training. To make sure your counsellor or therapist is truly qualified, check out the Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CACP) website at www.ccacc.ca

Psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are medical doctors with several years of extra training in psychiatry. They are able to assess, diagnose and treat mental health conditions (with medications or without). Ask your family doctor or pediatrician if they can refer you to a psychiatrist in private practice. Psychiatrists are covered by your provincial health plan, and you do not have to pay 'out of pocket' for their services.

7. Understand the services available to you if there is a crisis

There are different levels of crisis or emergency services and they vary depending on the age of the individual and the nature of the crisis.

Emergency

If you are in immediate danger or facing a life-threatening situation, call 911 immediately. If you need urgent medical attention go to your nearest hospital.

Crisis Support

For children and youth up to 18 years of age

call 613-260-2360 or 1-877-377-7775 (toll free for Eastern Ontario) or e-mail: crisis@ysb.on.ca

For youth over 16 years of age

call within Ottawa 613-722-6914, outside Ottawa 1-866-996-0991 or visit the website at www.crisisline.ca.

Walk-in Clinics

If you have concerns but it is not an emergency, there are mental health walk-in clinics where you can receive support.

For children under 12

Crossroads Children's Centre operates a walk-in clinic.

www.crossroadschildren.ca

For youth over 12

Youth Services Bureau operates a walk-in clinic. www.ysb.ca

8. Support your child or youth

Warmth and support from parents makes all the difference in the world to children and youth, though they may not always show it, and the evidence is clear that strong family support leads to better outcomes for youth, whether they are dealing with a mental health problem or not.

Spend quality, one-on-one time with your child or youth.

'Quality time' is different for everyone. For at least 15 minutes, and more if possible, have a conversation or do something together, whether it's cooking a meal, going for a walk, or playing ball or a card game. When it's just the two of you, your child or youth will find it easier to open up and share their feelings, experiences and concerns. Focus on making this a positive experience for both of you, because as you increase your positive interactions, you may find that the negative ones - like arguments - decrease. If you can, pick activities that you're good at. In this Internet age, where kids always seem to be more adept than their parents at anything to do with technology, it's important that they sometimes get a chance to see that their parents are capable, trustworthy, and ready and willing to help.

Connect before correcting. When your child or youth shares their feeling, validate these feelings by showing that you've heard and you care, so that they'll feel loved and understood. Don't criticize or minimize their feelings. Try not to jump in with advice,

even though this can be difficult, because this might cause your child to feel like closing up again. If they think they're going to get a lecture every time they share their thoughts and emotions, then they won't confide in you. Ask your child how they want to be supported. For example, you might ask "do you want me to just listen, or do you want my advice too?" And when you feel you must give advice (if, for example safety is an issue), you can respectfully ask "can I just give you my feedback on this?"

Understand that some behaviours may be symptoms of your youth's mental ill health. For example, a person dealing with depression can feel very unmotivated, and may not show much initiative or interest. Sometimes they stop wanting to do things they have always done and used to enjoy. Parents may be tempted to interpret these new behaviours as signs of laziness or uncooperativeness. Other times it's anxiety that can trigger a person's withdrawal from family and friends. Try to be patient and understanding during this period, and be sure to communicate any changes to the professionals when you see them.

Don't be discouraged if you feel that your child or youth is trying to detach from you. Many healthy children and youth are very peer-focused, and it can sometimes feel as if they value their friends and peers more than their parents. Children and youth struggling with mental health problems are often no different, so try not to take this personally. Your child or youth still really needs you, even if they aren't aware of it - even more so if they have mental health issues. Remember, their young friends are still growing up themselves, and they can't provide that unconditional love we parents try to give our children. It's the parent of caregiver who can truthfully say, "It's okay of your feeling this way. I'm here for you and always will be. We'll get through this together"

9. Help your child or youth cope with stress

People with mental health issues can find that coping with stress is especially difficult, but it's part of everyday life, and learning to cope with stress in a positive way can actually help people overcome their mental health issues. Help your child or youth to:

Identify sources of stress. Children or youth often feel stressed by:

- school (teachers, schoolwork)
- friends and peers (sometimes bullying is a factor)
- parents and siblings ((for example: family conflicts, financial troubles, separation and divorce, or family illness)

Find ways to cope with stress in positive ways, such as:

Distraction. Suggest that your child or youth get some exercise or even just go for a walk. They might want to listen to their favourite music. The idea is to do something enjoyable that will help them redirect their focus.

Relaxation and Mindfulness. Talk to them about breathing deeply and trying to very consciously relax their muscles. They can attempt to calm their minds by trying to let go of their thoughts and focus on the moment. Some youths might consider taking up yoga or meditation.

Solving the problem. In other words, face the stress and make a plan to deal with it

- If school work is a stress, this could mean getting tutoring, helping your child organize their work or having them tested for learning disabilities. You may choose to meet with the school to explore your options.
- If the problem is conflict, listen carefully to your child or youth's point of view. You can then help them develop a plan to resolve it, and coach them on how to communicate assertively. If the conflict is with you, set an example: Listen respectfully, communicate positively and try to come up with a solution that works for everyone. If there is family conflict, family therapy may be helpful.

Helpful resources for coping. Please visit the 'Resources' tab on our website at www.pleo.on.ca to find other tips on coping with stress, as well as some helpful websites.

10. Healthy living makes a difference

No matter what mental health issue your child is struggling with, it's important to keep in mind that their physical, emotional and spiritual health still matter. **Try to make sure your child or teen:**

Gets enough sleep. Lack of sleep can contribute to or even cause mental health issues, while healthy sleeping habits contribute to increased mental health.

Eats healthy meals and snacks. Be sure to include plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit.

Is physically active. Children and youth need about an hour of physical activity each day, and if this happens outside, so much the better. The evidence suggests that exercise can have significant antidepressant effects.

Has limits on 'screen time'. Too much screen time doesn't leave enough time for physical activity or 'face time' with family and friends, and it can interfere with sleep. Try to set a limit on the amount of time each day your child or teen spends watching TV, using social media or playing video games. Please don't try to 'ban' anything, and do have a discussion with your child or teen about setting reasonable limits that everyone can live with.

11 . Take care of yourself too

As parents we want to see our children thrive. When our child is struggling it creates great stress and often puts additional pressures on the family. Waiting for mental health services increases the stress. It's always hard to find time for yourself when you are busy looking after your children and of course that challenge is much greater when one of your children has mental health issues. However, you won't be able to do your best for your child unless you take care of yourself as well. Remember what they tell us when we fly: we have to put our own oxygen mask on first and then take care of our child, no matter how much our instinct tells us to do the opposite.

Avoid isolating yourself. Because of the stigma around mental illness, parents often tend to withdraw, and avoid telling even trusted friends or family about their child's struggles. Sometimes their child has asked them to keep their situation a secret. Certainly your child has a right to privacy, and to know that you won't be disclosing their illness to their social circle, if that is their wish. But for you to stay well, and sustain the strength you need to care and advocate for your child, and you have to stay connected with others, because this is your struggle as well. In other words, it's a balancing act. If you have a family member or friend you can rely on, turn to them for the confidential understanding and empathy you need for your own survival. Think about joining a confidential community support group, where you'll meet other parents in similar situations. Call helplines like ours, where your privacy is respected, you can choose to remain anonymous, and you can talk as long as you need to. And remember that safety always outranks confidentiality.

Ask family and friends for help and support. Sometimes you might need someone to listen, but other times you might just need help with childcare or household tasks. Perhaps someone could occasionally do your grocery shopping or other errands. Not all of these people need a complete explanation of your child's situation: it's perfectly okay for you to just say that your child or your family is struggling right now. One way or another, we've all been there. Often people want to help, but they just don't know how, so don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

Get professional help. Speak with your family doctor, or see a mental health professional if you suspect that you may have anxiety, depression or mood issues, or if you're beginning to feel that you're having trouble coping.

Connect with self-help and peer support groups. There you will learn about other community resources, get practical feedback from other parents and caregivers, and connect with other people who share your challenges and understand your feelings. In Ottawa, PLEO offers a number of monthly support groups. Call our helpline or visit our website for details about our groups and other community support.

Parents' Lifelines

Families for child & youth mental health



613.321.3211

Ottawa

1.855.775.7005

Renfrew County – Prescott Russell
Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry
North Lanark-North Grenville

About this brochure

This brochure was developed in collaboration with the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO). Special thanks to Jeff McCrossin (social work trainee), Joanne Curran (Hopewell Eating Disorder Support Centre) and CHEO's Mood and Anxiety Clinic.

Disclaimer

Information in this brochure may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

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