



what parents can do while  
**waiting**  
for mental health services

Often, when seeking help for your child, you can face the challenge of dealing with wait lists.

Even though this can be a frustrating time, there are many helpful things you can do while waiting for services.

## 1 Keep in touch with service providers

**Ask for your child to be put on a cancellation list.** Make sure the service provider has your contact information.

**Inform the mental health service provider or family doctor if your child's situation worsens.** 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 things deteriorate.

**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's needs increase, your family doctor may be able to advocate on your behalf or suggest other helpful mental health services.

**Check in with the wait list administrator every so often.** Occasionally, parents have waited 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

Try to improve your understanding of mental health challenges. This will improve your ability to cope with and care for your child, as well as help you engage more productively with your child's health professionals, by knowing what questions to ask. There are many excellent websites to assist you, as well as informative books and videos. Call our Parents' Helpline for help finding the best resources for you.

## 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. A clear, chronological written record can be of great help. 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 always 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 and this kind of preparation will help you describe the progression of your child's challenges, which is very important. Otherwise, you may tend to 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. PLEO offers several Parent Support Groups, as do other organizations. Call our Parents' Helpline for help finding the groups available to you.

## 6 Explore other mental health services

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

**School services.** Many 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 Mental Health and Addiction services available to students. Schools may also be able to refer you to other services.

**Employee Assistance Programs.** Your employer may have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which can provide a few meetings with a mental health professional at no cost. These services are confidential, and your employer will not know if or why you contacted the EAP.

**Private services.** Wait lists are common for publicly funded services like hospitals, clinics or mental health agencies (these services are covered by OHIP). However, you may not have to wait if you can afford a psychologist or social worker in private practice, or if you have employment benefits that will cover the cost.

## 7 Understand available crisis services

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 or a loved one 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](mailto: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 [crisisline.ca](http://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.

## 8 Support your child or youth

Warmth and support from parents make all the difference in the world to children and youth, though they may not always show it. The evidence is clear that strong family support leads to better outcomes for youth.

**Spend quality time with your child or youth.** 'Quality time' is different for everyone. Have a conversation or do something together, whether it's cooking a meal, going for a walk, or playing a game. When it's just the two of you, your child will find it easier to open up and share their feelings, experiences and concerns. Try to make this a positive experience for both of you. As you increase your positive interactions, you may find that the negative ones - like arguments - decrease. If you can, pick activities that you are good at.

**Understand that some behaviours may be symptoms of your child's mental health challenges.** For example, a person facing depression can feel unmotivated and may not show much initiative or interest. They may stop wanting to do things they have always done and enjoyed. You may be tempted to interpret these new behaviours as signs of laziness or uncooperativeness. Other times, anxiety 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.

**Connect before correcting.** When your child shares their feelings, 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

we've been there,  
**we get it**  
and we can help



advice, because this might cause your child to close up. If they think they're going to get a lecture every time they share their thoughts and emotions, 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 (e.g. safety is an issue), you can respectfully ask, "Can I give you my feedback on this?"

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

It can be tremendously stressful when your child is struggling. You don't have to do this alone, we are here for you.

## 9 Help your child cope with stress

Individuals with mental health challenges can find coping with stress especially difficult. Help your child to:

**Identify sources of stress.** Common stressors include:

- 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 your child get some exercise or even just go for a walk. Their favorite music may help. The idea is to do something enjoyable that will help them redirect their focus.

Some behaviours can be symptoms of your child's mental health challenges. We are here to help you find your way to a better understanding.

**Relaxation and mindfulness.** Talk to them about breathing deeply and trying to direct their attention to relaxing their muscles. They can attempt to calm their mind by trying to let go of their thoughts and focus on the moment. Yoga and meditation are great activities for this.

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

If schoolwork is a stress, a tutor may help your child organize their work. Perhaps have 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'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 together that works for everyone. If there is family conflict, family therapy may be helpful.

## 10 Healthy living makes a difference

No matter what mental health challenges your child is facing, it's important to keep in mind that their physical, emotional and spiritual health still matter. Try to support your child to:

**Get enough sleep.** Lack of sleep can exacerbate mental health challenges, while healthy sleeping habits contribute to improved mental health.

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

**Be physically active.** We all need physical activity each day, and if this happens outside, so much the better. Evidence suggests that exercise can have significant antidepressant effects.

**Limit 'screen time'.** Research is now showing that too much screen time can interfere with quality sleep and has a negative effect on anyone, disrupting healthy attachment to family and friends, while not leaving enough time for healthy activities. Try to set a daily limit for your child, while encouraging face-to-face conversations and outdoor activities when possible.

## 11 Remember to take care of yourself too

It can be tremendously stressful when your child is struggling, and difficult to find the time or feel justified in creating time for yourself. However, you won't be able to do your best for your child unless you take care of yourself as well.

**Avoid isolating yourself.** Because of the stigma around mental health, parents often tend to withdraw, and avoid telling friends and 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, however, for you to stay well and sustain the strength you need to care and advocate for your child, you have to stay connected with others. It's very much a balancing act. Think about reaching out to a trusted friend or family member, or joining a confidential community support group, where you'll meet other parents in similar situations. Call helplines like PLEO's, where your privacy is respected and you can talk as long as you need to.

**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.

The evidence is clear that strong family support leads to better outcomes for youth.

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 connect with others facing similar challenges. PLEO offers several Parent Support Groups, as do other organizations. Call our Parents' Helpline for help finding groups in your community.

A grayscale photograph of a hand holding a smartphone. The phone's screen is dark, and the text 'helping parents of children facing mental health challenges find their way forward' is overlaid on it in a mix of teal and yellow colors.

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children facing mental  
health challenges  
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This information is offered from a Family Peer Support perspective - PLEO's collective family experience over the past twenty years and collaboration with health, education and social service providers. *It is not meant as a substitute for medical advice.*

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