

Mental Health Guide for High School Students

As a high school student, it's important to take charge of your mental health. This guide offers easy, effective tips for self-care, plus resources for getting help when you need it.

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We won't sugarcoat it. High school is tough and a lot of teens struggle with mental health issues as a result. In fact, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five teens (aged 13-18) are experiencing a mental health condition. For LGBTQ teens, this number is three times higher. And these mental health issues can become chronic (meaning they follow you into adulthood); 50% of chronic mental illnesses develop at age 14.

While that's a pretty doom-and-gloom way to start, there are two bits of good news here. One, if you're experiencing a mental health issue, **you are not alone** and, two, **you can do something about it**. Our guide will give you some things you can do right now that will help you deal with the pressures of high school, practice self-care, and live your best life.

*If you're a teen who's having thoughts about suicide, seek help immediately by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK** or texting the Crisis Text Line by **texting 'TALK' to 741741**.*

Ways to Stay Mentally Healthy in High School

When signs of a mental health issue start rising up in you -- [anxiety](#), mood swings, eating issues, feeling withdrawn -- it can be really scary. Significant life changes, family issues, academic pressure, politics, relationship problems, and

money can all be causes of mental health issues, but they can also make your symptoms feel even more daunting.

So daunting, in fact, that many tend to use unhealthy coping behaviors to try and make it all go away. Some teens ignore it, some turn to substance abuse, and others act out or harm themselves. None of these are long-term, healthy ways to [be your happiest self](#).

The following tips will help you stay on top of your game mentally and help you develop healthy habits that can make all the difference right now, in college, in your career, and in your personal life as an adult. Some may not work for you and that's okay; give them a chance and adopt the ones that do make a difference.

- **Pay attention to your sleep.** Sleep is huge. Not getting enough sleep or [not getting good sleep](#) has been linked to all sorts of mental health issues in teens by a bunch of scientific studies. Most of those studies came to the same conclusion: if you're of high school age, you need more sleep (and more quality sleep) than an adult does. Most of these studies say you need **at least eight hours of shuteye during the school week and over nine hours on the weekends**.

For some, that's easier said than done. It always seems like as soon as your head hits the pillow, you're replaying everything that happened during the day or being flooded with anxious feelings about tomorrow. Here are some ways to stop that from happening and improve the quality of your sleep.

- **Set a Sleeping Routine.** Going to sleep at the same time every night and waking up at the same time every day is important. When you do this, your brain will know to start releasing the chemicals that make you sleepy at the right times every night and give you a dose of happy wake-up chemicals every morning.
- **Limit Your Screen Time.** It takes a ton of willpower, but turning your phone, tablet, computer, and TV off at least 30 minutes before you go to bed can make an enormous difference in how fast you fall asleep and how well you sleep. Try setting an alarm for 30 minutes before bed; when it rings, you turn off all screens and focus on something else instead (listening to music, reading, meditating, yoga, showering, etc).
- **Limit Caffeine.** Caffeine might be your instant happy juice, but it might also be keeping you awake at night. Try giving yourself a cut-off time for your last caffeine fix of the day that is several hours before you head off to bed.
- **Make a List for Tomorrow.** If you find yourself lying in bed at night worrying about what tomorrow holds, first ask yourself if there's anything you can do about it right now. If there isn't, set it aside mentally and know that you'll handle it when it comes up tomorrow. Experts also say it can be helpful to make a to-do list for

the next day, which appears to help our brains let go of the anxiety about impending events.

- **Get a Little Melatonin Help.** Melatonin can also help; teen brains don't release this sleep-inducing chemical until much later in the night than adult brains (typically 11 pm to midnight). Melatonin supplements can help gently rewrite that schedule when used properly.

Exercise

Exercise may be the single most important tool for staying mentally healthy in high school. It's linked to nearly every tip on this list:

- **It can help you get better sleep**
- **It's fantastic for 'me-time' (and also [socializing](#))**
- **It'll force you to hydrate**
- **It can improve your diet by upping your cravings for healthy food**
- **It's been linked to higher self-esteem, [reduced stress](#), and [increased happiness](#)**

The beautiful part of exercise is that it comes in so many forms. It doesn't have to mean joining your high school football/softball/basketball team (although those are awesome options for the right kind of person) or strapping on a headband and going for a run (although that's awesome for people who love running).

There are tons of other ways to [exercise](#):

- **Dancing**
- **Skateboarding**
- **Hiking**
- **Swimming**

- **Walking the dog**
- **Biking**
- **Weight lifting**
- **Completing YouTube challenges**

There's only one overarching guideline -- **you should aim for 60 minutes of physical activity every day**. How you do it is up to you. Whatever you decide,

here are a few tips to make it happen:

Make It Fun

In the long term, if you pick something you don't enjoy, you're not going to stick to it. Instead, focus on things you like. In other words, if you hate running, don't run. If catching Pokémon gets you up and active, do it! If the gym is your happy place, go for it! If live-action role-playing helps you get your sweat on, grab your foam sword and fight!

Build Slowly

If you're not used to a lot of physical activity, ease into it -- start where you are and don't judge yourself. If that means a 10-minute walk every other day, that's okay. Do what you can and push yourself a bit every time. Add a minute to that walk every week and you may be surprised how quickly your body adapts.

Use Technology

Smartwatches and fitness trackers are an amazing way to keep tabs on your progress and keep yourself motivated. Social media can be an awesome motivational tool, also -- there are fitness groups for all levels on Instagram, fitness influencers all over TikTok, and an insane amount of workout channels on YouTube.

Video games count, too; as long as you're out of your chair and moving, you're doing something positive for your mental health. You might also want to hit up

the app store; you'll find all sorts of apps that let you raise money for charity or earn Amazon gift cards just for exercising.

Reward Yourself

It's okay to give yourself a reward for working out, especially as you hit your goals. For minor goals (like hitting an hour of exercise), that might be small incentives like some TV time or a (slightly) indulgent snack. For larger goals (like exercising 20 hours in a month), it could be a trip to the movies, buying something, or getting a boost to your allowance. Talk to your parents about your goals and see if they're willing to participate in a reward system.

Limit Social Media Time

Social media can be a great thing. It can help you develop an identity, communicate with others, and find a place to fit in. And since there are all sorts of specialty groups on social media, it can actually help you stick to healthy behaviors like exercising, improving your diet, and talking about your feelings. Unfortunately, social media can also be incredibly damaging, exposing you to bullying, increasing peer pressure, and creating unrealistic views of other people's lives. Several studies have concluded that teens who use social media for more than three hours a day or at nighttime experienced much higher levels of depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and dissatisfaction with life.

That's why it's important to use social media in a responsible way. Here are some tips that can help:

- **Limit the amount of time you spend on social media, especially passive scrolling**
- **Disengage from social media for at least an hour before going to bed**
- **Don't participate in bullying, spreading rumors, or posting damaging content**

- **Ask a parent, brother, sister, or friend to help you stay accountable**
- **Join groups or follow people who are a positive influence on your life**

Hydrate

There's a fantastic way to [manage stress](#), anxiety, and mild feelings of depression and it's really, really simple: drink more water. Dehydration saps your brain's energy (it's made up of 75% water), inhibits its ability to produce serotonin (the 'happiness' chemical), and increases stress in your body.

Here are some signs you're dehydrated:

- **Increased hunger**
- **Bad breath**
- **Dryness (chapped lips, dry skin)**
- **Headache**
- **Cloudy thinking**
- **Rapid heartbeat**

So, the obvious question is how much water should you be drinking? The answer depends on a lot of factors including stress levels, gender, weight, exercise levels, and the climate. The general rule of thumb, however, is **15.5 cups (124 oz.) of water per day for boys and 11.5 cups (92 oz.) for girls**. You'll want to increase that amount if you're still experiencing some of the symptoms of dehydration or if you've been exercising.

If you have trouble drinking plain water, try adding flavor with a squeeze of lime, some store-bought water flavoring drops, or a seltzer. Avoid drinks with lots of sodium in them: diet soda and energy drinks are two of the biggest culprits.

Find Balance

Finding balance means equipping yourself with tools that help you understand your feelings, reduce stress, and center you emotionally. Two of the greatest tools we have for this are **yoga and meditation**.

There are several stigmas out there about both of these practices but we're here to tell you that they're wrong. Yoga and meditation are about:

- **Paying attention to yourself and the world around you**
- **Cutting out unhelpful thinking patterns**
- **Practicing good breathing techniques to help alleviate anxiety**

They aren't religious, and you don't have to be an oddball to use them to better your life. In fact, athletes like LeBron James use them to get stronger and perform better, artists like Lady Gaga use them to foster creativity, and influencers like Emma Chamberlain use them for, well, fun!

Yoga

Getting started with yoga isn't hard. There are literally millions of beginner videos on YouTube that will run through all the yoga basics you need to know in order to get started. All of them use different styles, also, so you don't have to bend yourself into a pretzel or be drenched in sweat to get the benefits.

Meditation

Meditation is easy, too. There's no need to cross your legs, hum, recite a mantra, or touch your fingers to your thumbs. All you need is a comfortable place to sit,

some headphones, and an app. Meditation apps give you options to choose from like:

- **Reducing stress**
- **Sleeping better**
- **Getting more creative**
- **Performing better in sports or the arts**
- **Finding calm**

Many will start at just five minutes, giving you techniques for breathing, helping you let go of stress, and offering healthy coping mechanisms for everyday life.

Start Planning

We realize that, as a teen, you may not be able to plan your life down to the minute, especially with parents and teachers dictating what you do with most of your time. You can, however, **write down a schedule for yourself** that includes things like school, extracurriculars, sports, and other external obligations, plus the things you plan to do with your free time.

Why do this? There's a bunch of evidence out there that says the simple act of making a scheduled plan (even a loose one) helps our brains put aside the stress associated with those tasks. In other words, by taking an inventory of what our days look like, our brains are satisfied that they'll be taken care of and they back off on the stress chemicals that scream 'look how much we have to do!'

If you're the type who likes to physically write things in a planner, that's awesome! There are also boatloads of apps that will help you create schedules in super-easy ways. They'll help you stay on task throughout the day, give you the leeway to switch things up on the fly, and offer built-in 'me-time.'

Get Me-Time

Spending time by yourself is critical for self-care, whether you're an introvert or an extrovert. There are so many benefits:

- **It helps you pursue the things you're interested in**
- **It gives you time to reflect**
- **It helps you get in tune with your emotions**
- **It helps you establish your independence from your parents**
- **It helps you develop your own identity**

It's important to do this without guilt and without sacrificing things that you need to do (homework, family obligations, a job, etc). Striking that balance can be really hard (even adult struggle with this a lot), but here are some ways to make it easier:

- **Let parents know that you need time to yourself to stay mentally healthy**
- **Learn to say no to things if they will get in the way of your me-time**
- **Make alone time activity-based (drawing, reading, playing a game)**
- **If you're busy, focus on quality -- 20 minutes can do the trick**

Talk It Out

When you're struggling with a mental health issue, it's natural to want to retreat or not share your feelings with someone. After all, they might judge you, not

understand you, or not accept you. When we're vulnerable, we want to avoid all of those things.

Usually, our fears about this are overblown. Your friends (and even your parents) may know exactly what you're feeling because they may have gone through it themselves. Even if they haven't, people who love you and care about you will be understanding and help you talk through it. And sometimes **all you need to improve your day is someone to listen.**

If you don't feel comfortable talking things out with a friend or family member, consider a mental health chat app like [7 Cups](#), where you can talk to trained listeners anonymously and for free. There are teens on there who understand what you're going through; they offer advice, welcome you into support communities, and just listen.

Change Up Your Perspective

Life often feels pretty monotonous. Wake up, do school, eat lunch, do extracurriculars, finish homework, eat dinner with the family, rinse and repeat. When we get caught in that cycle, it's easy to lose perspective and start feeling down. That's why it's a good idea to **change it up when you can.** As a teen, your options to do this might be limited but there are still ways to get out of your head for a while.

For example, many people find that **helping others is an almost instant perspective-shifter.** It works on several levels -- it makes you too busy to sit and stew over your situation, it connects you to other people who share your interests, and it can give you a self-esteem boost by making you feel like a good person. And, perhaps more importantly, it can give you a sense of purpose.

Others find that **escaping into nature** can change their outlook. Going for a hike, reading a book in the park, or sitting by a body of water may be just what you need to zoom out from your current circumstances.

Improve Your Diet

Most of us don't eat right and that can make us feel bad. Diet has a tremendous effect on your energy levels, your mood, and your ability to study. Researchers conducted a big study called the SMILES Trial (Supporting the Modification of Lifestyle in Lowered Emotional States). In it, they took people with fairly bad diets who were experiencing depression and divided them into two groups: one continued eating the same way and the other started eating healthier. Not surprisingly, three months later, a third of the group that ate a better diet reported that their symptoms were gone, which is a huge difference, statistically speaking. It may not always be easy to eat the way you want to. Since they buy the groceries, your parents might decide what you eat. If you're at school during the day, your options are fairly limited and, if you're buying food yourself, it's natural to go for the cheapest option, which is usually not a healthy choice.

As much as you can, though, **you should work toward a more [balanced diet](#)**: eating more whole grains, fruits, lean proteins, and vegetables and less sugar, fried food, and processed foods.

Here are some ways you can do that:

- **Talk to your parent(s) about buying healthier options**
- **Get involved in the grocery shopping**
- **Make your own lunches and bring them to school**
- **Switch out sodas for seltzer**
- **Opt for a piece of fruit over-processed food snacks at least three times a week**
- **Start checking the labels on the things you eat (watch for high sugar, trans fat, and sodium)**

- **Eat a healthy breakfast for better focus, faster metabolism, and fewer cravings**
- **Reach for more veggies (especially dark green, red, and, orange ones)**
- **Don't skip meals (you'll be less likely to grab unhealthier food during the day)**

Mental Health Strategies for Dealing with COVID

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has been difficult for the entire world, but it's been particularly hard for teens. One minute you were going to school, hanging out with friends and participating in all the activities that keep you happy and healthy and then the next minute, you're locked up at home with no independence and facing the prospect of missing out on things like your final semester before college, that killer role in the play, the major school dance, or the sports season -- all major milestones in your life.

After all that's happened, it's natural to feel down, angry, and bored. Aside from all of the strategies we've talked about above -- exercise, hydration, nature, sleep -- here are a few things you can do to stay sane as we weather the coronavirus storm.

- **Get the Facts about COVID-19.** There's so much misinformation out there about the COVID-19 pandemic, especially if your main source of news is social media. Avoid exposure to conspiracy theories and rumors by educating yourself on the facts. One of the best places to do that is the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).
- **Protect Those Around You.** You've probably heard this one a lot over the last year but that's because it's incredibly important that we protect one another. The best way to keep friends, family, and your community safe is to wash your hands for 20 seconds at a time several times per day, wear a

mask when you're in public, and practice physical distancing. Knowing that you're doing your part can help you worry less about your loved ones staying healthy.

- **Make a Routine and then Break it.** Make a routine that includes the same wake-up time, homework time, exercise time, family togetherness time, and alone time every day. It's important to be as consistent as possible with this schedule -- experts tell us that flowing aimlessly from hour to hour during the day contributes to feelings of stress and anxiety, which is true, up to a point.

Following a routine every day of your life is a sure-fire recipe for boredom, so it's also important to break your routine every once in a while.

Try for an 80/20 split -- 80% of the time you follow your routine and 20% of the time you throw away the schedule! Of course, this may be something you work out with your parents; talk to them and see how you can fit your routine into your family's routine.

- **Name It.** Sometimes we feel upset and we don't really know why. Often, just naming the emotion can help us rise above it and feel better. It can take practice to look inside and know what's going on, so try this -- the next time you feel upset, ask yourself: **What am I really upset about and what emotion am I experiencing?**

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If you have trouble naming it, there's a really handy tool called [Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions](#) that makes it easier to point to an emotion and go, 'yep, that's it!'

- **Avoid Upsetting Content.** Distressing TV and movies, somber music, and bleak books can be vital works of art that help us understand ourselves and our place in the world. However, if you're feeling down, you may want to back off the darker stuff for a bit. Look for more uplifting content like light comedies, energetic music, and books that give you a boost.

Mental Health Resources for Teens

Taking charge of your mental health is courageous but it's important to know that you don't have to do it alone. There are incredible organizations across the country that are here to help. Some are designed for when you're in crisis and others are there to help you hook up with cool people who have the same goals as you or find resources for becoming your best self.

Taken from

<https://study.com/resources/teen-mental-health-resources>