2 Stresses affect mental health

Common, everyday situations often create stress. This includes everything from a loud, unexpected noise to arguing with someone in your family, to preparing for a test in school, to misplacing your keys. Usually, the stress comes and goes, and we go on. We don't all experience the same moments of stress in our lives, or react the same way to them, but we all experience stress. While extremely stressful situations or terrible events can cause trauma that people often need help addressing (see page 34), mostly, stress is something we "just deal with."

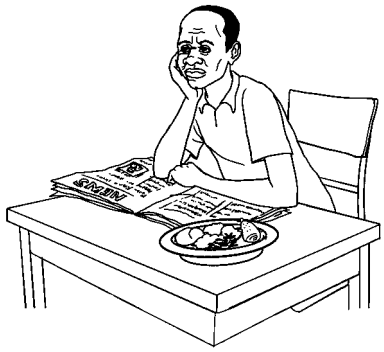
Many people live with ongoing, harmful stresses:

- Working several jobs to get by, having too little income or a lot of debt.
- Abusive or unhappy relationships.
- Challenges related to rough times as a child, or young adult, or for people who had to change countries or move to a new place to find safety.
- Discrimination because of how you look, who you are, or from ideas others have about you. These can be based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, body size, customs, language, or other reasons, including mental illness. Discrimination can be direct and dangerous but also can happen in small ways that wear away at you over time.

Stresses come regularly from illness, work, or family life, and for children or young people they often come from school environments and online interactions. Even exciting events, like a new baby or starting a job, can be stressful because they create big changes.

People respond to too much stress in different ways. Some people get angry more easily while others are overcome with worry and doubt. Stress makes it impossible for some people to make decisions, while others are pushed to make snap decisions without thinking them through. People may use alcohol and other drugs to try to lower their stress, which may lead to additional problems.

If you are one of the many people who "just deal with" stress, it can help to identify the methods to beat stress that work best for you. Many people find overcoming a challenge leads to more confidence that they can do it again next time. Helping each other get through stress and stressful times can bring relief, and when group actions or supportive social programs remove some of the stresses altogether, this lightens the load people carry.



Stresses can take the joy out of life.

But you don't have to face stress alone.

Stresses affect the body

When stress or fear happens suddenly, you can feel it in your body—your heart beats more quickly and your breathing may change. And then, as the stress fades, you often feel your body relax. Short-term stress is common for everyone and not always a problem. In fact, responding to and getting through stress is often a rewarding part of our emotional health (see "Stress and anxiety are not always harmful," page 33).

When someone is stressed all the time, it can build up and affect them more. Sometimes the stress in our lives doesn't directly affect our thoughts and feelings, but the body shows it is there. Common conditions such as trouble sleeping are often tangled up with stress. Stress can also show up as body aches and pains or illnesses we can't explain another way.

People often get used to stress and don't notice how it is affecting the body, even when the stress is enough to cause harm.

Stresses that continue for a long time (for example, from a high-pressure workplace or an abusive relationship) can cause both mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, as well as physical signs, including headaches, lack of energy, and stomach upset or other intestinal problems. Ongoing stress can lead to long-term health problems including high blood pressure and heart disease, diabetes, and problems affecting the immune system. For example, racism and other types of discrimination in the US cause very high rates of stress-related physical problems in Black communities.

What we notice about our bodies holds clues about our emotions and gives us ways to manage them. While our bodies often hold stress, they also often hold the keys to reduce stress—that is why many people consider sports, stretching, walking, dancing, and other physical activity to be "stress busting." There are many techniques to use our own body awareness to reduce stress, including acupressure, finger-holding, reflexology, breathing techniques, and other practices (see examples on pages 21, 31, and 140).

HOW TO Use finger-holding to manage strong emotions

Techniques involving pressure points, pressing on specific points on the body, can help make people aware of what is happening inside them.

Using finger-holds in challenging moments can bring peace, focus, and calm. This calming can give you time to think of the right response or action to take. Finger-holds can also be used for relaxation with music or before going to sleep, to release the problems of the day and bring peace to body and mind.

You can do this for yourself or you can hold the fingers of someone else who is angry or upset. The finger-holds are helpful for crying children or tantrums. They can also be used with people who are very fearful, anxious, sick, or dying.

1. Start by wrapping either of your hands around one finger of the opposite hand. Choose one finger to focus on a source of stress, or go through all 10 fingers one at a time. People often focus on each finger being connected to a specific feeling, such as:

- The thumb for sadness or grief
- The index finger for fear or panic
- The middle finger for anger
- The ring finger for worry or anxiety
- The little finger for low self-esteem or trying too hard

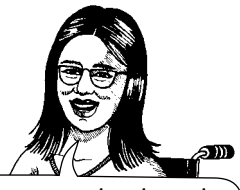
2. Hold each finger with a firm touch for at least 1 to 2 minutes and up to 5 minutes. As you hold each finger, you often feel a pulsing sensation.

- Focus on your breath moving in and out of your body and simply feel the feelings instead of thinking about what events or life circumstances caused them.
- Breathe out slowly, releasing the feelings and problems. Imagine the negative feelings draining out of your finger into the earth.
- Breathe in a sense of harmony and healing.

Emotions can be like waves of energy moving through the body and mind. You can make a channel of energy connecting each finger to a particular emotion or part of your body.

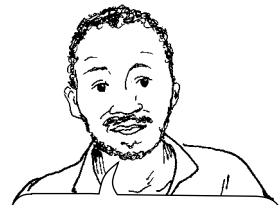
Dealing with all the stress

Because it is impossible to completely avoid the things that cause stress, people learn to handle them enough to get through each day. By connecting with others going through similar situations, you can lessen stress by talking it through or by sharing activities such as exercise, meditation, community service, singing, or creative arts. Working with others to change conditions in the community can help people feel better now while also preventing mental health problems by removing or lowering stresses that affect everyone.



We taught the 4th and 5th graders meditation techniques and have 10 minutes daily of quiet time. The kids now look forward to it.

Twice a month I pack grocery bags at the food pantry. I'm not saying it will end my neighbors' poverty, but at least they won't be hungry while we work toward bigger solutions.



My neighbor and I grew up with the same music. We get together, play our favorite songs, and sing along loudly!

I teach a class on mental health for community health workers from different backgrounds. I always ask: "What do people in your family or culture do when things are difficult?" Many people mention tea—brewing tea or inviting someone to join them for tea. Another common response is practices involving water, such as relaxing in water, bathing, or foot-washing. Of course, watch out for practices that may cause harm, but always ask about the traditions that work for people already. We often hear new ideas we each want to try!

Food, exercise, friends, and nature

You hear about it a lot and it's true: nutritious food, exercise and movement, being with other people, spending time outdoors, and getting enough sleep all help prevent many physical and mental health difficulties as well as help us manage them better. This is why so many community groups and health programs make these a focus.

HOW TO Pick a health habit to try out or do more of

Is there something you already like to do that you know is good for you? For example, walking in the neighborhood, eating fresh fruit, drinking more water, getting a little extra sleep, spending time outside—even when it's cloudy and especially if the day is sunny. Think of this as your secret weapon to lessen stress, change what's on your mind, and make you stronger. To start, make your goal small enough that you know you will achieve it. Doing one thing well usually makes people see they can continue or even do more of it.

Doing it with others can make it more fun. Maybe you can make a pact with another person or a group to check in about how each of you are doing with your goals. Not all goals will work out, but if you find something that feels good and is doable, you will see that you can change things in your life. Try different ideas.

- Walk 2 or 3 times a week, even if it isn't very far. Try some errands on foot, or you can get off the bus or park the car so you walk a little extra each day.
- Get together to cook or eat with someone, trying a new food or recipe.
- Drink more water—plain water, water with lemon, or unsweetened herbal tea—with meals and during the day.
- Agree with a friend that you'll each go to sleep 15 minutes earlier than normal, or, if your phone is keeping you from sleeping, agree to put your phone in a different room a few nights per week.

If starting a new health habit on your own or with a friend isn't working, see if a community or senior center offers workshops or classes—often free or low cost—and choose something that sounds interesting or fun to try out. Try to interest a friend in going too.

Help others think about their goals by asking more about them. Almost no one likes being told what to do but it is OK to encourage someone to come up with their own ideas of what could work.

To change our health habits, we often need more than personal strength and initiative—we need communities where having healthy habits is not so difficult! Think about what keeps people in your community from living a more healthy life and what could make it easier.

- If the water in school cafeterias tasted good and no soda was sold, would more kids fill up their water bottles?
- If parks and bike and walking paths were kept clear of trash and felt safe to use, would more people use them?
- If there was a community garden, affordable neighborhood farmers' market, or community meal program, would people eat healthier food?
- Are there historical or cultural traditions that used to bring people together which could be revived?

Stress makes diabetes, high blood pressure, and other chronic illnesses worse. And living with these conditions can cause more stress. I reverse this negative loop that creates stress by treating my diabetes, including eating well. That helps with the diabetes but also improves my energy level and mood.

Our city park has always funded a summer outdoor yoga class. This year we mixed it up by finding community members who do other movement—hip hop dance, belly dancing, tai chi, and "bring your baby" stretching. More people started to come and the teachers we hired were happy more people could try out their classes.

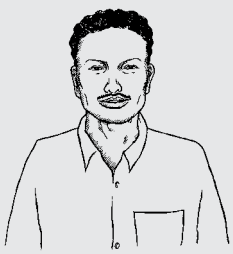
It took us a year to make a tule canoe as our Indigenous ancestors used to. We learned to be in relationship with tule by harvesting it, drying it, and then working with it to make the canoe. We came together every few months to pray, to remember Indigenous technical knowledge, and to share stories and songs. We made plenty of mistakes to laugh at, but it was enormously satisfying to see our finished boat could float!

Where I teach, the high school kids talk a lot about their anxiety, often while eating cookies or chips and drinking soda or energy drinks! We got the school to offer more nutritious snacks, with less sugar and caffeine. For kids who make the switch, many of the signs that look and feel like anxiety go away. The kids organized a campaign to get everyone to carry refillable water bottles and the school to improve the water fountain filters.

Being there for people

Along with improving where we live, we can create communities in which people are aware of others' needs and offer more emotional support. You don't need special training to feel concern for another person and start a conversation. Although a private, quiet place to talk might be ideal, any available time or place is probably OK. Ask if they have a moment to take a walk or join you for a cup of coffee or tea. Sitting together on a playground bench while they watch their children may be an opportunity to check in a little, even when their life is very busy.

I knew my neighbor has family in a country going through violent times, though I didn't know much about it. One day I asked after her family. She looked so sad and then relieved—saying she is terribly worried but few people know this is on her mind all the time. Now we exchange a few words whenever we see each other, and I pay more attention to the news reports about her country.



When worried about someone—maybe we think they drink too much alcohol—it is tempting to speak about it directly. But if the person doesn't experience it as a problem, then either it isn't a problem or, as long as they don't see it as a problem, they won't want to deal with it. I test the waters first. For example: "I've noticed you seem to stop for a drink after work before coming to our meetings. Is that something you want to talk about?" If they react negatively, be ready to let it go. You have planted a seed and maybe they will come back to you about it in the future.

Construction workers die from suicide 5 times more than from jobsite accidents. Our tough-guy worker culture means that if you are hurting, you hide it from everyone—at home and at work. I always remind my crew: "It's okay to not be okay" and tell them to look out for each other. We need to make it okay to ask how people are and okay to answer honestly when you are asked.

I worried that my elderly neighbor was lonely during the day. I started giving her a ride to the neighborhood church on my way to work twice a week. She now sings in their choir and helps maintain their garden. It reopened her world and she always thanks me for it.

HOW TO Offer emotional support

If someone lets you know they are going through a rough time or if you think they are, it's common to not know what to do or say. The good news is that just being there for someone can be extremely helpful. In fact, for some people just knowing that someone is thinking about them, someone cares, someone will visit now and then, can make a real difference in their mental well-being.

- Once you feel ready to listen, check if the person is OK with you asking.

"I've been wanting to know how you are, is it OK if I ask?"

"If you are OK talking about it, tell me how it's been going for you lately."

If the person is not ready, mention you're available if they change their mind.

- Listen more than you talk and let the person talk freely. Use questions that get the person talking instead of questions where the answer is "yes" or "no."

"What did you do then?"

"Tell me more about that."

"And how did that feel?"

- Offer empathy and reassurance. Be affirming when appropriate.

"That must have been very difficult."

"I can see it was a hard situation where you did your best."

"Sounds like you learned a lot from that."

HOW TO Offer emotional support *(continued)*

- Stay calm and be patient.

"Take your time. We are not in a hurry."

"We can just be quiet with these feelings for a minute."

"Thank you for sharing that."

- Do not make assumptions or minimize what they are feeling or experiencing. Choose words that show you are open to and not judging what they share.

"I appreciate that you can share that with me."

"That isn't something I know much about, so I'll learn from whatever you can explain about it."

"I am sorry to hear people keep telling you, 'It's no big deal.' I can hear that it was a big deal."

- Focus on not giving advice. It is tempting to think you can help people fix their problems, but they are the only ones who can decide how to handle their situation. It can take a lot of restraint not to give them solutions! Instead, ask about what seems to work for them already and what they want to do about their situation. Offer to help find more information only if you know you will follow through. Remember, sometimes listening is enough.

"What are you thinking you want to do?"

"Say more about what worked for you last time this happened."

"That's a great idea. Do you know what is stopping you from trying that?"

"Do you want help looking into some options for that?"

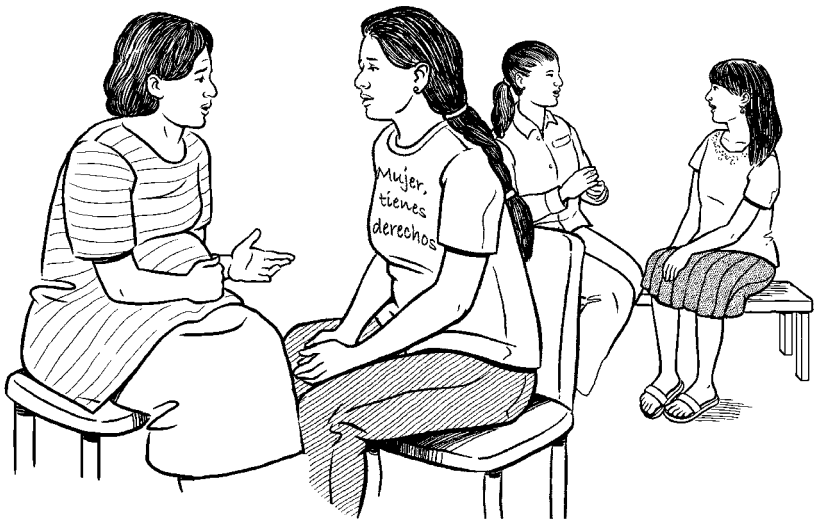
"You don't have to decide right now. This is something you can think about."

Peer counselors strengthen ties and build resilience

Finding and training people who have had similar experiences or are from a specific community to help others with similar backgrounds or situations is called peer counseling. Peer counseling often works best because the counselors understand the experiences of community members and are trusted differently than outside professionals.

Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) is a California-based organization of immigrant Latina and Indigenous women workers. Members speak Spanish but many also speak Mam, a Guatemalan indigenous language. MUA's mission is to increase their members' personal and community power, and use civic-political participation to achieve social and economic justice. Members are directly in charge of MUA advocacy campaigns, and each person gains skills by lobbying, calling representatives, giving testimony, and taking to the streets to stand up for workplace health and safety and women's rights.

MUA's practice is centered on mutual support. MUA has helped hundreds of women get out of situations of domestic violence, and trains members to gain leadership and legal advocacy skills. The MUA peer counseling program, *Clínicas del Alma*, builds leadership and is a part of healing. Trained members are available to support others, especially new participants, providing a space for each woman to speak freely about what is on her mind without fear of judgment. The organization is a space where respect, confidentiality, trust, and empowerment are woven into everyday interactions and all aspects of carrying out the work.



ACTIVITY Practice being a good listener

If your group members are new to each other, talk about how to take in other people's experiences while keeping your heart and mind as open as possible.

It can take practice to set aside our own ideas and to listen without assuming we know more than what we are being told. This is especially true when people have different experiences due to where and how they grew up or live now.

Practice listening. The group divides into pairs. One person talks about a topic for 5 to 10 minutes, picking from a few prompts. For example: "Talk about something that is challenging in your life," or: "Describe an issue the community is facing." Their partner listens without commenting except to encourage the speaker to say more. As a listener, show you are paying attention with your expressions and by facing the speaker.

Then the two people switch roles. When they are finished, they consider how well it worked. They ask each other questions like:

- *What did I do that made you feel I was listening?*
- *Did anything make you feel I wasn't listening closely enough?*
- *When it was your turn to listen, what was hard about it?*
- *If you wanted to start responding while you were listening, how did you stop yourself?*

Then have a general group discussion about ways to best show listening and concern. Discuss how listening sometimes includes talking, such as asking questions, sharing experiences, and saying, "Thank you for sharing that," or "I understand."

Remember, when you do not understand something, you can ask the person to explain more.

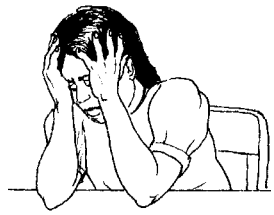
Variation. To have the group reflect on the natural tendency to want to give advice, have the listener give lots of advice about the problem presented, even to the point of being pushy. When the partners talk about it afterwards, they can say what it felt like to get advice. Then try again, focusing on giving support, not advice.

Anxiety

Everyone feels nervous or worried from time to time. When these feelings are caused by a specific situation that can be fixed—perhaps your rent and electricity bill are due, but then your paycheck arrives in time—they usually go away soon afterwards.

For situations that you know make you anxious, learning how to make yourself feel calm can help (see "Regain calm," page 31). If the feelings continue or happen too frequently, you may need help to identify and address what is causing the worry and anxiety. This could be planning ahead (for example, to avoid anxiety about being late for appointments because buses run behind schedule, you could plan to leave earlier) or coming up with a new strategy (for example, to worry less about your child's safety, you could organize with other parents so all the children on your block walk home together). Where the cause of concern is related to larger injustices or problems that make you worry for yourself or others, don't stay alone with it. As a first step, find and talk with others who are experiencing the same situation or feelings.

Feeling worried all the time



If you stay worried or always fear the worst will happen, and there is no specific situation that is causing your worries, then you may need help from someone who has experience counseling people about anxiety.

Constant worry may come with other signs:

- feeling tense, restless, or nervous
- difficulty thinking clearly
- sweating, headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains that get worse when upset
- difficulty sleeping

My brother is so afraid of germs that he no longer leaves home and rarely sees people. We are talking with him—does this feel like a problem to him? If he wants to get out more, what would make that easier?

When you are able to relieve or control the anxiety, often these other signs lessen or disappear.

HOW TO

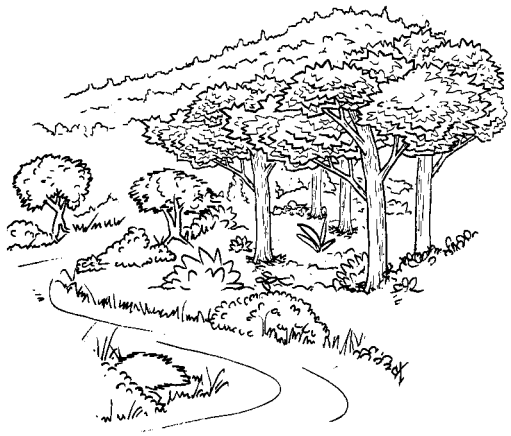
Regain calm: Find what works for you

There is no one strategy that calms everyone and stops anxiety, fear, panic, or anger from taking over. In fact, some people who feel anxious find that deep breathing makes them more anxious! Try different techniques and decide which work best for you. Some people count beads on a necklace, squeeze a ball, stroke something textured, smell a soothing scent, press their fingers on the body's pressure points, or use finger-holds (see page 21). Spend time with pets if that gives comfort or draw on your traditions or faith practices (prayers, mantras) if these help you. Practice calming exercises in group settings and with children. Learning what others find calming can add ideas to your own list.

Breathing. Deep breathing and breathing exercises help a lot of people calm down quickly. It can be as simple as breathing out a little longer than breathing in: breathe in for 4 seconds, then breathe out for 6 seconds. (See page 140 for another breathing exercise.)

Distraction. If helping someone, ask them to describe: 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can touch, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste. Doing something to refocus your thoughts can help the body settle down more quickly.

Visualization. Choose a calming image— gentle waves lapping a sandy beach, towering trees filtering sunlight in a quiet woods, a kitten with soft fur snuggled on your lap—and practice keeping it in your mind. Then bring that image to mind in moments of stress by closing your eyes and concentrating on it. Longer visualization stories can also move your mind to a calmer state. For example, picture yourself beside a beautiful river where you are slowly dropping leaves or petals into the current. Imagine they are worries or problems as you watch the river carry them away.



Panic attacks

A panic attack is a severe kind of anxiety. Panic attacks happen suddenly and can last from several minutes up to a half an hour. In addition to the signs of anxiety (see page 30), you may feel your heart pounding, have chest pain, have difficulty breathing, and feel that something terrible is about to happen.

If you have repeat panic attacks, practice slow breathing at other times so you are prepared to use it when needed to calm yourself. Similar to using medicine to lower a fever, slow breathing can help you stop a panic attack but it does not resolve the problem that caused it.

HOW TO Help someone during a panic attack

Help the person regain control of their breathing. Help them focus on deep, slow breaths, inhaling through the nose and exhaling out of the mouth.

Counting slowly to 4 while breathing can help a person breathe more slowly. Be patient—it might take some time for the person to feel calm and gain control of breathing.

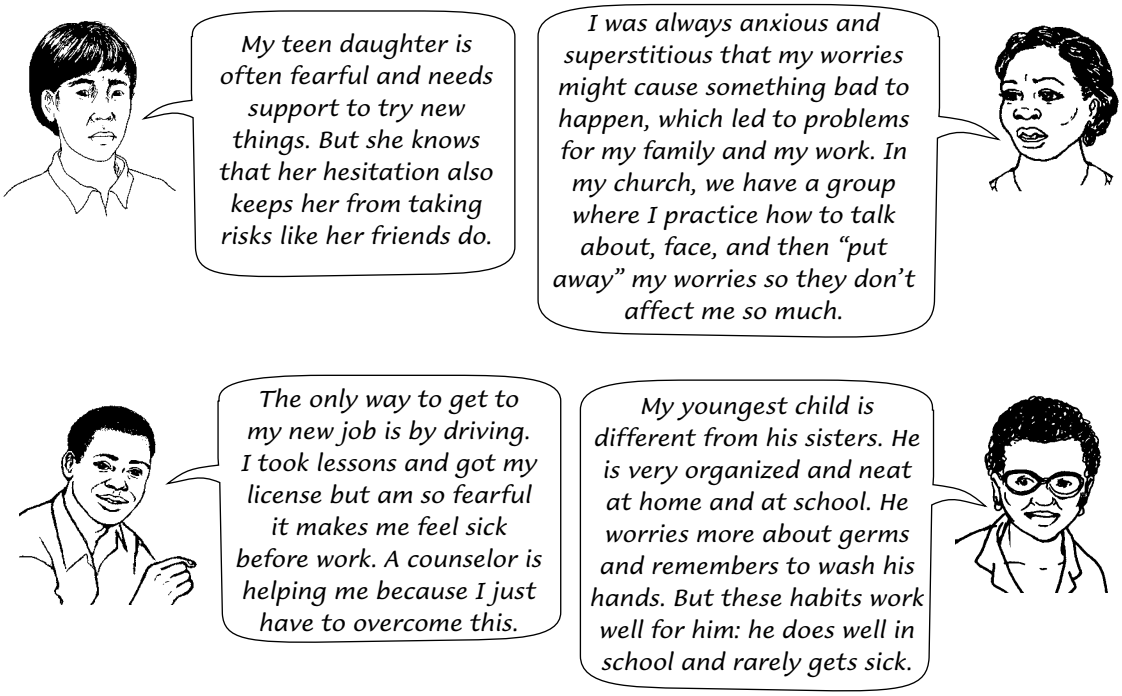
Another way to interrupt a panic attack is to hold an ice pack, a package of frozen food, or ice cubes in the hand, or to drink ice cold water.

Especially when a person is older or in poor health, it can be difficult to tell the difference between a panic attack and a heart attack. Often heart attacks are triggered by physical exertion, and their chest pains intensify more slowly and last longer than a panic attack. If you're not sure, do not take a chance: call 911 or go to a hospital immediately.

Stress and anxiety are not always harmful

A student may have trouble sleeping before a test, a worker may feel overwhelmed by a deadline, an athlete may worry before a race, and a community leader may feel her heart pounding before speaking at a big meeting. Sometimes stress and anxiety help us prepare for important tasks. These feelings can help us focus on a goal, make the time to plan ahead, or work especially hard. Knowing how and why our bodies react in these situations can help you use stressful feelings to your benefit. This can help you feel more ready for the situation you are facing.

Find what works for you. Everyone has worries and fears, and how we respond to these is different. Something that is a problem for one person may not be a problem for someone else. The biggest indication of whether a person needs help for their anxiety is how much it affects their daily life.



Part of finding what works for you is accepting how people's brains work differently (this is called "neurodiversity") and celebrating its benefits, such as "outside the box" problem-solving. Where neurodiversity is experienced as a disability, society should do a better job of meeting people where they are. For example, specific sensitivities—to light, noise, new people, or crowds—interfere less with enjoying daily life when there is awareness and support. A shrill-sounding school bell may make a few kids especially anxious but by changing to a softer sound, all the school children will benefit.

Trauma

Sometimes stressful experiences are so overwhelming they cause trauma. Trauma is an emotional or physical response to a terrible event a person saw or went through in the past or is going through now that feels life-threatening to them or others. Examples include being in an accident, abuse in the family, violence, rape, torture, displacement, and large-scale disasters. Trauma can follow:

- a single incident, like a dog bite.
- a horrific event affecting many people, like a mass shooting.
- ongoing or past events, like growing up in a violent home.

Trauma can make a person feel unsafe, insecure, helpless, and unable to trust the world or the people around them, either sometimes or all the time. Trauma recovery can take a long time. An old traumatic experience can still be a problem for someone, especially if they never had help healing. Trauma that happened to one's parents or ancestors can also have lasting impact.

We may know survivors of trauma, even if it is not something they talk about or we are aware of. This includes adults affected by abuse or other childhood injuries, sometimes before they were old enough to understand (see "Violence in families," page 76). A person may remember feeling terror without recalling details of what happened. Or people will remember the events but not remember the feeling of terror, which can make it harder for them to understand their continuing problems. Sometimes traumatic situations are still occurring, and people fear that talking about it could cause them or others further harm. Some people who experienced violence or abuse also were abusive toward others. This can lead to confusion, guilt, shame, anger, fear, and other painful feelings.

Common signs of trauma

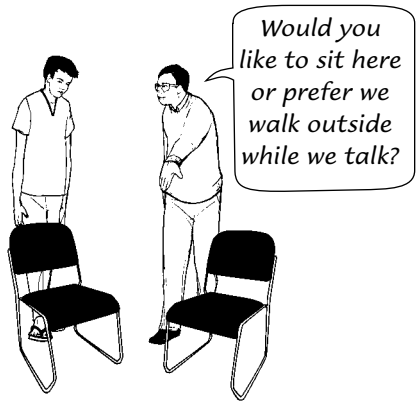
Immediately after a traumatic event, people often experience shock and denial. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, avoiding people, and avoiding anything that reminds them of what happened. They may have depression and physical problems such as head or stomach aches, nausea, difficulty concentrating, nightmares or insomnia, hopelessness, and feeling like nothing matters. These reactions can be part of more lasting effects from trauma known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD, see page 55).

People who have experienced trauma may be jumpy or constantly alert to danger, may feel irritated or angry, and may always have the trauma on their mind.

Reacting to trauma, the mind may try to protect itself by separating body, mind, and emotions, usually experienced all together. The person may remember feeling nothing during the traumatic event, or feel "like I was outside of myself watching it happen from a mile away." The separation between feelings and body can become a habit. It can cause numbness as another reaction to trauma.

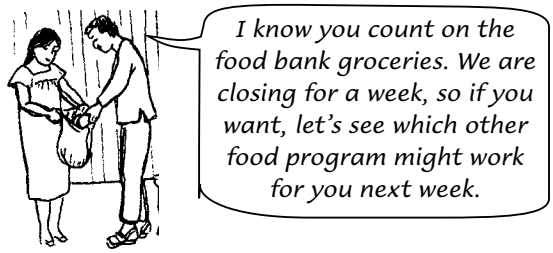
Support people who have experienced trauma

Ways to support people following trauma include:



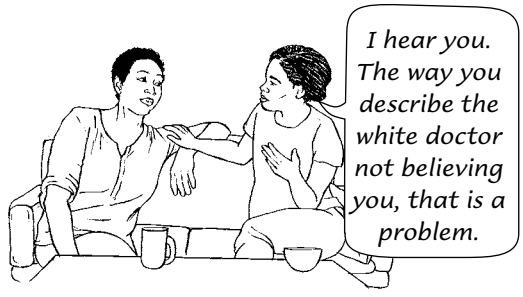
Provide a sense of safety. People can have a hard time recovering their sense of safety even if the trauma is over. The body stays in the state of responding to danger, so the person doesn't feel safe. Help them feel more comfortable. For instance, if they don't feel safe talking with you in a room with the door closed, ask what would feel OK, like a bench in a quiet corner of a park where others are around.

Show you are trustworthy. When people have experienced trauma, they may be cautious with others, always on edge, and fearful of attack or betrayal. You can show you can be trusted by being predictable and by not hiding anything. For example, be on time, avoid promising something unrealistic, do exactly what you say you will do, and clearly explain why you are doing things and why you are asking certain questions.



Give a sense of control. In a traumatic situation, people experience a loss of control. Help people regain control by giving them choices, big and small. Have them decide if, when, and where they talk with you, participate in decision-making, and know what will happen next.

Take it seriously. People who have experienced trauma may feel isolated or out of sync with the rest of the world. Be aware of the conditions that continue to create danger and cause trauma in people's lives, and show you take them seriously. By openly recognizing that racism, for example, targets people for violence or unequal treatment, you can demonstrate that your support is not dependent on them accepting the conditions that caused their trauma.



Group activities to help people living with trauma

For some people, connecting with others who have faced similar types of trauma can be helpful in feeling less alone with their experiences. (Chapter 8, "Support groups," includes ideas about how to set up and run support groups.) Here are some ideas for group activities.

Help people share their experience

When a trauma occurs, people often feel that it shouldn't be talked about. They may feel shame, as if there was something wrong with them that brought it on, or that they are damaged or tainted by what happened. Sometimes they feel no one wants to hear about such a horrible thing, which increases their isolation.

ACTIVITY **Speak the unspeakable**

Facilitating a support group for people who have experienced trauma can bring up a lot for the group and the facilitators. Talk with others who facilitate such groups to decide whether you have the resources and experience to take this on.

When setting up a support group, provide clear information ahead of time about what to expect. That way, people can decide if they are ready to share some parts of what they are dealing with and to hear about other people's traumatic experiences. Follow suggestions on pages 133 to 134 for starting support groups, including establishing group agreements of how information will be kept private and other ways to help people feel comfortable.

If you know everyone feels ready to connect with others with similar experiences, introduce the idea of "the unspeakable." Part of what makes a trauma a trauma is how alone people often feel, as though what happened makes them not belong, that no one could understand or wants to hear about it. For some people, writing, drawing, working with clay, or other forms of expression can work better than talking, so make art materials available during the group. Let people know they can share a drawing or something they've written instead of talking. Or they can pass if they aren't ready.

1. Start by inviting people to mention what can make it hard to talk about their experience. Examples include: "I don't want to think about it," "People don't want to hear about this kind of thing," "People look at you differently when they know this happened to you," "It was worse than words can say." Remind the group that it is OK to choose not to speak.

ACTIVITY **Speak the unspeakable** *(continued)*

2. Share the idea that part of feeling better after experiences like this is finding ways to connect with others—being seen and heard by others—rather than staying all alone with it. Ask the group to name the things that others can do to convey that they are listening/paying attention. Examples include: "Don't look directly at me, but don't act like you are ignoring me either," "Take a moment to think before you respond."
3. Give people a set time (perhaps 5 minutes) to think about the experience that brings them into the group. You might say: "This group is for people who have experienced gun violence in our communities. Take 5 minutes to think, write, or draw on your own about your experience with gun violence."
4. Explain they can choose to talk, read out loud something they wrote, or show a drawing. Suggest they focus on a small piece because it is common when talking about trauma to get caught up and feel like it is happening all over again. Let the group know that there will be a time limit and each person will have the same amount of time to share. As always, people can pass if they don't want to share.
5. Invite people who feel ready to take turns sharing part of their experience, talk, read aloud something they wrote, or show a drawing. After a person has shared, with the group showing they have been listening, ask if they felt heard and how it felt to share before the next person begins. Remind people to avoid commenting on what others share.

6. When everyone who wants to has shared, invite the group to reflect on what people are thinking or feeling after the sharing, or something they learned or appreciated about listening to others. Be clear that people are not being asked to talk about anyone's specific experiences or to give advice.

Activities like these can bring up hard-to-manage feelings. Get group agreement at the beginning to support one another and have a plan to provide additional mental health support if needed. If you are co-facilitating with others, make time to debrief and support each other following a group meeting. If you are facilitating by yourself, plan how you will debrief after the meeting and have support.

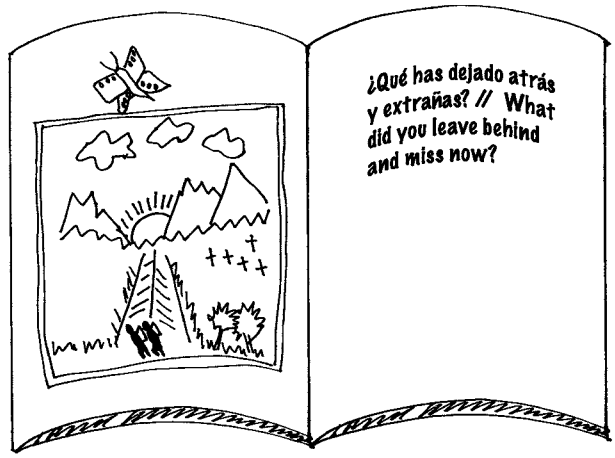
Creating the more complete story

Traumatic events harm a person's way of understanding the world. They might experience this as a spiritual crisis or the end of everything familiar: "Nothing makes sense anymore." Someone who feels as if senseless, horrible things can happen at any time may question if life is worth living.

Creating a fuller story of what happened that puts it in the context of a person's broader, complex life can be part of healing. This may include "speaking the unspeakable" (see pages 36 to 37) as a first step. It may also help to "tell a story" that makes the trauma just one part of a person's life and remind them that their life includes a past, a present, and a future. A group can come together to create stories that provide connection and empowerment through artistic or documentary expression.

Digital stories. *Voices to End FGM/C* has connected with groups in the US and other countries to support survivors of female genital mutilation or cutting. They use storytelling and media production so survivors can tell their own stories on their own terms. The stories are made into short videos and used for social justice advocacy to prevent female genital cutting practices.

Creative storytelling. *NAKA Dance Theater* supports healing circles with immigrant domestic workers through theater, movement, textile art, collage, and other arts. One group produced a theater piece and a color zine to reflect on their experiences of forced migration, violence, and injustice in the workplace. The zine doubled as a journal for future participants by including questions for reflection and blank pages where people could write or draw their own stories.



Help resolve feelings of blame

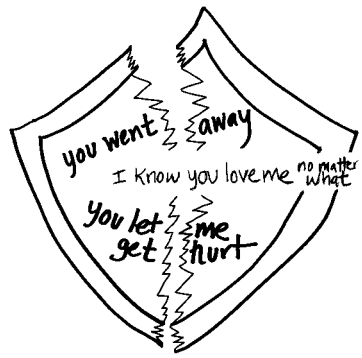
One consequence of experiencing trauma is that people may feel betrayed by their loved ones (or others on whom they depended) for "letting" this happen to them, even if a part of them knows it is more complicated than that. Adults may feel let down by partners, government officials, or neighbors, and children may feel let down by caretakers who did not protect them. Adults, in turn, may feel shame for not having been able to protect a child or a spouse.

Helping people talk about these feelings or explore them through art can be important to healing, to making space for understanding that what happened was not their fault. It can also help people rebuild and strengthen their "protective shields"—the real abilities that we have to protect ourselves and others under ordinary, non-traumatic circumstances.

ACTIVITY Repair the protective shield

This activity can be used to help someone while they think about the person they feel let them down. Or it can be done with the two people involved, such as a parent and child. Start by talking about how hard this activity can be and why it is important. Both sides are hard: feeling let down by a loved one and feeling that we failed someone we love. If you are doing this with a parent and child, help the parent anticipate that it can be hard to hear what the child expresses but that it is important to hear them out completely. Explain that this is part of an ongoing process, not something that can be healed quickly.

1. Invite the person to draw a shield shape.
2. Guide the person to talk about specific things that happened that made it feel like the shield was not working, for example, "You didn't come when I called you," "You left me alone," "You didn't stop the fire from burning down our house." With each statement, make a rip or use scissors to make a cut in the shield.



3. Invite them to look at the broken shield and talk about the thoughts or feelings that come up.
4. Then invite them to list things that represent protection and patch the broken shield. Use masking tape with words written on it or images cut out of magazines showing healing or protection. For example, write, "You come and hold me when I'm scared at night" or add a picture of a watchdog.

As you look at the broken/repaired shield together, invite them to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

Grief and loss

Grief is our response to loss. Loss is always a part of life, and processing loss through grieving is essential to mental health. It is common to feel overwhelmed with grief or go through a long or difficult grieving process with:

- the death or approaching death of someone close.
- the death of someone in the community or a respected person, whether or not there was a personal relationship.
- the end of a relationship, a divorce, loss of a job, being forced to move or losing a home, having a serious or ongoing illness, or adjusting to a disability.
- tragedies that affect many people at once, including violence, displacement, and disasters.

Although all of us will experience grief, different people will show and experience grief in many different ways. Grief has no single pattern or timeline. People in your family or community who have experienced the same loss may go through it very differently. Even after time has passed and it seems the hardest part is over, intense feelings may return. Ups and downs can continue for a long time. As feelings gradually ease, it becomes more possible to live with the loss as life moves on.

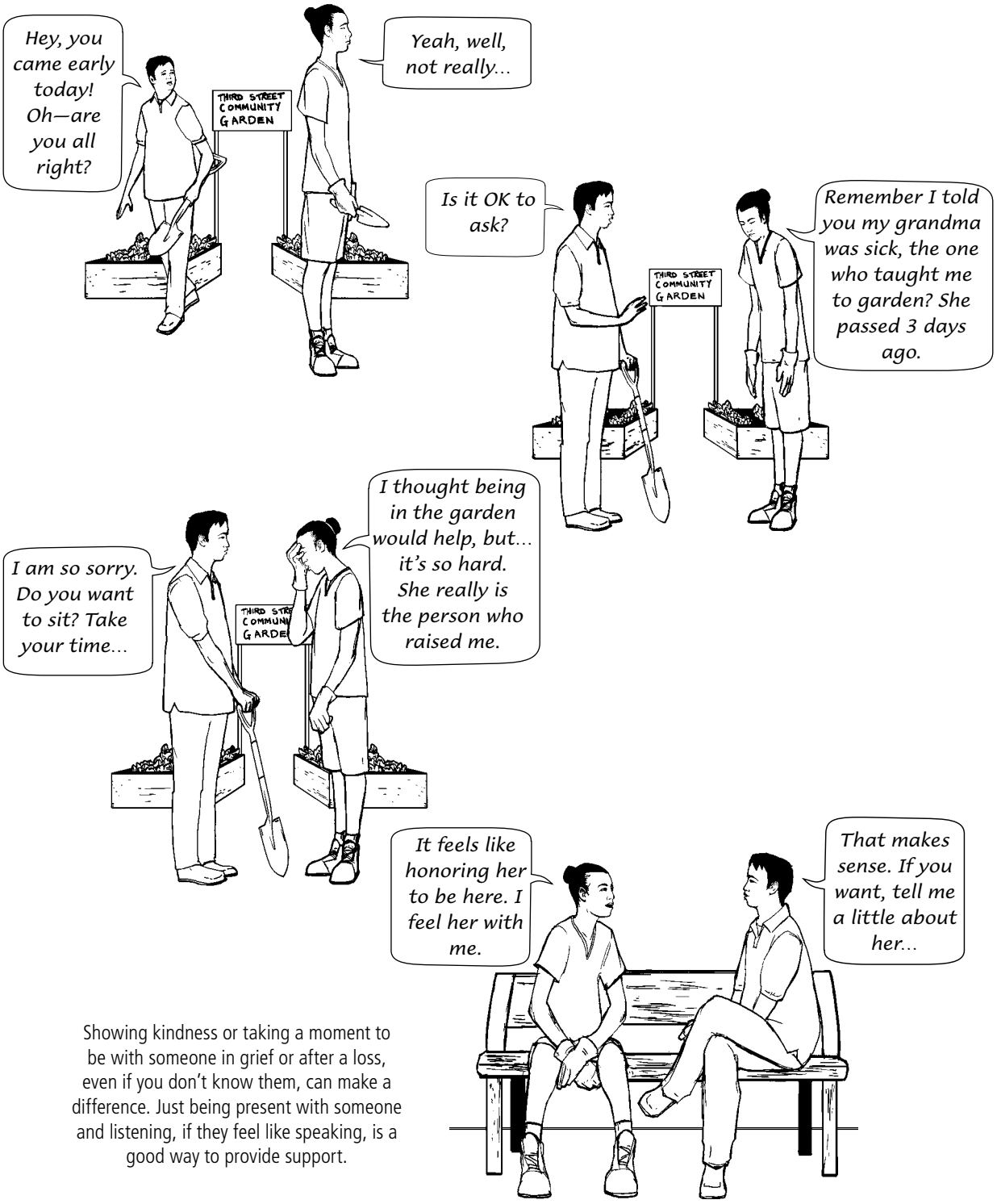
Support for grieving

After a loss, paying attention to your eating, exercise, and rest, and accepting support from others can help you get through the first weeks and months.

Spend time with others who are grieving the same loss or who can relate to yours. Planning or attending religious or other rituals for burial or remembering can bring people together as well as give them something specific to do when they may feel helpless in other ways. Support groups (see page 131) with participants who have had a similar kind of loss can provide a place to work through feelings. As with other situations involving strong feelings, many people find writing, music, art, or other forms of expression to be powerful ways to process grief and loss.

Facing too many losses at once or losing someone when you are experiencing other stresses or hardships needs even more attention. If you had a difficult relationship with the person you lost, you may be working through a bigger mix of emotions which may take more time.

When supporting another person, you can accompany them as they go through pain, but your job is not to take away the pain or tell them when it will go away. Accept their feelings and their timeline. You can be a comforting presence; listen if they want that, and find out if there are tasks or responsibilities you can take off their plate.



Showing kindness or taking a moment to be with someone in grief or after a loss, even if you don't know them, can make a difference. Just being present with someone and listening, if they feel like speaking, is a good way to provide support.

When loss can lead to mental health problems

A blocked grieving process can lead to mental health challenges, especially depression. Emotional difficulties can be created or made worse by ideas about when and how much grief is OK to feel.

Mismatched timeline. People often say or act like you should be "over it" or should "move on" when that does not match where you are. Though calming for some, routine caretaking or meeting other family expectations and household tasks can feel overwhelming when trying to grieve. Society, the workplace, or religious rituals may expect you to grieve at a different pace than your feelings are developing. You may have no or too little time off before you are expected to return to work, or be expected to participate in observances that schedule certain feelings to specific time periods.

Conflicted feelings. Having difficult or mixed feelings about the person before they died, such as being angry at them or feeling guilty you didn't do more for them, can make it harder to feel settled about their death.

Hiding grief. Stigma and shame can block the grieving process. For example, if you lose a loved one to a drug overdose, you may feel shame or anger about their substance use, and this can block your grief.

Avoiding grief. Using alcohol or other substances to manage emotional pain, working too many hours, or relying on television, video games, or online scrolling to avoid thinking about the loss can displace the grieving process. While distraction from grief may be helpful at times, it can also prevent the release that you will feel by going through necessary grieving.

Needing more help. Sometimes, the hard feelings of loss don't get better even after time passes. Painful emotions remain severe and interfere too much with life. If signs of depression (see pages 45 and 54) make you think someone is not recovering from loss or is not able to move through a grieving process even with the help of their friends and family, try to connect them with mental health support. Some common experiences with grief—for example, not sleeping or eating well, losing interest in regular activities—do not always mean a person has depression, however, even though the signs may look the same.

Helping children with loss

Children who lose someone close to them need loving attention, patience, and support as they grieve and find ways to go on with their lives.

Children grieve differently than adults, in ways related to their age. Young children can know when they or someone else in their household is very ill, or when someone has died. They may not understand all the actions and feelings of people around them, but they know when something is wrong.

When someone is very ill or, following an accident or after someone has died, everyone in the family feels distress, including the children. A child may respond by misbehaving, wetting the bed, not eating, not speaking, or acting younger than their age. Children do not decide to do these things; they just have no other ways to show their distress. Helping them learn how to process their feelings will help them throughout their entire life (see pages 85 to 86).

Ways to prepare a child for loss

Many families avoid talking with children about serious illness, death, divorce, and other serious situations because they think that not hearing about such problems protects them. But not talking with children may leave them afraid of what is happening, alone with their fears, and shocked later if there is a death or someone close to them is no longer there.

Talking with a child about these topics can be difficult, but helping children prepare to face a difficult situation or death in the family, and then talking with them about it afterwards, is very important. How a child reacts to upsetting news often depends on how the adults are handling it. When adults appear strong and calm, children often respond that way too.

Allow children to ask questions. Answer their questions honestly, giving them truthful information they can understand based on their age and ability to understand. Share small amounts of information over time as the child adjusts to what they see happening. Let them know any feeling they have is OK to have and OK to tell you about. For example, a child might reveal their worry that it was their behavior that caused a person's illness or accident, and they need to be reassured that is not true. Show them understanding and affection, praise them when they do something well, spend time with them, and give them the attention all children need.

Community support for grieving

Helpful traditions. Ask about and offer ways to connect people to others who share their traditions about death and grief. Especially when someone has moved recently, or is from another country, they may want to reconnect with cultural traditions but do not know where to find others who share them.

Create meaning. Many people find comfort in organizing to prevent others from going through what they did. People may share powerful testimonies, work to change policies, or raise money for a larger cause when their loss is related to a specific illness, type of violence, or accident. Joining with others in common cause creates bonds and emotional support. Creating resources and support networks can bring comfort in knowing that the next person needing the same information will benefit from your experience.

Commemoration and memory. Religious and spiritual practices help many people find comfort or meaning after a loss. People can also create their own spaces or moments in which to remember and honor loved ones. This can be as simple as lighting a candle or finding a beautiful spot for quiet reflection. These occasions can be very personal, shared only by family, or more public. The Mexican and Central American tradition of creating altars to express both celebration and sadness on the yearly Day of the Dead has inspired many beautiful and meaningful altars to individuals and groups, for example, people who were victims of gun violence or partner violence or died crossing the southern US border.

Permanent community-designed monuments, plaques, parks, and gardens mark important sites and keep the memory of people or group histories alive as well as creating places to gather. Monuments can be mobile too. The *AIDS Memorial Quilt* is made of thousands of quilt sections sewn by families and loved ones of people who died from AIDS. As the AIDS Quilt travels, it brings people together to remember loved ones and celebrate life.

Depression

It is natural to feel sad at different times—when a friend or family member is very ill or dies, when you lose a job, when a relationship or marriage ends unhappily, or after a serious event or tragedy. In these situations, sadness can last for days or weeks, or it can come and go (see “Grief and loss,” page 40).

Depression, however, is different than sadness that follows a difficult event or from feeling distressed by the state of the world. Depression is when feelings that include sadness, hopelessness, or numbness are present all the time.

You may have depression if sadness lasts for weeks, if you feel useless or hopeless, or if you don't want to leave the house or even get out of bed. Depression sometimes doesn't feel like sadness at all, but more like being in a fog where nothing seems important. Depression is a serious medical condition that affects a person's life, ability to make decisions, and ability to function.

A person with any of these signs that do not go away may have depression. Even if it is not depression, they will need help and support:

- feeling sad most of the time, feeling hopeless, or being numb to feelings
- sleeping too much or too little
- difficulty thinking clearly
- feeling guilty
- feeling like crying or crying frequently for no apparent reason
- loss of interest in activities that a person used to enjoy, including eating, spending time with others, and sex
- lack of energy for daily activities

Severe depression (see page 54) is when depression lasts a long time and strongly interferes with a person's ability to function. If someone has been talking to you or others a lot about death or suicide, then take them seriously. Try to talk with them to see what kind of help they think they need (see page 65).

Some people are embarrassed to be depressed and do not want anyone to know how badly they feel. But depression is an illness, not a sign of weakness, and is no one's fault. Let them know that you are OK with them as they are and that you believe there are things that could help them feel better that they have a right to access.

Help for someone with depression

Although it is hard to believe while in the midst of it, a person experiencing depression can "get their life back." This is true even when depression is a long-term condition that will likely stay a part of their life. Finding the right support and treatment is key.

Talk therapy. For some people, coping with or healing from depression is helped by counseling or other types of talk therapy, being part of a support group, or working in social change groups.

Movement or touch. Some people are also helped by addressing how mental health is felt in the body. Techniques include focusing on the body during talk therapy and touch therapies that provide insights or release.

Medicines called anti-depressants are sometimes combined with the other types of therapy, especially if symptoms are severe. Figuring out if medicines or other treatments will work and which best suits a person is a process. Having an ongoing connection with the same health worker or team of people allows changes to be made over time to adjust the treatment, medicine, or dose. Medicines do not work for everyone, and the use of medicines can create problems too. It is important to remember: the social conditions that cause many mental health problems will not be fixed by medicines, but by social change. (See more about medicines on page 50.)

Asking even a trusted person for help can be very hard for a person with depression because the condition itself often makes people feel unable to do anything. This makes support from others even more important. It can be a big relief to find someone who knows what depression is like, who can offer accompaniment, and who can help find the services available for people with depression.

Preventing mental distress in LGBTQ+ youth

LGBTQ+ youth in the US are more likely to experience depression and other mental health problems, a situation made worse without support from family and friends. Teachers and school staff may notice challenges faced by students in the process of defining their gender identity and sexuality. School-based efforts, such as Genders & Sexualities Alliances clubs, can provide support, protect students from mental health stressors, and prevent some young people from developing depression. It takes courage, but these and other efforts (see page 121) are especially important when LGBTQ+ communities are under attack.

Build a supportive network of adults at your school so that students have safe places to be. Let the students determine if they want to be activists or if they want to put all their energy toward supporting each other. Even if attendance is low, keep publicizing the meetings. Just announcing it in the weekly school bulletin can be enough to let an LGBTQ+-identifying kid know there are people out there who care.

A place to just be yourself. *Color Splash Out* is a camp program in Texas where young people have fun and also get support as they think about their gender identity. The affordable program is run by counselors with a variety of gender identities who help kids feel OK about being exactly who they are, even if they don't have a name for it yet. Kids appreciate being nurtured in a way they can carry back to other parts of their lives: "Having friends here who get me makes school tolerable when I'm back home."

Pushing back on what pushes people into depression

Conditions that make depression more likely include:

- living with constant stress or worrying about meeting basic needs, such as access to housing, health care, safety, and food.
- experiencing something terrible or that feels catastrophic, such as major loss or severe illness.

Community efforts to lower everyone's stress and insecurity (the focus of Chapter 1, "Building community builds mental health") will improve conditions and make it more likely everyone has someone or a network of people they can turn to when they need support. Strong friendships, knowing your neighbors, and quality workplace relationships are important parts of what keeps depression away. The community-building we can do to push back against isolation and disconnectedness makes a big difference.