7 Mental health during different times of life

Some challenges to mental health arise during specific times in our lives, just as certain opportunities to promote wellness and mental health may be best taken advantage of at different ages. This chapter highlights promoting mental health during pregnancy, for babies and in early childhood, in adolescence, as adults, during aging, and when confronting death.

Babies come into our communities needing so much care. Creating healthy situations and settings for them—in families, neighborhoods, and environments—is central to their well-being and the well-being of our communities. So that is where this chapter begins.

This mural from a farmworker community in Salinas, California, shows large hands embracing and shielding a family in the fields that provide work and food but also exposure to dangerous pesticides. *Hijos del Sol Arts Productions* with the support of *CHAMACOS* painted this beautiful reminder that the entire community can protect people during pregnancy and their babies from environmental harms.

Pregnancy and parenting newborns

Pregnancy, birth, and then caring for a newborn are big life events and people respond with a wide range of emotions to the many changes and challenges. Many people experience this as a positive though complicated time, finding pleasure, pride, and connectedness in becoming a parent. Along with all the joy and positive experiences, everyone needs extra support to get through the more difficult parts of pregnancy and parenting a newborn. After giving birth, a person may experience periods of sadness, exhaustion, and worry. Sometimes they may feel so different that they hardly recognize themselves.

Compared to countries where parents have access to care and paid leave from work, the US lacks support systems for people during pregnancy and after birth, making this time extra stressful. Some situations create even more stress and make mental health problems more likely, such as:

- having mixed feelings about having a child, health challenges during pregnancy, or a very difficult birth
- family problems, including substance use, violence, or lack of support for the pregnancy or parenting
- lack of housing, income, food, or transportation
- lack of access to quality health care because of the high cost, racism, or other types of discrimination
- a baby who is very hard to care for, is born with health problems, or dies at or soon after birth

Ways to make it easier:

- Listen to how the person feels, what they are going through, and any concerns they may have (pages 26 to 27). Take care not to rush in with advice, especially if you haven't been asked to give it. Help people trust themselves and their abilities. Ask about and help them build on whatever strategies are already working for them.
- Make prenatal care and the birth experience as personalized, supportive, and culturally appropriate as possible. Midwives, doulas, and other birth workers may specialize in pregnancy, birth, or the time after birth. In some states, Medicaid will help cover the cost of hiring a doula.
- Organize friends or volunteers to help with meals, supplies, transportation, or childcare. Help for even a short time can reduce stress.
- Get new parents together to share feelings, problems, and ideas about solutions. Regular get-togethers help parents feel less alone, get practical support, and just laugh together.
- Arrange regular home visits and other ways to pay attention to parents struggling with anxiety, sadness, or a lack of energy that prevents them from asking for help or caring for their babies as best they can. In those situations, counseling, medication, or a combination of strategies may be needed to help a person find relief.

Better birth care

What if the process of bringing children into the world fully centered the health and well-being of the person giving birth? *Changing Woman Initiative* (CWI) is a Native American-led women's health collective working in Arizona and New Mexico. CWI's founder, midwife Nicolle Gonzales, saw too many Native American women with bad birth experiences due to Western health care and bureaucracy. "We learned from our relatives' stories about feeling violated, unheard, and invisible to the world."

To meet the needs of Native American women, CWI offers home birth and other care in ways that validate and renew Native American birth practices. CWI's Corn Mother Easy Access Women's Health Clinic offers basic maternal and child health services while supporting mental health by affirming cultural identity. The clinic helps train Native American midwives and birth supporters and provides mother and baby with 6 weeks of personalized follow-up.

Black families experience more birthing complications and worse birth outcomes compared to other groups in the US. This holds true even for high-income families and regardless of the parents' education levels. It is glaring evidence of how historical and current racism damages the physical and mental health of Black people in the US. Committed to reversing these outcomes one family at a time, the non-profit *The Black Doula Project* (TBDP) began as an online movement to create awareness, provide maternal health education, and create support for Black women's maternal journeys. But the group wanted to increase their impact further given the seriousness of the problem: "Black women dying due to maternal complications is not just a sad story; it is a public health emergency."

Known by various names, doula support is a long-honored tradition in Black communities. But the extra cost of hiring a doula can put it out of reach for many families and adds to the perception that hiring a doula is somehow not common for women of color. To make an alternative birthing experience with positive outcomes available to Black women, TBDP began providing easy-to-apply-for grants to any Black family living in Washington, DC, or Baltimore to cover the costs of birth and postpartum doula services. Better birth outcomes should be guaranteed for everyone.

Depression

Many people feel depression and anxiety during pregnancy and after birth, and creating spaces to talk about it can help a lot.

The hormonal changes that happen during pregnancy directly affect your mood and the physical changes of pregnancy can make your body feel unfamiliar. These are some of the reasons why prenatal care is so important—talking about these changes with an experienced health worker gives you a better understanding of how your body and baby are developing and what to expect.

Lamaze (lamaze.org) and other childbirth classes, often provided at low cost or for free, allow a group of people to create community while building confidence about their pregnancies and giving birth. Classes like these can be especially helpful in communities where migration and social changes have disrupted the traditional ways in which knowledge and preparation for childbirth used to be passed down.

Depression is even more common after birth than it is during pregnancy. Because becoming a parent is supposed to be a joyous time, new mothers often feel ashamed about being depressed, thinking it shows they are unfit as parents or might harm their babies. Community workers can help families understand that depression after birth is common, ask how the person is feeling and what they think would be most helpful, and guide them to the support they need.

Depression can range from "baby blues" (mood swings in the first days after childbirth) to moderate or severe depression (see page 54). Any form of depression can be hard to get through but all can be treated with counseling, therapy that takes into account the needs of the baby, medication, or a combination of these.

It's not always easy to tell the difference between common ups and downs and signs of depression or anxiety. Adjusting to life with a baby is overwhelming. New moms may think it's wrong to make a big deal about their feelings, or they have been taught not to complain. So we blame ourselves instead of seeing depression as a common maternity health problem. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, speak up. Good care can prevent depression from getting worse and can help you recover. Do not suffer in silence.

There are many reasons people with a new baby or young children can end up isolated. Limited options for jobs and housing can make it hard to live near friends and family. Politicians talk about self-reliance but often cover up the lack of government-supported community support systems. Because isolation makes depression worse, support groups for new parents can help. So can making it easy to participate with a baby in all kinds of community activities, either by offering childcare or making space for babies and small children to be part of your event.

Anxiety

Someone may experience anxiety for the first time during or after pregnancy, or if they had anxiety before, it may become worse. The emotional and financial stresses around childcare are big sources of anxiety. Local resources like parents' networks that compile and share information about childcare and other concerns of new parents can help a lot. Sharing babysitting with another family or a group of families forming a babysitting cooperative are other ways to take turns watching each others' children.

Make breastfeeding easier

Not everyone is able or wants to breastfeed, but for many, breastfeeding helps protect against anxiety and depression. So why doesn't society make it easier to have the time, support, and places to breastfeed? Why isn't paid family leave available to everyone? Some places even have laws that make breastfeeding harder! Activists involved with "lactivism" promote breastfeeding culture by challenging restrictions on public breastfeeding. "Nurse-in" events bring people together to breastfeed where someone has been shamed or hassled for breastfeeding, including in stores such as Whole Foods, Target, and Walmart.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, artist Jill Miller painted a colorful Milk Truck to create an eye-catching space for breastfeeding and drove it around to celebrate workplaces and businesses that support breastfeeding. Raising public awareness about the emotional and physical advantages of breastfeeding promotes mental health by undoing the stigma of shame and isolation.

Trauma

Some people experience trauma during pregnancy, childbirth, or the weeks after. Trauma can be caused by a very difficult birth, loss of the baby, other medical difficulties or poor medical care, poverty or racism, or violence from a partner or family member. Also, given the intense emotions related to pregnancy, giving birth, and caring for a baby, a person's past trauma may be triggered.

People with traumatic responses (see page 34) during or after pregnancy need support. Help them get counseling, therapy that takes into account the needs of the child, medication, or a combination of these. Groups working to improve access to counseling and other services around pregnancy and birth can push the health system to recognize how much trauma there is in our communities and provide support.

Psychosis

People with psychosis experience a reality not shared by others (page 56). For example, someone may hear voices inside or outside their head that others do not hear, or see things that are not there.

A person may have experienced psychosis before or may experience it for the first time during pregnancy or early parenthood. Someone with a longstanding psychotic condition may be successfully treated with medication or another type of therapy that enables them to parent children successfully. They may need support and advocacy around their rights as parents, for example, the right to use medication to support their mental health during pregnancy even if the medicine poses a risk to the developing baby.

Psychosis that happens for the first time when a baby is born is rare. Postpartum psychosis is a serious condition that appears suddenly, usually 24 hours to 3 weeks after childbirth. The person may experience extreme mood swings, confusion, unexplained behavior, and insomnia, as well as see, hear, feel, and smell things that are not there. If their psychosis includes ideas about suicide or harming the baby or others, this is an emergency. Hospitalization may be needed to keep everyone safe.

Babies and young children

We don't often talk about the mental health of babies, but both their mental and physical health are shaped by the health of their birth parent and community, their caretakers, and everything in the environment they are born into.

We can support infant mental health by supporting their parents, families, and communities in welcoming and caring for a new baby. Making sure that families have sufficient food, shelter, safety, time together, and protection from the stresses of not having those things is very important.

Why is there so much focus on children under 5? While learning happens throughout life, early learning lays the foundation for individual mental health. We learn most when the brain is developing most quickly—during the first 1,000 days of life, a child's brain is twice as active as that of an adult. That's why young children learn more than one language just by hearing them spoken. During this time, babies and very young children learn how to calm themselves, interact with others, and relate to the world in ways that will last their whole life.

Give babies what they need

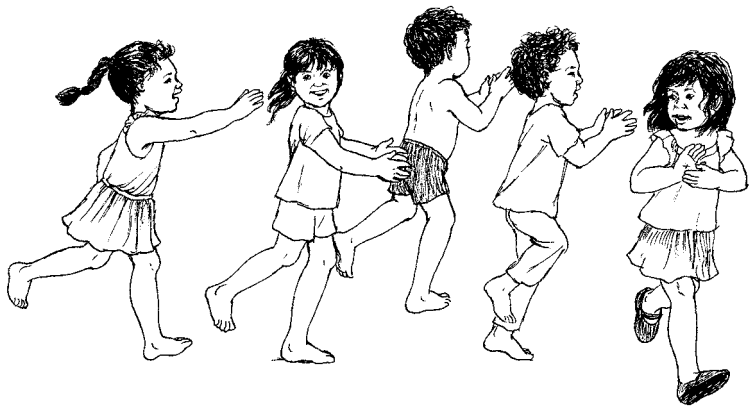
As anyone who has tried parenting knows, it is almost impossible for one or two people to take care of a baby by themselves. In reality, it truly "takes a village." When parents do not get enough support, they can feel they are failures and blame themselves. On the other hand, getting good support improves the mental health and broadens the life possibilities for both the baby and the parents.

All babies need love, care, and attention to survive and thrive. Help parents have the time, energy, health, and emotional support they need to provide that to the baby. People, programs, and policies that help families with food preparation, finances, time off work, care for older children, and responding to health concerns all contribute to making the baby's world healthy.

- **Give parents** the time and energy to be with their baby. When parents get help with meals and looking after other children, the new baby gets more attention. When workplaces and laws guarantee paid time off for new parents—including partners and adoptive parents—time for bonding with a new baby is increased.
- **Give babies** focused attention. Newborns turn to the sound of familiar voices and respond to smiles and facial expressions. Each baby has different feeding, sleeping, and other habits. Spending time together lets babies teach their caregivers what works best for them.

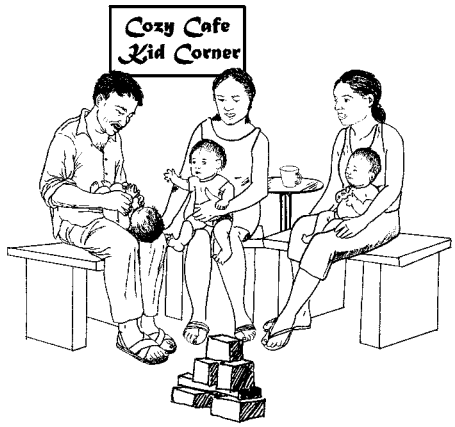
Sing or talk to a baby while you care for her. Respond to the baby's noises and talk about what you are doing. Babies like to copy sounds they hear.

Born to play. Play brings joy and comfort, builds relationships, and is a key part of learning. Watching a young child play and learn is watching growth happen. When they can safely explore the world and interact with others, play is a child's most accessible and powerful way to learn.

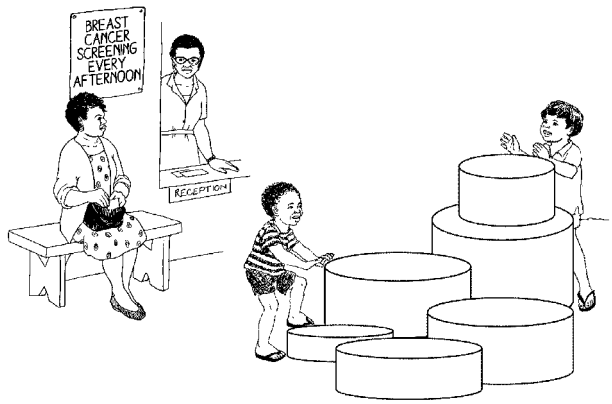


Smart spaces

Two moms created *Joyful Parenting SF* to make San Francisco, California, more kid-friendly. They urge restaurants and other businesses to add children's play areas and diaper-changing tables so parents can meet other parents. Regular meet-ups for young families keep people with newborns from feeling isolated, allow young children to meet other kids, and draw people to local family-friendly businesses.



KABOOM! is a national non-profit focused on creating playspaces in areas where they are scarce and ensuring the playspaces allow families and communities of color to feel safe, welcome, included, and comfortable. Their website shares their *Playbook* (see page 162), a guide for institutions and community organizations to advocate for and create spaces like small play areas in laundromats and kid-friendly spaces in waiting areas where families seek social services.

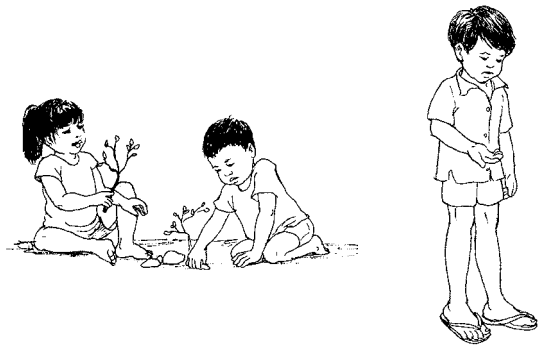


A question when planning any community meeting or activity should be: How will we make this work for new parents? Will the event be fun for young children? What childcare can be provided? How will we make it clear that their participation is valued?

Tune in to what children experience

Parents and other caretakers can learn to recognize and respond to their child's emotional state. This helps babies and young children manage their emotions. Without caring attention, children may find their feelings overwhelming and frightening, which can lead to behaviors that are distressing for themselves and others.

If you notice your child's behavior creating problems or your child is suddenly acting younger—such as having frequent accidents despite having previously learned how to use the toilet or no longer using words despite having previously been talking—talk to health workers or others experienced with child development to sort out how to help the child. Teachers who notice a child becoming withdrawn or not wanting to play can ask if the family has noticed changes too.



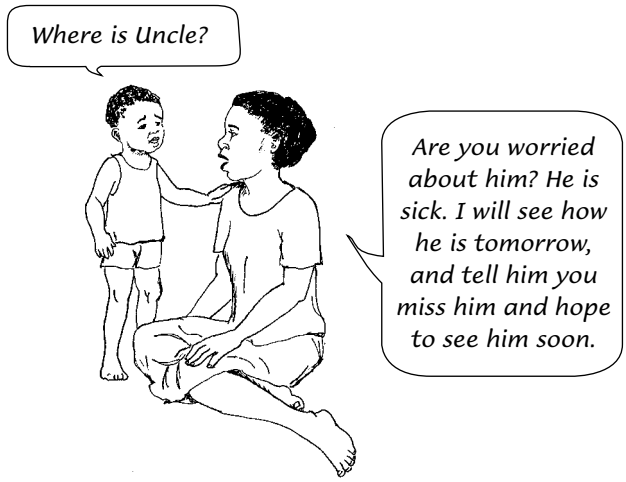
When a family is in a stressful situation and parents are unable to focus on or respond to what a child is experiencing, other adults can step forward to help. This can make a big difference in how the child will remember the experience afterwards.

Separation

Separation from caregivers can be stressful but also promote growth for a young child.

Routine separations build confidence.
Though separating from a parent when a child goes to childcare might cause stress in the moment, the positive interactions with other children and adults will help the child learn that change can be fun and rewarding.

Unexpected separations cause distress.
When a parent goes away suddenly or for a longer period of time than usual, the separation can cause distress even if the child is well cared for and the parent returns safely. By maintaining routines and reassuring them that everything is OK, you help the child recover a sense of ease.



Reassure a child in a hopeful but honest way.

Traumatic separations require support.
Forcible separations, such as the death of a close family member, separation of immigrant children and parents, incarceration of a parent, and child welfare removal of children from their homes can be traumatic and have long-lasting harmful effects on babies and children. As a society, we urgently need effective ways to prevent traumatic separations and to provide support and healing for children who experience them. That support must include age-appropriate ways to help children talk about separation, loss, and other serious worries (for ideas see page 43).

HOW TO Use puppets or dolls to help children communicate

If a child cannot talk directly about what he is feeling, he may be able to express it by drawing or play-acting. Because pretending can help children share feelings and ideas that are otherwise too difficult for them to communicate, "play" can sometimes be very serious. Use stuffed animals, dolls, or puppets to help a child learn about and express feelings.

Puppets and drawings can help young children find words to describe and understand feelings. For example, ask the child to draw the face of a person who is sad, a person who is happy, a person who is angry, and a person who is afraid. Talk about these faces with the child. How do you know a person is happy? How does a sad person act? What does an angry person do? When do people have these feelings?

Make paper puppets with scissors, sticks, glue or tape, and pens or crayons. Or make puppets with scraps of cloth. Ask your child to name them and make up a story about them. Ask: What did they do then? How did they feel about it? Having learned more about what the child is feeling and experiencing, create a path through the strong feelings toward a resolution. For example, you can help the child wrap up the "story" in a way that leaves the characters calm or helping each other.

Adolescence

As children reach their teen years and begin to grow into adulthood, they experience dramatic changes—physically as the body matures, socially as they take on new roles and responsibilities, and emotionally as they explore who they are and want to become. Friends and peers are often as or more important to them than family members. They feel pressure to fit in and worry about being left out of social circles.

How communities support this transition from childhood to adulthood has a great effect on young people's mental health. Peer support programs organized to allow young adults to help teens, or older kids to help younger ones, can help young people feel their problems and perspectives are taken seriously. The older kids know how to share experiences in ways that younger kids can hear, and they gain skills as a mentor or coach. The younger person gets to learn from someone in an age group they aspire to. Such peer programs strengthen values of compassion, service to others, and community building.

An older person knows a bad event will eventually fade into the past, while a teenager might think: "My life is ruined forever!" That feeling won't go away just because I say it isn't true. In my work with teens, I try to reassure them while recognizing their intense feelings, how true they feel. I keep an eye on their situation over time to see how they are getting through whatever happened.

The teenage brain is wired to take risks. As young people mature, they develop more ability to think through what could happen as a result of their actions. During puberty, with its hormone and body changes, romantic feelings and interest in sex intensify. Feelings that are difficult to control and a big mix of emotions can be a lot to handle and often lead to explosions of impatience, irritability, despair, or feeling distracted, nervous, or anxious. But learning to manage this mix of emotions leads to growth and maturity, and one of the rewards of working with young people is the chance to be inspired by their honesty, creativity, and enthusiasm.

At age 14, my son changed his name and gender identity the summer before starting high school. He was getting together with a mix of old and new friends and I asked, "Wait, do your middle school friends know about your gender and new name?" He came back a few minutes later saying, "They do now, I just texted them. It's all good." I admire how accepting kids can be—it is a good lesson for us adults.

HOW TO Work with young people

Show you know how to listen. This is true when talking with anyone (see "Being there for people," pages 25 to 27), but especially with young people. Listen without criticizing. Do not insist on giving advice. Focus on what they are experiencing and how it feels to them.

Help them flourish and maybe plant some seeds. Support them doing what they already enjoy (music, art, sports, caring for animals) and also help them discover new talents and interests. The same strategies adults can use—exercise, eating well, sleeping enough, building good relationships, and spending time outdoors (see pages 22 to 24)—help build mental health for youth. Keep an eye out for anyone who is shy, needs specific support to join in, or could benefit from other kinds of assistance.

Create spaces and places to connect. Community and school programs offering activities, sports, homework support, and volunteer or paid work opportunities provide young people with places to be and things to do. Spending time positively lessens the chance that they will spend too much time on social media or video games, or use alcohol or drugs at a young age. It can also buffer their struggles through emotional ups and downs.

Recognize that young people experience "big picture" problems. Kids are very aware of the climate crisis, police violence, school shootings, restrictions on birth control, abortion, and other health care, and how people in the news fuel racism, discrimination, stigma, and hate. Like everyone, it makes them anxious and threatens their future. Support the creation of school environments, friendship circles, and groups that let young people challenge and change these conditions. Teens can gain emotional support, strength, and acceptance through participating in community efforts for change.

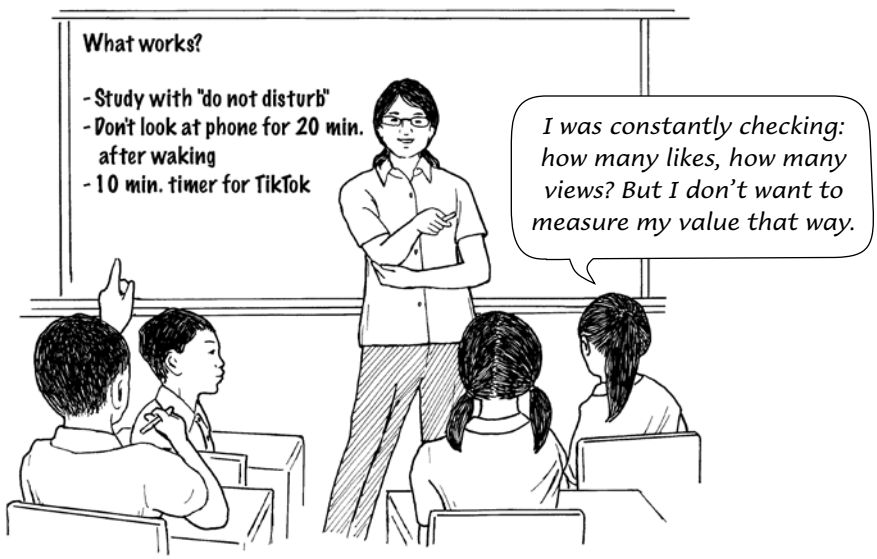
Life online

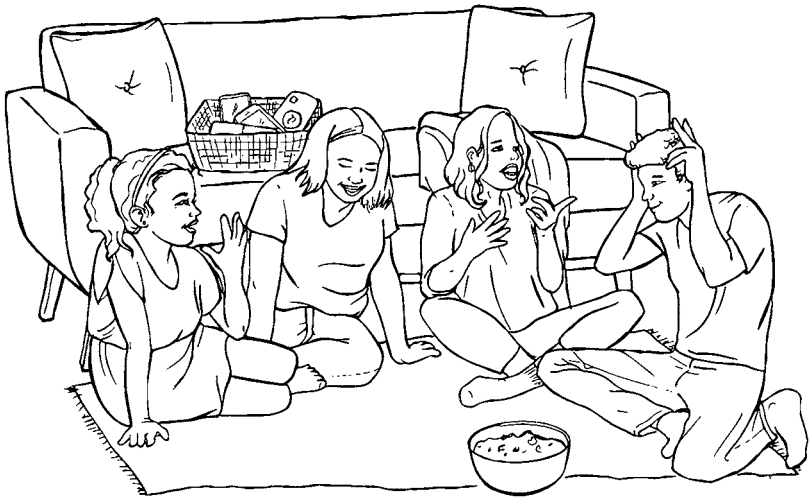
Most people in the US have a mobile phone by the time they are 14 years old. While internet access is now a necessity and social media may be interesting and useful, many apps and platforms addict us by design, making money for online companies at the cost of our mental health. We may not notice being sucked in, but then find ourselves thinking: "I know this isn't good for me, but I can't stop!"

Young people themselves are pushing back. Students have supported school-wide practices to store cell phones out of reach during school hours, except for emergencies. The non-profit *My Digital TAT2* helps young people navigate the complexity of being online and think critically about the benefits and drawbacks of their digital interactions, so they can make healthy choices. In addition to training students, parents, and health care professionals about digital well-being, they partner directly with young people.

In their internship program, high school youth meet with tech experts, learn research and presentation skills, and discuss the constantly-changing online world young people face. When these students do *My Digital TAT2's* "Digital Loop" activity (see pages 115 to 116), they think critically about their online behavior and share insights about ways to make it useful or limit it, such as:

- using "reminders" for homework due dates and important school or family events
- setting limits on video games or other addictive apps
- listening to music when feeling down
- when walking outside, following the rule, "No phone, instead look around!"

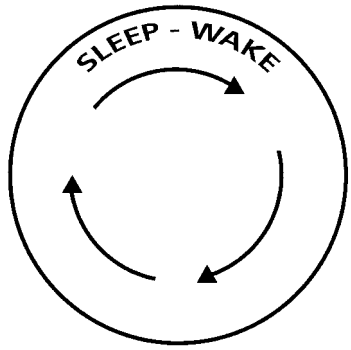




When we get together, for the first hour we agree to turn our phones off and put them away. Then later we can take them out if we feel like it.

ACTIVITY Chart your "Digital Loop"

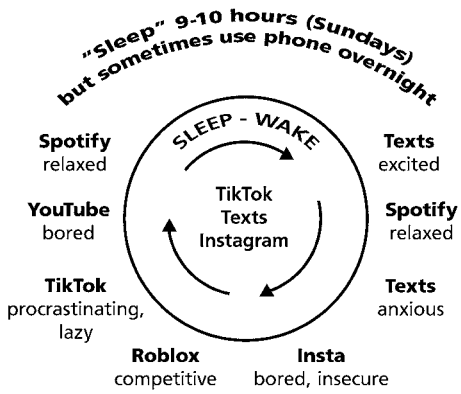
Stuck to your phone? You are not alone! Checking the same apps and platforms over and over can trap you in a "digital loop." While being online connects us to others and provides useful information, it also creates problems. Take a step offline to explore your digital habits. Your family can do this activity, or a school or youth group can use it to promote digital literacy. Share it with your parents—they often use devices as much or more than young people.



1. **Create Your Loop.** First, draw a circle. Second, around the edge, write the names of the social media, music apps, streaming platforms, and video games you use at specific times, such as "when I first wake up" and "when I'm on the bus." Third, in the middle, write the names of the apps you use all day, that are "always on." You can make your loop reflect a usual weekday, weekend day, yesterday, or some other example. Write down the hours you sleep and if you interrupt your sleep to use your phone.

ACTIVITY Chart your "Digital Loop" *(continued)*

2. **Add Feelings.** Write the feelings you associate with each app. Does it make you feel: Connected? Excited? Relaxed? Stressed? Angry? Unhappy about yourself? You can also note the feelings that make you turn to an app: Bored? Checking for responses or reactions? As an automatic reflex? Try to tap into and name as many feelings as you can.



3. **Share.** Each person takes a turn explaining what they noted about their own app use.
   - What do you check constantly? Which make you feel anxious, insecure, or take too much of your time?
   - What apps or activities feel most helpful, happy, relaxing, or good in other ways?
   - What feelings surprised you?
   - What makes you put your phone down or get off your computer?
   - How does being online affect your sleep, schoolwork, chores, or other activities?
   - Does being online or specific apps cause conflicts with family or friends?
4. **Reflection.** Take turns talking about what you learned from each other and anything you would like to change.
   - How do you feel about the time you spend both on and offline? Good, bad, unsure?
   - Do you feel in charge of your time or is the loop in control sometimes?
   - What changes (if any) would you make to your digital habits?
   - Share ideas about how to balance online time with time offline to do other things you enjoy, like sports, getting together with friends, being in nature, making art, or others.

Variation: Start with step 2, with the group listing all the feelings people might associate with their phones and online time. Then keep the digital loop circle with you for the next day or few days. Every few hours use it to track what you do online and how you feel about it. Then use the reflection questions with the group the next time you get together.

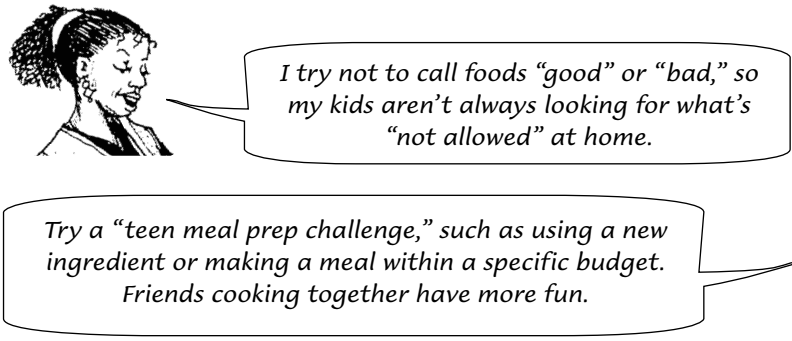
Nutrition, eating patterns, and body image

Eating enough nutritious food is important for health and mental well-being, especially for teens. But instead of celebrating what our bodies do for us, our online time, mass media, and advertising often tell us there is something wrong with our shape and size, causing eating patterns that can harm our bodies and mental health. Too many people feel compelled to diet, binge eat, or purge after eating, or just dislike eating. Family, school, and community efforts can improve physical and mental health by changing how we interact with food.

Plan regular breaks for meals and snacks. Eating every 3 to 4 hours allows time to begin feeling hungry, but not so hungry you can't concentrate on anything else. Everyone can learn to listen to their body, be aware of their level of hunger, and see eating as one way they take care of themselves.

Prepare your own food as part of healthy eating. See what kinds of cooking or other food prep you enjoy. Learn which foods have what vitamins or what makes them nutritious. Avoid highly processed foods as much as possible and challenge yourself to try a variety of foods.

Be aware of messages about body shape and size. Celebrating all kinds of body types and sizes builds self-esteem and is a buffer against social messages telling young people they look "wrong." Admire what people's bodies can do instead of what they look like. Avoid criticizing what or how much people eat, or how much they weigh.



When young people need help

Adolescence is a time of vast change and transition, which can bring stress and anxiety. Learning how to get through it all is a big part of what is meant by "growing up." But when emotions overwhelm a young person's ability to function, when they express worry about themselves, or when they put themselves or others in danger, they need help. Share information about warning signs and encourage young people to reach out.

If you feel something, say something

If you feel stuck or overwhelmed, it's OK to ask someone you trust for help. Especially when you:

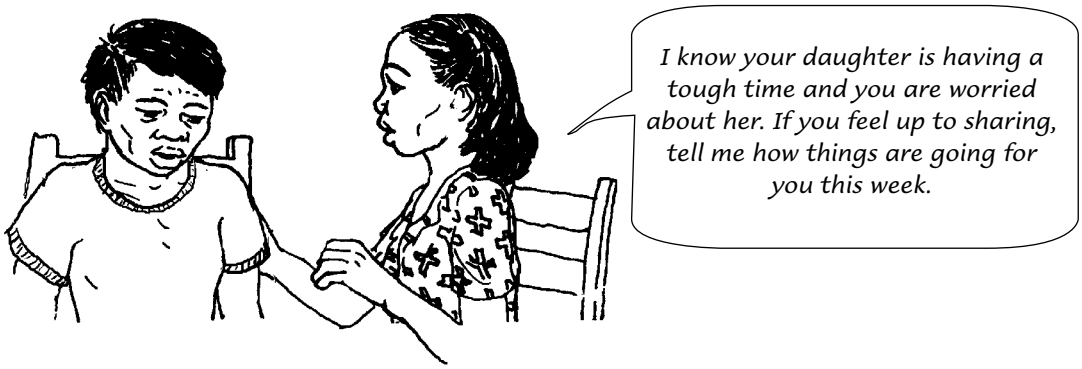
- can't fall asleep at night or have a hard time staying asleep.
- have very low energy or are not motivated to do things.
- do not want to eat, or eat a lot more than usual, or are worried about other eating patterns.
- feel nervous, stressed, or worried.
- have a hard time concentrating or cannot keep up with school work.
- use alcohol or drugs in a way that is causing you problems.
- panic suddenly and find it hard to calm down, with a pounding heart or difficulty breathing.
- cut yourself or do something else to injure your body.
- think about hurting yourself or ending your life, or feel like you would just like to sleep and never wake up because your life is not worth living.
- are being abused, hurt, or pressured to do dangerous or scary things.

Even if it is difficult to talk about, find someone you trust (at your school, the parent of a friend, through your church, a family member, counselor), call or text a hotline (see page 155), or visit the office of any health or community services you know about.

When you first talk to someone, you do not have to share everything about how you are feeling or exactly what you are experiencing. You might start by sharing just a little, enough so someone can understand the type of help you need.

Support parents and caregivers too

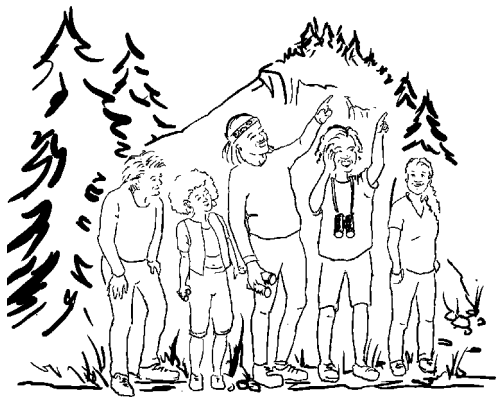
When a young person is showing warning signs or is in crisis, their family and friends are likely feeling worried and afraid. Just being there as a friend or neighbor can make a big difference. Listen to what they are experiencing and believe what they say about it. Offer to help out with meals, rides, or by looking after their other children.



Community support for young people

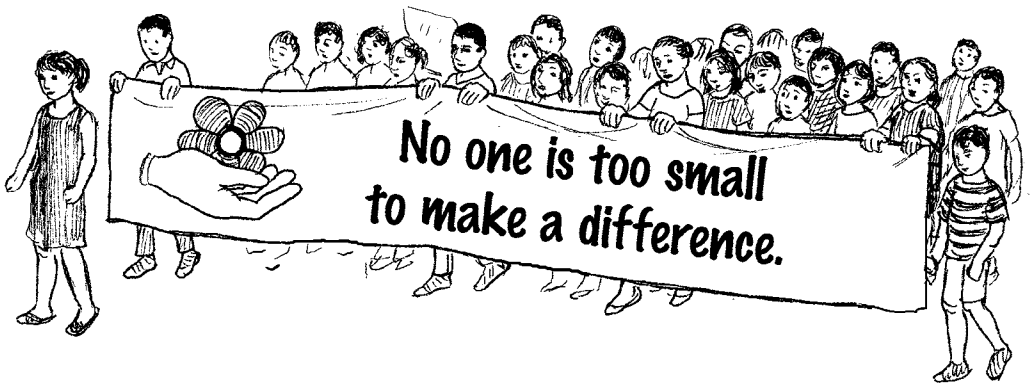
Many activities can lead to young people having better physical and mental health through building feelings of community, encouraging self-expression, and learning to make decisions and appreciate the results.

Coming together in nature. For nine years, the *New Roots Program* summer nature camp in Boise, Idaho, brought together teens from immigrant and refugee families for up to two weeks of daily outdoor experiences in the company of environmental professionals. The program worked to make Boise, which is more than 80% white, more welcoming to youth of color. Bringing together kids who might otherwise be isolated builds community among them, encourages exercise and new forms of recreation, promotes learning about the natural environment, and gives youth ideas about possible future careers. Across the border, *Nature Canada* promotes a similar program and created a toolkit to facilitate environmental non-profits to partner with diverse organizations serving youth.



Providing a cultural grounding. The *Black Youth Healing Arts Center* in St. Paul, Minnesota, provides cultural, ancestral, and innovative healing processes to Black youth, including free classes on art, dance, and gardening practices of the African diaspora. Spaces and activities include a commercial kitchen, recording studio, ceramics, painting, weaving, performance stage, and art gallery.

Supporting youth-led solutions. Outraged by adult inaction and the devastating effects on their future, youth movements are trying to force policy makers to act with the urgency the climate crisis demands. These efforts work to positively channel youth anger, despair, and frustration into sit-ins, school strikes, and demonstrations. The *Sunrise Movement* studies and endorses political candidates, and encourages young people to vote, while *Fridays for the Future* says: "Every day there are more of us and together we are strong." *Movement Generation* supports youth leaders through retreats and activities that create connections and mutual learning. Their downloadable manual *Propagate, Pollinate, Practice* (see page 166) includes curriculum tools, guides, strategy documents, and easily adaptable activities.



Turning trauma into youth leadership

Today's young adults of Flint, Michigan, a majority African American city, were among thousands of children exposed to lead in the public drinking water through decades of racist policies and purposeful neglect. The *Flint Youth Justice League*, *Flint Public Health Youth Academy*, and *Young, Gifted & Green* were part of the local response to address and help repair the harm, promoting environmental justice as young survivor organizers, scientists, and advocates.

Inspiring hope with advice and by example. LGBTQ+ youth may face rejection from family or peers, as well as bullying or even violence in both public and private spaces. This makes depression and other mental health distress a serious risk. Individual and community programs are essential to supporting LGBTQ+ youth. *The Trevor Project* provides online guides and resources on gender identity, sexual orientation, and mental health and maintains a 24/7 crisis hotline (1-866-488-7386). The *It Gets Better Project* exists to uplift, empower, and connect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth around the globe. They share thousands of personal stories, post videos about many different personal journeys, and compile resources such as national call-in lines and local groups with supportive people to talk with. (See more examples on page 46.)

We can create "chosen families," people who may not be related but who do what good family members should do: provide unconditional love and mutual support.

Bridging the generation gap. *The Mother-Daughter Project* challenges the common negative stereotype that teenagers reject parents. The project helps communities form mother-daughter groups to support these relationships through the teen years, caring for the mental health of both by building trust and having fun in a group. Mothers (anyone in a caretaking and mothering role) meet separately for a few months before starting get-togethers that include their daughters. An important group rule is: "It's gotta be fun—or we won't come."

Building connections as an adult

Common ways people connect—through work, places of worship, children, sports, neighborhood networks, community service—do not always work for everyone. It can be hard to find new friends or a sense of community, for example, after moving to a new place or losing a life partner. Because personal and group relationships are so important for health and well-being, many community groups have found creative ways to challenge the isolation felt by too many adults. And if you can't find a group, you can try to start one!

I have OK work connections but I live alone. A friend and I invited 4 people we knew to a monthly dinner with 3 simple rules: 1) 1 person picks up pizza and 1 person makes a salad; 2) if you host, don't clean before we come over; 3) if someone can't make it, the rest of us have dinner anyway. This has worked well for us for over 10 years! Sometimes we also watch a movie, but most of the time we just eat and talk.

When I took on more caregiving for my parents—especially tough in a small rural town—I had no free time and triple the stress. A weekly 30-minute online get-together with 2 friends who are living through the exact same situation has been lifesaving. We can be totally honest with what is going on and I look forward to it every week.

"Third places." Many adults leave home in the morning for work or school and then return home again with nowhere else to go. Every community needs safe and appealing "third places" (not home or work) where people can gather with friends, run into people they know, or make new friends, preferably without spending much or any money. Cafes, parks, dog runs, playing fields, fitness and rec centers, libraries, senior centers, and community centers can meet this need if we put energy into making them feel attractive and welcoming. Often these are existing spaces that would be used more if there was renewed outreach or they were made easier to get to by providing transportation.

The Jarrell Community Library is not only the heart of its small Texas rural community, it is one of the only places to gather. Part of the broader *Libraries for Health Initiative*, the Jarrell Library has a certified peer support specialist at the library to talk to people and connect them to the resources they need. The Jarrell Library focuses on seniors, military members, and young families. Their mental wellness program presents guest speakers, stocks self-help guides and books on caring for those with mental health challenges, and lends kits that include jigsaw puzzles and other activities that help aging minds stay sharp.

Our network of health educators helps others but we need to de-stress ourselves. All we needed was a space we could use once a week, a salsa music playlist, and a portable speaker to shake it all loose. It doesn't matter what you wear, how you look, or how you dance. I know dancing is good for my health too, but I go mainly because doing something alongside others feels great.

I have a friend who can't stay on top of her dishes, she loves to vacuum; I'm the exact opposite. When getting together to watch a movie, we first take 20 minutes to do these chores. Our house cleaning parties help too. Four of us meet once a month to all clean one home and rotate each time. More gets done, it's fun, and who doesn't feel better in a clean space? Sometimes our group will clean for neighbors who live with chronic pain or a disability, and they return the favor by helping out some other way. One guy helps us do our taxes!

Workers working together. Many of us spend more time with our co-workers than we do with family members! Connecting with co-workers can make the workplace better (see pages 152 to 154) and work less tiresome. Maybe there are opportunities to take your break alongside someone else, chat over lunch, or commute together. If you have workplace improvement committees or a union, it can provide an infrastructure for social activities and lead to new friends.

Freelance work in the "gig economy" can leave workers more isolated and with fewer rights and lower pay than traditional jobs. Gig workers (for example, rideshare and delivery drivers, home-based call center workers) are coming together to share stories and strategies to improve their working conditions. In Mexico City, women food delivery workers connect via text in chat groups to share information and are supported by a network of cafés with orange signs in the window ("Puntos Naranja"). The sign shows the business will help workers in an emergency and provide a space to rest, charge a phone, or meet to talk about problems. These connections help build ties among isolated workers which can lead to improved conditions such as access to health care, accident insurance, and union representation.

Reach out to invite people in. It can be a challenge to break into long-time networks, especially for people who are shy, have just moved, don't share the same first language, or sense the door is closed to newcomers. When a group consciously throws the doors wide open, this helps meet new people halfway. To build community, go beyond opening the door—actively invite new people in! This shows, not just says, that there is space for them too. Noticing who might be new (the family that moved into the building, the student enrolling mid-year) or who might be left out (someone with limited mobility, resettling refugees or immigrants) is a first step.

Think about what makes your space welcoming and what might make it feel strange or unsafe. When you reach out, are you aware of people's languages, family obligations, access to transport, and other constraints (see page 10) that could limit participation? Ask about and respond to what people need to make them feel welcomed into your circle.

New faces bring new learning

Since 1972, LGBTQ+ members of the United Church of Christ (UCC) created an *Open and Affirming Coalition* to raise consciousness about how LGBTQ+ individuals and their families need and deserve to feel welcome and safe in their churches, and now hundreds of UCC-affiliated churches have worked toward that goal.

Church signs may say: "All Are Welcome." But we often find out that sign isn't for us if we are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

The UCC Longmeadow, Massachusetts, church went through a 2-year decision-making process that included Bible reflection and reading about and listening to LGBTQ+ identified people's first-hand experiences. It was a deep look into what it really meant to "come out" as an open and affirming church.

When my fellow church members learned about my bad experience in another church as a transgender woman, they took on the work to create a truly welcoming space.

I used to think homophobia didn't affect me. Learning what people in the LGBTQ+ community go through in mixed spaces like ours and how to be an ally was transformative for me. I am deeply proud of our church's open and affirming practices and glad to see our church grow as a result. And I feel really blessed with all the new friendships I have made.

Aging and living as an older person

As people get older, many of their avenues of social interaction narrow or disappear, leading to more loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Depression and anxiety are made worse by weak goverment support for people who are aging. Social Security income, when people qualify for it, rarely provides enough to live on, and the increasing privatization and costs of Medicare make health care more complicated and harder to get. Many communities lack services for people as they get older.

It isn't right that life is so hard for older people. There should be more help available and it should be easier to get. To find public and non-profit programs and other resources that may be near you (grouped as Area Agencies on Aging), look at: eldercare.acl.gov. *These federal, state, and local programs might offer daytime care, caregiver training, respite care, and help for people applying to programs like Medicare and Medicaid.*

The close relationship between physical and mental health (see page 20) makes combining many activities in places like senior centers a great way to strengthen elders individually and as a community. By providing nutritious lunches, dance classes and chair yoga, card games, and book and movie discussions, older people take advantage of opportunities to socialize and fight isolation while their families and caregivers get a break.

Multi-generational solutions. Matching older people seeking companionship and household help with younger people who need housing and enjoy helping creates a win-win situation. In fact, any kind of connecting across generations often improves everyone's mental health while addressing basic needs.

The *Southeast Arizona Health Education Center* (SEAHEC) works to improve health and well-being in US rural border and migrant communities. SEAHEC's *Entre Nosotros* curriculum trains community health workers to support elders to look out for each other's mental health and recognize warning signs, learn overdose prevention, and learn techniques that help people feel calm. SEAHEC's Future/Youth Health Leaders Club prompted high school students to interview people in group care homes about their interests and needs. They designed and hung posters in Spanish and English to brighten rooms and moods, organized intergenerational Bingo and *Lotería* games, distributed holiday gift baskets, and made lasting friendships.

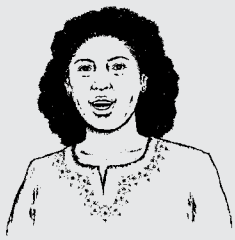
Peer helpers. *The Village to Village Network* helps groups set up support networks among elders to meet different needs (like transportation, technology assistance, home repair, and errands). They also sponsor activities and outings. They help keep people healthy, connected, and more independent.

Transportation. Many seniors can no longer drive or walk distances, and need support getting to and from the grocery store, doctor's appointments, the library, and other places. City-sponsored on-call senior shuttles or free ride vouchers can provide needed and dependable transportation.

Listening ears. A volunteer at a suicide prevention hotline in San Francisco, California, noticed that many older callers were not talking about suicide, but were lonely and looking for somebody to talk with. He started a *Friendship Line* (now in English and Spanish) to provide a "listening ear" for callers. It also offers telephone medication reminders, well-being checks, and even in-person visits. If there is not a local call-in line near you, try the national *Friendly Voice* line and speak to an AARP-trained volunteer. For call-in lines and hotline numbers, see page 155.

Document community history. Organize, train, and support young people to interview long-time neighborhood residents and record their memories of the community and what has changed. Compiling and sharing oral histories builds community pride, honors the life experiences of elders, and validates the creative work of young documentarians.

Protect against elder abuse and scams. Promote conversations among family members to help people plan for a time when they will not be able to look after their own finances. Getting the word out about how to recognize and deal with common scams helps protect seniors and begins to address the shame and grief resulting when someone is tricked into giving away money. The *AARP Fraud Watch Network and Volunteers of America* created the VOA | ReST program (Resilience, Strength, and Time) to help people through the emotional impact of these experiences, offering facilitated peer discussion groups.



I knew my mom would be upset if I said, "I need access to your finances in case your memory loss gets worse." Instead, I asked her to tell me more about my aunt who spent all her money buying items online she already had. Then I said, "I want to make sure that never happens to you." That opened the door for us to make a plan.

Alliances to change the care economy and the nature of care work. Eldercare Dialogues grew out of activism by the *National Domestic Workers' Alliance* and brought together elders, direct care workers, and family members in conversations. With a focus on transforming care jobs into "good jobs," with adequate pay and decent conditions, they developed policy recommendations, standards for being a good employer, and a training guide for anyone to start similar conversations (see page 166). *Caring Across Generations* is a national organization also focused on the dignity deserved by both caregivers and those needing care. They record stories and create public awareness campaigns to transform attitudes and narratives about aging, disability, and care. They also lobby for policy changes at every level.

Death and dying

Thinking ahead to and preparing for death can bring up strong emotions. Dying and death are topics people often avoid talking about, even among friends and family. For many, not being able to talk about and plan for death creates stress, anxiety, and depression.

Let's talk about it. "Death Cafes" are one-time or multi-part group conversations to talk about death in an open, respectful, supportive, and confidential space so people can feel safe expressing their thoughts. Talking freely about death can remove the taboo against talking about it, provide relief for participants, and lead to sharing new ways to think about the end of life. With tips on how to keep it simple, the *Death Cafe Guide* (free from deathcafe.com) covers how to organize an event, often in a library or other public space, and how to make everyone who attends feel welcome.

Make your wishes known. It should be easier to think about and get legal support for what you want for your end of life, including in case of an emergency. Some libraries and legal aid non-profits hold clinics to help write an Advance Health Care Directive, a document that specifies the medical care you want under certain conditions (for example, not wanting machines to keep your heart pumping if you have brain damage and won't wake up). Legal aid clinics can also help you write a simple Last Will and Testament. Making these decisions when you are well, and adjusting them as needed, can bring you and your family peace of mind. *PREPARE for your care* (prepareforyourcare.org) walks you through this process based on the state you live in.

I have a lot of single friends, working in different professions who want to have an advance health directive but put it off. We decided to get the forms, have a party to fill out and print them, and then be witnesses for each other, signing them to make them legal.
It was fast and fun—and we felt good about getting it done!

Prepare and share a list of palliative care, complementary care, and hospice services. Help people learn about these services, how to access them, and which are free or affordable. *Palliative care* focuses on well-being, comfort, and support to make decisions so a person will feel better. It is not only for people who are dying. *Complementary care* means therapies that help ease problems from illness, lessen treatment's side effects, and feel calmer and worry less, such as meditation, herbal remedies, pain medicines, special diets, exercise, hypnosis, acupuncture, massage, and prayer or spiritual healing. *Hospice services* focus on making a person who is dying more comfortable by reducing pain and other symptoms with medication and other methods, helping them and their family make plans, find emotional and spiritual support, and address other needs. Hospice can start months before the end of life and can happen in a hospice center, a hospital, or where a person lives.

Spending time with someone who is dying

When you are with someone who is dying, it can be hard to know what to say. Still, many people find this time to be meaningful and important. It can provide a chance to give both the person and yourself peace of mind. If there are important things that remain unsaid between you, you will need to decide how you want to express your thoughts and feelings.

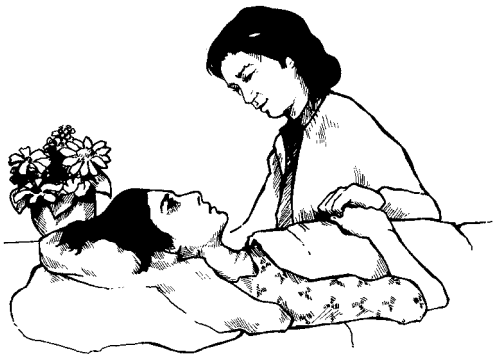
It may feel right to simply be present, perhaps holding the person's hand so they know you are there for them. Regardless of whether they have months to live or are no longer fully conscious, you can:

- talk about memories, especially happy ones, and accomplishments the person can feel good about.
- thank the person for what they have given you.
- let the person know you love them and will miss them.
- express forgiveness or ask for forgiveness.

Sometimes, confronting the end of life may find you or the dying person angry, sad, or scared. Staying close, keeping them company, and listening can show you care. You do not have to express feelings that you do not have or tell them what they want to hear. You will have to live with your last interactions with them after they pass away. If what you feel you must say may be difficult for them to hear, try to say it in a way you will not later regret.

Sometimes a person wants to talk about dying and may ask you what it will be like. It can be hard to hear these questions when there are no easy answers. It is OK to say: "I don't know. Nobody does." You can reassure the person that medications and other methods are available to help control pain.

Every person's body slows differently as they die. Holding their hand as they cry or talk about their good memories or regrets may be the best you can do. Telling them you will be there with them as they die can help, even after they lose the ability to speak. They may appreciate prayers, other religious or spiritual practices, music, or incense. Often the person can still hear you even when they no longer seem to be awake or responding. Just sitting with someone and breathing with them can be very comforting in the last stages of dying. Saying out loud that it is OK for the person to let go can make a difference. They may need pain medication along with your care and presence to bring comfort and ease their transition to death.



A dying person and their family need care with love and dignity. With death as a part of life, hospice workers, death doulas, and health promoters trained in what is needed at the end of life accompany families and share their skills to help people get through the hardest of times.