

# What Parents can do while waiting for Mental Health Services



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

## 1. Keep in touch with your mental health service provider

- **Ask to be put on a cancellation list** (if your provider has one). This gives you the possibility of being seen more quickly. If another family cancels an appointment, your service provider can call you to see if your family can make the appointment time. Make sure they have a telephone number where they can reach you during the day.
- **Let your mental health service provider (or family doctor) know if your child or youth is getting worse.** Your child's place on the wait list depends on many things, including your child's needs. Let your service provider know if your child or teen:
  - Is feeling more depressed or anxious
  - Has more trouble at home or school
  - Expresses thoughts that life is no longer worth living
- **Check out support services.** Many organizations have 'wait-list supports' like information about mental health in general and about support groups.
- **Keep your family doctor or pediatrician in the loop.** If your child or youth gets worse, he or she may be able to advocate on your behalf. They may be aware of other available services.

## 2. Get informed

Understanding all that you can regarding mental health issues and available services can help you to better understand things when you meet with the mental health professionals. It enables you to be better engaged and know what questions to ask. There are many excellent websites that can assist you as well as informative books and videos. Be cautious though and look only at reputable sites and avoid chatlines. Some websites:

### **[www.ementalhealth.ca](http://www.ementalhealth.ca)**

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

### **[www.cheo.on.ca](http://www.cheo.on.ca)**

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

### **[www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com)**

The Offord Centre for Child Studies in Hamilton, ON

### **[www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca)**

Children's Mental Health Ontario.

### **[takingcare.knowledge.ca](http://takingcare.knowledge.ca)**

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

### [www.teenmentalhealth.org/blog](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org/blog)

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

### [www.iwk.nshealth.ca](http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca)

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

### [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca)

Our website offers many additional resources and allows you to subscribe to our newsletter where you will be informed of available parents' training and information sessions.

## 3. Keep a journal

Write about events, situations, behaviours and worries that you want to share with your service provider. This is a good way to prepare for your first appointment. You think you will remember everything but that can be challenging.

## 4. Prepare for the first appointment

Make notes of what you want to discuss with the service provider and questions that you want to ask. Your journal will make this easier. It's important that your service provider see a progression of how things have been going. It's easy to forget things or only focus on what's happened recently if you don't write them down.

## 5. Connect with a support group

Other families who have experience supporting their own child can often help you to know about other community resources they found helpful. In Ottawa PLEO offers several parent support groups. Call 613-321-3211 or visit [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca) for more details.

## 6. Explore other mental health services

Even though you might be waiting for services at one agency, you can still contact other services. Most agencies will list their referral criteria and processes on their websites or you can call their intake group.

**School services.** Many high schools have mental health resources available including psychologists, mental health nurses and addictions counsellors. Contact your child's principal or vice-principal to access these services. Schools may also be able to help refer you to other services.

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

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

### **Professionals in private practice:**

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

#### [www.ottawa-psychologists.org](http://www.ottawa-psychologists.org)

Ottawa Academy of Psychology

#### [www.crhsp.ca](http://www.crhsp.ca)

Canadian Register of Health Service Psychologists

#### [www.cpo.on.ca](http://www.cpo.on.ca)

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Emergency

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

### Crisis Support

#### For children and youth up to 18 years of age

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

#### For youth over 16 years of age

call within Ottawa 613-722-6914, outside Ottawa 1-866-996-0991 or visit the website at [www.crisisline.ca](http://www.crisisline.ca).

### Walk-in Clinics

If the situation changes and you are concerned, there are walk-in clinics where you can receive support.

#### For children under 12

Crossroads Children's Centre operates a walk-in clinic.  
[www.crossroadschildren.ca](http://www.crossroadschildren.ca)

#### For youth over 12

Youth Services Bureau operates a walk-in clinic. [www.ysb.ca](http://www.ysb.ca)

## 8. Support your child or youth

Warmth and support from parents makes all the difference in the world to children and youth, though they may not always show it. Strong family support leads to better outcomes for youth, whether they have a mental health problem or not.

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

Quality time can mean just talking or doing an activity together, for at least 15-30 minutes. It might be walking or hiking or throwing a ball around, or perhaps cooking or playing a game of cards. Time with just the two of you will give them the chance to share experiences, feelings or worries. It will be easier for them to open up when it's just the two of you. Focus on making this a positive experience for both of you. Increasing positive interactions may help to decrease negative things, like arguing. Activities where you have more skill than your child helps them appreciate that parents are capable, worth looking up to, and a source of help when needed.

**Connect before correcting.** When your child or youth shares feelings, 'validate' these feelings by showing that you've heard and care. This helps to make them feel loved and understood. Don't criticize or minimize their feelings. And try not to jump in with advice-although this is sometimes hard, because we really want to help! Giving advice when your child is just sharing feelings can make them feel that you really don't understand. If they think they are going to get a lecture every time they share their feelings, then they won't confide in you.

**Understand that some behaviours may be symptoms of your youth's mental ill health.** A person dealing with depression can feel very unmotivated, and may not show initiative or interest. It can be easy to interpret this as being lazy or uncooperative. Often they may not want to do things they have always done and seemed to enjoy in the past. Withdrawal from family and friends can be caused by anxiety. Be patient and understanding of the changes you are seeing and identify these changes to the professionals when you meet with them.

**Don't be discouraged if you feel that your child or youth is trying to detach from you.** Many children and youth are very focused on their peers. It might even seem that they value their friends and peers more than parents. Children and youth struggling with mental health problems may also try to detach from parents. Try not to take this personally. Your child or teen still really needs you, even if they aren't aware of it. While peers are very important, they just don't have the same, long term commitment that a parent or caregiver can provide. Parents and caregivers, not peers, will always 'be there' in good times and bad, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is just not possible for peers. Only parents and caregivers can truthfully say, "It's OK if you're feeling this way. I'm here for you and always will be. We'll get through this together". No peer can offer this kind of support, because they're still just growing up themselves.

## 9. Help your child or youth cope with stress

Stress is part of our daily lives. Mental health problems like depression or anxiety can make it harder to handle these everyday stresses. Learning to cope with stress in a positive way is an important part of mental health. Help your child or youth to:

**Get support.** Remind them that you are always there for support during rough times. Listen and validate their feelings. Ask how they would like to be supported.

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

- School (teachers, schoolwork)
- Friends and peers (sometimes bullying)
- Parents and siblings (family conflicts, financial troubles, separation, divorce, family illnesses)

**Find ways to cope with those stresses.** There are many ways to handle stress in a positive way:

**Distraction** (moving attention away from the stress for a little while). Taking a walk or exercising. Listening to music or just doing something enjoyable.

**Relaxation and Mindfulness.** Consciously relaxing muscles and focusing on breathing deeply. Calming the mind by trying to let go of thoughts and focusing on the moment. Yoga practice-focusing on body postures and breathing.

**Solve the problem.** This can mean facing the stress and making a plan to deal with it.

- If school work is a stress, this could mean getting tutoring, help to organize work or checking for learning disabilities. It could mean meeting with the school to explore options.
- If the problem is conflict, listen carefully to your child or youth's point of view. You can then help them develop a plan to resolve it. You can also help them to communicate assertively. If the conflict is with you, set the example for listening and positive communication, and try to come up with a solution that works for everyone. If you're having trouble with family conflict, family therapy may help.

**Helpful resources for coping.** Please visit the 'Resources' tab on our website at [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca) to find a list of websites offering programs and ideas to help you cope with stress.

## 10. Healthy living makes a difference

No matter what mental health issue your child is struggling with, caring for the body and mind can really help. Taking care of the basics can go a long way to helping your child or youth to feel better. **Try to make sure your child or teen:**

**Gets enough sleep.** Most of us don't get enough sleep, and that can lower mood and energy levels. Better sleep can improve behaviour, attention and outlook. Try to work out a regular time for bed, and a calming bedtime ritual. Keep computers, TVs, cell phones and video games out of the bedroom.

**Eats healthy meals and snacks,** with plenty of fruits and vegetables.

**Is physically active.** Children and youth need about an hour each day of physical activity, and if this happens outside, even better. Studies also show that exercise can have antidepressant effects.

**Has limits on 'screen time'.** Too much screen time doesn't leave enough time for physical activity or 'face time' with

family and friends. And it can interfere with sleep. Try to set a limit on the amount of time each day your child or teen spends watching TV, using social media or playing video games. Please don't try to 'ban' anything. Have a discussion with your child or teen about setting reasonable limits that everyone can live with.

## 11 . Take care of yourself too

As parents we want to see our children thrive. When our child is struggling it creates great stress and often puts additional pressures on the family. Waiting for mental health services increases the stress. It's always hard to find time for yourself when you are busy looking after your children and even harder when they are dealing with mental ill health, however to be able to be there for your child you do need to take care of yourself. Like the airlines remind us, we need to put on our own oxygen mask first so we can then help our child with theirs.

**Avoid isolating yourself.** Because of stigma parents often tend to withdraw, avoiding the need to discuss their child's situation with others. But to stay well we need to stay connected with others. Connect with a family member or good friend who will be understanding and empathetic. Connecting with other parents in similar situations, through community support groups, can help.

**Ask family and friends for help and support.** It's much easier to cope if you have support from others. Friends and family might be able to give you a break by helping with child care, errands or household tasks. Or they could just be there for you; listening when you need to talk. Often people want to be supportive they just don't know how. Help them to understand and don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Most people are very eager to help if they know how.

**Get professional help.** Speak with your family doctor, or see a mental health professional if you are having your own troubles with mood, anxiety, depression, or having difficulty coping.

**Connect with self-help and peer support groups.** Support groups can help you learn about other community resources, as well as offering practical advice and support that professionals cannot provide. In Ottawa, PLEO offers a number of monthly support groups. Call 613-321-3211 or visit [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca) regularly for further details about these and other community support.

# Parents' Lifelines

families for child & youth mental health



**613.321.3211**

[info@pleo.on.ca](mailto:info@pleo.on.ca) | [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca)

### About this brochure

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

### Disclaimer

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