



Natural Supports Toolkit:

# Understanding the Links Between Physical and Behavioral Health

Child and Adolescent Guide

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, SW

Room 509F, HHH Building

Washington, DC 20201

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**Korean: 주의: 한국어를 사용하시는 경우, 언어 지원 서비스를 무료로 이용하실 수 있습니다. 귀하 카운티의 회원 서비스로 연락하십시오.**

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**Polish: UWAGA: Jeżeli mówisz po polsku, możesz skorzystać z bezpłatnej pomocy językowej. Zadzwoń pod numer obsługi członkowskiej odpowiedni dla Twojego kraju.**

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**Mon-Khmer Cambodian: ប្រយ័ត្ន: បើសិនជាអ្នកនិយាយ ភាសាខ្មែរ, អ្នកអាចប្រើប្រាស់សេវាជំនួយភាសាដោយមិនគិតថ្លៃ។ ចូរ ទូរស័ព្ទទៅកាន់លេខសេវាបម្រើសមាជិកសម្រាប់ប្រទេសរបស់លោកអ្នក។**

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# PerformCARE<sup>®</sup>

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## Overview and background

This toolkit is to help natural supports of young people with a behavioral health illness understand the link between physical and behavioral health.

### Who are natural supports?

For children or teens, natural supports are usually parents or guardians. Natural supports can also be friends, neighbors, and paid helpers. Natural supports play a key role in the support of people with a behavioral health illness. Natural supports provide emotional support and guidance and can provide hands-on support, like helping with medicines and making sure medical and behavioral health visits are made. That's why natural supports need to know about the ongoing problem of poor health among those with a behavioral health illness.

### What is behavioral health?

Behavioral health is a term often used to link a person's behaviors with their health. Behaviors like eating habits, smoking, or activity level can effect a person's physical well-being. More recently, the term behavioral health also includes a person's mental health and misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Mental health is the well-being of a person's mind and how they think, feel, or act. Many mental health disorders occur because of genetics, brain chemistry, or how a person manages their environment and life experiences.

Children and teens also have mental health disorders or emotional disturbances for the same reasons. In children and teens, they may develop an adjustment disorder, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Drug and alcohol abuse is also a serious behavioral health disorder. Drug and alcohol abuse can lead to a biological need to use drugs and/or alcohol because the body and brain craves them. Unfortunately, drug and alcohol abuse has been identified in children and teens.

### What is the link between physical and behavioral health?

Studies have shown that people with a behavioral health illness, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder, are likely to have many physical health problems. Gaps in health care are often due to problems with access to care or problems following health care treatment plans correctly. This causes poor overall physical health. As a result, diseases like diabetes, heart disease, respiratory illnesses, tuberculosis, obesity, osteoporosis, hepatitis B and C, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are more likely to occur in people with a behavioral health illness.<sup>1</sup> In children and teens, health concerns are similar to adults, including obesity, asthma, and type 2 diabetes. Teens also have the additional concerns of the risk of teen pregnancy, physical injury due to bullying, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Personal habits can also affect overall health. For example, lack of exercise, poor diet, sleeping too much or too little, drug and alcohol use, smoking, and not taking medicines as prescribed can harm health. When people take control of their health, they are more likely to work together with their doctors, therapists, and natural supports. Age does not matter. If you are an adult, teen, or child, getting healthier and feeling better lowers risk. It is important for natural supports to encourage a person with a behavioral health illness take a more active role in personal health. But first, the natural support will need to know what motivates the person. This is a key factor in helping the person on the journey to better health.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that culture can affect how young people react to both physical and mental illness. How a person with a physical or mental illness expresses their symptoms or copes with the symptoms may vary; some cultures may be stoic and quiet, and others may be more open and seek treatment frequently. Some children or teens may have

**SHORTNESS OF BREATH**

**ABDOMINAL PAIN**

**NUMBNESS**

**HEADACHE**

**INSOMNIA**

**CHEST PAIN**

**FATIGUE**

**BACK PAIN**

**DIZZINESS**

**SWELLING**

**STRESS**

been taught that mental illness is not real and their parent or guardian may seek medical treatment to find a physical cause. It is important at any age to remove the stigma of mental illness so those with these conditions can get the care they really need. Culture can even influence coping skills and treatment choices. As a support giver, keeping the young person's culture in mind may help you understand their motivation and choices. No matter what culture a person comes from, everyone experiences stress.

Let's take a closer look at stress and how it affects the overall health and well-being of children and teens.

## Stress and anger

Everyone feels stress at times. Knowing how to deal with stress can help children and teens take the first step toward feeling better.

### What causes stress?

Stress is a natural body reaction to both good and bad situations. The body responds to stress by letting go of hormones. Stress can make the heart and breath rate go higher. Everyday tasks, grief, or some type of injury or bad experience can cause a stress reaction. Sometimes even simple things like running late for school can make a child or teen feel stressed and uneasy. However, long-lasting stress can harm overall health. Long-term stress can make youth feel angry, nervous, or sad.

### How does stress affect health?

Stress affects the body in many ways. In 1989, a study on stress was done by two doctors.<sup>3</sup> The study looked at more than 1,000 patients and the physical symptoms they reported to their family doctors. The cause of the physical symptoms could not be found in most cases. The doctors were able to find a real physical reason for the symptoms in only a small number of patients. The doctors believed the patients' symptoms were being caused by stress. After this study, the medical term "stress illness" was created. It's a term for real symptoms that are caused by stress.

Long-term stress is hard on the body. It can lead to eating too much or not enough, alcohol or drug use, and not wanting to be around other people. Stress can cause the heart to pump faster, which can lead to high blood pressure. This puts people at risk for stroke or heart attack. Under stress, muscles tense and tighten, which can lead to headaches and chronic pain. Chronic pain can cause some people to stop being active. Long-term stress can also weaken the immune system. The immune system helps people fight colds, flus, viruses, and other infections. Not only does a weakened immune system make it easier for a person to get sick, it can make the illness last longer.



### How can natural supports help manage stress?

Here are some ways you can help someone with a behavioral health illness deal with stress:

- Ask them what is causing the stress and talk about ways to make things better.
- Encourage them to talk to their therapists or doctors about their feelings of stress.
- Suggest positive “self-talk.” Saying positive things out loud about dealing with a situation can make young people feel less worried and more encouraged. For example, saying things like “I can do this,” “I can get help with this,” or “I won’t let this bother me.”
- Help them find things that make them happy and support them in doing those things. Some good ideas include going for a walk or doing other physical activities, doing crafts, watching a funny TV show, calling a friend, or singing along with a favorite song.
- Suggest they get a notebook to write down their feelings and problems. Seeing their thoughts in writing can make them seem like less of an issue and help people handle them better. Some people write every day and some only a few times a week.
- Offer tips to help them relax. For example, have them sit still for 10 minutes and do deep breathing with their eyes closed. They can also listen to peaceful music for 10 minutes.

Like adults, children can worry and feel stressed at times. They worry about school, homework, family, friends, and people who bother them. Physical activity is the best way for children to get their minds off of the reasons for the stress. Getting the energy out can also help improve their moods. But listening to music, playing a video game, or watching TV can also help.

Lowering stress is needed for overall wellness of a child or teen. Participation in stress-relieving activities and talking about it with an adult can make a difference. As a parent or guardian, helping to provide a safe and nurturing environment for a child is important. Make a low-stress schedule at home. Don’t schedule too many activities, and show and tell them how you handle stressful situations in a healthy way.

### How does anger affect health?

Anger also needs to be managed. Anger can cause a young person’s heart rate and blood pressure to go up. Expressing anger in a healthy way will help them vent the rage and feel more in control. There is less wear and tear on the body. But anger turned inward can cause a child or teen to feel ill until their blood pressure returns to normal. As a parent or guardian, helping the child or teen manage their anger is the best support you can give.



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### **How can natural supports help manage anger?**

Here are a few suggestions for natural supports to keep in mind when the person becomes angry:

- Encourage the same relaxation tools noted above for stress.
- Encourage children and teens to talk about what is making them angry, but make sure to avoid criticizing or fighting back.
- Allow them space if they need to cool down.
- Help them problem solve how they can avoid the trigger causing the anger.

Encourage them to talk to their therapist about what causes the anger.

## **Pain and emotions**

Physical pain can limit activity and cause stress, anxiety, and fear in children and adolescents. Pain can make a child or adolescent avoid social activities and friends, because the pain is either unbearable or because they are feeling sad. Children often don't know how to express pain. Sometimes they avoid saying how bad the pain is out of fear, or to please the parent. It is impossible to completely prevent minor injuries, but talking to children about safety from an early age may reduce the frequency of injury around the house. How the parent responds to the pain can influence a child in how they respond to the pain. Here are a few helpful hints:

- Recognize their pain. Say things like “ouch that must hurt,” but remain calm.
- Ask how much it hurts and have them describe it.
- Let them express how much pain they are having and encourage them to tell the truth.
- If the pain limits their activities and going to school, help them understand this is not long term.
- Try to keep their mind active on activities they can do safely, such as relaxation techniques, listening to soothing music, crafts, and reading.

There is a strong connection between the mind and body. What we do to our physical bodies often affects our minds. The following sections of the toolkit look at a few issues concerning lifestyle choices that need to be addressed on the path to wellness.

## **Child and adolescent lifestyle choices**

Like adults, children and adolescents are affected by the strong connection between mind and body. Their thoughts, moods, and

behaviors are often shaped by how they feel physically. That's why children and adolescents need to reduce stress in their lives. It's important for them to get involved in physical activities, and avoid drugs, alcohol, and smoking. Many children and adolescents also have to deal with bullying. In addition, peer pressure can expose young people to behaviors that can harm their health and well-being.

Let's look at these risk factors.

### **Smoking**

In Pennsylvania, 12.9 percent of high school students smoke. This is higher than the U.S. national average of 10.8 percent. E-cigarette use in high school students is even higher in Pennsylvania, at 24.1 percent.<sup>8</sup> Work is being done to lower these numbers. Still, young people remain at risk, and education needs to continue in homes and schools.

Almost all tobacco use begins in young adulthood. Smoking puts people at risk for many diseases, including lung cancer. Many young people don't realize that the nicotine in cigarettes is a drug and nicotine can be very hard to quit. It's important for young people to understand the dangers of nicotine and to never start smoking. Unfortunately, some youth will try smoking, chewing tobacco, and e-cigarettes. Fortunately, natural supports, parents, or guardians can help young people quit and can make a difference.

Here are a few ways to encourage young people to quit smoking:

- Help the young person see nicotine as a drug.
- Discuss the benefits of quitting, such as avoiding illness and saving money.
- Set an example. If you use tobacco, try to quit, or don't use tobacco around young people.
- Help young people plan to stop. Set a stop date and ask them to talk to their health care providers if nicotine replacement is needed.
- Be aware of their friends at school and home. Watching others smoke or going to places where smoking is allowed often causes relapses. Encourage young people to stay away from these things while they are going through nicotine withdrawal.
- Discuss how young people can reward themselves after they quit.
- PerformCare offers support for children and adolescents who want to quit. Please go to PerformCare's website at <http://pa.performcare.org/self-management-wellness/smoking-cessation> or call Pennsylvania Tobacco Quitline toll free at **1-800-784-8669**.
- For information on how to talk to a child or adolescent about not smoking or how to quit smoking, go to [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org).





### Exercise and eating habits

Over the past 30 years, obesity has more than doubled in children and increased by four times in adolescents. This puts them at a higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, and bone and joint problems.<sup>9</sup>

Some children and adolescents may be overweight because they eat more calories than they burn off through physical activities. Schools can help children and adolescents eat healthier and become more active. However, families also impact the way youth think about their bodies, what and how much they eat, and how much physical activity they perform.

### How can natural supports help?

As a natural support, encouraging just a few changes can help young people live healthier lives. Knowing the healthy weight range for the child or adolescent is the first step. Asking the family doctor is one way of finding this information. Measuring the body mass index (BMI) is another way of knowing if the child or adolescent is overweight. This measurement looks at the height and weight and then decides their body mass. To measure a child's BMI, visit this page:

**<https://nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx>**

Eating healthier and staying active are the two best ways to fight obesity. Here's how to get started:

- Ask the doctor what diet the child or adolescent should follow.
- Talk to the youth about what he or she wants to do to lose weight.
- Together, write a goal and a plan to reach that goal. When the goal and plan are in writing, it makes it more real. Plus, it becomes easier to track what is being done to reach the goal. Talk about the plan and how hard it might be to eat healthier and stay active.
- Take time to listen to how the plan is going.
- Making lifestyle changes isn't always easy. Suggest making just one small change at a time.
- Do activities with the youth or ask if there is a friend who might like to join in.

Here are some other helpful hints you can give:

- Cut down on portion size.
- Eat more vegetables and fruits.
- Look up healthier recipes.
- Set a goal every day.
- Take the stairs instead of an elevator.
- Walk and count the number of steps you walk each day.
- Jump rope.



- Dance.
- Spend less time playing videos and watching TV.
- Avoid sugary drinks.
- Drink low-fat milk instead of whole milk.

For more help, go to [www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate).

### Drug and alcohol use

One of the best times to talk to teens about tobacco, street drugs, and alcohol is when they are in middle school. It is not unusual for teens to be offered these types of substances in middle school. Adolescents are trying to find their own identity and “fit in” with their school friends. Parents and guardians should make it clear they do not want their teens to use street drugs, tobacco, and alcohol. Let them know what will happen if they do use drugs. Some teens misuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs to get high, stop pain, or because they think it will help them with school work. Some teens will take medication that belongs to someone else. Boys are more likely to misuse prescription stimulants to get high, while girls tend to misuse them to stay alert or to lose weight.<sup>10</sup>

### How can natural supports help?

Here are some ways you can help:

- Have an open and honest talk with teens.
- Help them practice what they would say if someone offers them harmful substances. Practice more than once to make sure teens feel at ease and strong about saying no.
- Facts about drug and alcohol use can be found on the web or in the library. Parents and guardians can review this information with their teens. Talk about the bad effects drugs, alcohol, and tobacco have on the body, such as changes to the brain, and elevation of blood pressure and heart rates.

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Adolescents are trying to find their own identity and “fit in” with their school friends.

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- Use open-ended questions to get teens to talk more. This means asking questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Asking questions can help teens be more open about being offered or having tried drugs. Parents and guardians can make a difference just by opening up and having ongoing talks with their teens. Studies show that youth who are not watched by their parents or guardians are four times more likely to do drugs.<sup>11</sup> Knowing where your child is, knowing their friends, and talking to the friends' parents may help to prevent drug use.

For more information about helping family members or friends with substance use issues, visit the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Inc. website at [www.ncadd.org/family-friends](http://www.ncadd.org/family-friends).

## Medicines

Medicines play an important role in treating behavioral health illness. Health care Providers know which medicines to prescribe to help with behavioral health illnesses. It is important to follow the prescriber's directions and tell the prescriber about side effects that cause problems. Medicines are meant to improve the quality of the person's life, not harm it. Side effects are not unusual for most medicines prescribed, and many side effects will go away once the body adjusts to the medicine. As a natural support, it is important to know when a child or adolescent should get help for harmful side effects. Call the doctor right away or go to the nearest emergency room if the person has any of these symptoms:

- Thoughts of wanting to die.
- Suicide attempts.
- Depression getting worse.
- Anxiety getting worse.
- Feeling very angry.
- Not being able to sit still.
- Feeling very nervous.
- Wanting to hurt or actually hurting someone.
- Wanting to do unusual things that put them at risk.
- Any strange behavior or mood, like not talking or acting unusual.
- Physical issues, including:
  - Swelling of the eyes, face, or lips.
  - Blood pressure changes.
  - Difficulty urinating or frequent urination.

- Feeling thirsty and taking in lots of fluids.
- Seizures.
- Change in vision.
- Difficulty walking.

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**It is important to follow the prescriber's directions and tell the prescriber about side effects that cause problems.**

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Youth who take certain psychiatric medicines may need some blood tests. This is to make sure they are getting the right amount of medicine. The doctor will write an order when a blood test needs to be taken.

A group of medicines called antipsychotics that treat psychotic disorders and schizophrenia can cause weight gain, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and high cholesterol. These medicines can help lessen behavioral health symptoms, so the doctor may think the benefit outweighs the risk. However, the doctor should check blood pressure and weight and order blood tests to monitor blood sugar and cholesterol levels regularly. Talk to the doctor if there are any concerns about medicines.

Here are some things to remember as a natural support:

- A person should never stop taking medicines on their own.
- Some young people may need to stay on their medicines for years.
- Sometimes a child or teen may want to stop taking medicines because they feel better, but the reason they feel better is because the medicines are working. Stopping the medicines without the advice of a doctor can make symptoms worse.
- Some medicines need to be slowly lowered to avoid bad side effects. Encourage the child or teen to always talk to his or her doctor before making any changes to medicines.
- Children and adolescents may respond to medicines differently than adults. Watching the child closely may be needed; note any changes and report them to the prescribing doctor at the next appointment. If there are immediate concerns or questions, contact the prescribing doctor right away instead of waiting.

Studies on teens who are pregnant and need behavioral health medicine are limited. Studies do show that there may be risks to the baby depending on the medicine and the term of the pregnancy when the medicine is taken. Each teen's needs are different and the health care Provider should talk about the benefits and risks of all medicines. For additional information about medicines, go to the National Institute of Mental Health website at [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/mental-health-medications/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/mental-health-medications/index.shtml).



## Dental care

There are different reasons why some people don't get regular dental care. Some people are afraid of the dentist. Others forget their appointments or don't have transportation. But everyone needs to have regular dental care. Dental care is typically covered by the physical health plan. Anyone can call the Member Services departments of their physical health plans to get information about dental care benefits.

As a natural support, you could call the physical health plan for help in understanding dental benefits and to find a dentist close to home. Here are a few suggestions to help a child or teen with a behavioral health illness who is not getting regular dental care:

- Explain that going to the dentist is no different than going to a physical health care provider. Medical Assistance will pay for transportation if the person is set up through his or her county. Call PerformCare Member Services if you need help with this.
- Encourage the young person to talk to the dentist about fears of getting dental care. Talking to the dentist on the phone before the visit may lessen the fear.
- Make the dentist visit on the same day as other activities. Set up reminders on the calendar or refrigerator to avoid missing the visit.
- Remind the young person that routine mouth care is needed at least two times a day. This includes flossing daily.
- Encourage the young person to avoid sugary snacks since they lead to tooth decay and gum problems.
- Remind them that smoking and substance abuse can lead to cavities, stained teeth, and even oral cancer.

Psychiatric medicines can cause dry mouth. Dry mouth is uncomfortable and can lead to gum disease. Here are a few tips to help with dry mouth:

- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candies.
- Avoid soda, caffeine, and citrus drinks.
- Drink plenty of water to help the mouth stay moist.
- Use lip moisturizers as needed.
- Use over-the-counter artificial saliva as needed.





## General physical health

A number of studies have shown that people with a behavioral health illness are likely to have many physical health problems. They are at higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Gaps in health care and unhealthy lifestyle choices often lead to poor health. It is important that individuals with a behavioral health illness get the preventive and routine care they need. Encouraging them to contact their physical health plan to learn about their covered services is the first step. Routine care — such as yearly medical check-ups, tests, eye exams and immunizations (shots) — are important in preventing illness.

Both physical and behavioral health plans have Case Managers who work with people with chronic medical and behavioral issues. They can even work together with approval to create a care plan that will meet the person's needs and work toward removing barriers to care. Contact either plan and ask for a Case Manager to add more support and resources to getting healthy.



## Your role

Natural supports play a key role in helping young people with a behavioral health illness go through the health care system. Natural supports can help educate, assist, transport, and speak up for the person. Many studies show that natural supports can reduce stress, improve coping skills, and provide hope to people with behavioral health issues.

It is stressful being a support giver. Caring for a child or teen with a mental health, emotional, or substance abuse disorder can be exhausting and you will need time to recharge. Take a time-out for yourself and follow the same stress management techniques noted earlier.

It is important to remember that natural supports have their own needs. Support and education for natural supports are available to anyone through the local National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). To find your local NAMI chapter, visit [www.nami.org/Local-NAMI?state=PA](http://www.nami.org/Local-NAMI?state=PA).

For more help, PerformCare has a Family and Consumer Affairs Manager. Contact Member Services for assistance.

## Bibliography and resources

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**[www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm)**.
10. National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens website.  
**<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-facts/prescription-drugs>**
11. Partnership for Drug-Free Kids website. **[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)**.





Call Member Services at the toll-free number listed below for your county or area, and someone will answer your questions and help you with behavioral health services.

**Capital area**

Cumberland, Dauphin, Lancaster, Lebanon, and Perry counties

**1-888-722-8646**

**North Central region**

Bedford and Somerset counties

**1-866-773-7891**

Franklin and Fulton counties

**1-866-773-7917**

**Deaf or hard-of-hearing**

**1-800-654-5984 TTY or 711 PA Relay**

This handbook may be updated with additional text provided by the Department of Human Services or other information we feel is important for you to know.

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