



Concerned About Your Child

a part of the
FAMILY WORKBOOK SERIES
on
Mental Health & Depression



www.ErikasLighthouse.org


Erika's Lighthouse is a not-for-profit dedicated to educating and raising awareness about adolescent depression, encouraging good mental health and breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

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Erika's Lighthouse Family Workbook Two: Concerned About Your Child

Welcome to the Erika's Lighthouse Family Workbook: Concerned About Your Child. This workbook is designed to give families information about what to do if they are concerned about their child's mental wellbeing. This book is the second in a series. If you have not already read the first workbook, [We All Have Mental Health](#) , it is strongly suggested you do prior to continuing.

In the first workbook, we covered how you, as a parent, caregiver or family member, can promote good mental health, build resilience, and normalize conversations around mental health. Now, we are going to help guide you through how to support your child if you have concerns about their mental wellbeing.

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This workbook is based on the experiences of families experiencing childhood and teenage depression. It was written for families who are in similar situations. While Erika's Lighthouse consulted with clinical, therapeutic, legal and child development experts when developing this material, it makes no representations about the medical or psychological opinions expressed herein, nor does it accept responsibility for any actions taken as a result of the material or information contained in the workbook. Every child and family's situation is unique, and Erika's Lighthouse urges families to seek and find competent professional advice tailored to their own family's situation.

Understand Your Concerns

All of us, especially our children, experience feelings in our day that can derail us temporarily like stress, anxiety, sadness, frustration and anger. If we take our time to examine these feelings and have a strategy to manage them, they typically go away in a short period of time. We would typically call these everyday feelings. But sometimes, these feelings can seem overwhelming and they don't easily dissipate even with our best efforts. These overwhelming feelings will most likely need to be explored with a helping professional.

Before you can determine if your child may be experiencing a mental illness, it is important to know what may be happening. The most common mental health concerns experienced by young people are stress, anxiety and depression.



Stress

It seems like everyone today is stressed, and that includes our children. Stress is a normal part of life and is not “all bad.” On the positive side, stress helps motivate us to get things done and do our best. For example, feeling stressed about a project or test can motivate your child to study. Or knowing they have to be in the car for school at a certain time can help your child get ready in the morning.

Although some stress is OK, too much stress can be overwhelming. It can interfere with sleep, thinking and learning, and it can get in the way of your child enjoying life. Too much stress can cause problems for our bodies and our minds. Our children experience real stress, and it usually is caused by academics, family and social pressures like feeling disconnected, left out or bullying.

Often, what stands in the way of good mental health is unmanaged stress. When we have too much stress, we often experience physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches. It can also lead to mental illnesses, like anxiety or depression.

As a caring adult, it is often helpful to examine what causes you stress. There are many ways you can handle stress. It is important to know how you react to stressful situations in your life so that you can better manage these reactions and be a model to your child and those you care about. Demonstrating how to manage stress and use positive coping mechanisms is an excellent way to promote good mental health in your home.

Anxiety

Let's talk about anxiety. Anxiety can frequently lead to depression, or exist alongside it, in children and adolescents. In fact, depression is frequently experienced in tandem with other mental illnesses.

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of worry, fear and physical changes in the body. It is a general term used to describe a feeling of extreme worry or unease. Occasionally, all of us feel anxious, especially children. It's a natural and expected part of life. Think about it, have you felt anxiety creep up when faced with making an important decision? Maybe when you're trying to solve a problem? Or when you have a medical issue you have to

Stress is normal and good for us. Unmanaged stress is not.

face? Although worry and unease are typical in children, persistent or extreme forms of fear or worry could be due to anxiety or depression.

When a child feels anxiety that lasts a long time and prevents them from doing things such as going to school or seeing friends, then it can become an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are more than just temporary worry or fear. Having an anxiety disorder means the anxiety does not go away and can interfere with daily life, like school, work, job performance and relationships.

When we face something difficult or we face an unknown outcome, anxiety likes to turn that challenge, that unknown, into danger. Anxiety may present itself as fear or worry but can also make children irritable and angry. [Anxiety symptoms](#) can also include trouble sleeping, as well as physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, or stomachaches. Some children with anxiety keep their worries to themselves, so the symptoms can be missed.



Depression

Depression is a real disorder and it's very common. Between 15 to 20 percent of young people will struggle with depression before they reach adulthood. It's also serious. 90 to 98 percent of young people who take their lives have a diagnosable mental illness, usually depression.

**Depression is:
a mood disorder
common
serious
treatable**

But just as important as understanding the [Signs and Symptoms](#) of depression, we want everyone to understand what good mental health is, that everyone deserves to have good mental health, that you are not alone and there is always hope.

Depression can look different for everyone but in order for there to be a diagnosis of depression, you must have a particular [set of symptoms](#) that include a depressed mood or a loss of interest in activities that you once enjoyed. Changes in weight or appetite, trouble sleeping, feeling restless or slowed down, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness, inability to concentrate, and thoughts of death or suicide


are also common in a diagnosis of depression. These symptoms have to last for two weeks or longer in order to have the diagnosis of depression. What you're looking for is a change in behavior in your young person from what is typical.

Depression in adolescence looks a little different than what adult depression would look like. You might see more irritability. Teens are really good at pushing away people and not wanting them to be around. You might hear a self-defeating attitude, things like I'm not good enough, I'm not pretty enough, I'm not strong enough, I'm not smart enough. There is likely going to be some odd sleeping habits, such as more time in bed but less time sleeping. Substance use, aggression, getting into more fights, more acting out, more risk-taking are common.

You might see problems in school. Changes in the way we think are often the first sign of depression. Grades may be fine, but thinking might be more difficult or it may take them longer to do their work. You can learn more about depression with our [Primer on Depression](#).

Risk Factors




There are known risk factors for mental illness and depression. These include a family history of depression or suicide, family dysfunction, prenatal damage from alcohol abuse, substance misuse, medication, tobacco or other trauma, low birth weight, poverty, abuse, neglect and multiple, frequent life stressors. Children who are the victims of bullying and children who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or queer) are at a higher risk for depression. Check out a list of particularly [At-Risk Populations](#) .

It's important to note that these are risk factors, not definitive predictors. In other words, these conditions put a person at a higher risk for depression, but they do not cause the disorder and their presence does not necessarily mean that the disorder will manifest itself. In fact, researchers believe that some combination of genetic and environmental factors are responsible for triggering mental disorders like depression.

Supporting Your Child

Being A Trusted Adult

We need to encourage kids to identify who a [Trusted Adult](#)  is in their life. A trusted adult is defined as someone your child can confide in when they need help or support, someone they can talk to, who won't make them feel silly or embarrassed. It might be you, or another family member, or maybe it's a teacher from their school, a school social worker or counselor, maybe their coach or religious leader. It doesn't matter who it is, what's important is that our kids feel like they have someone they can go to if they're concerned about themselves, have questions or just want to talk. This person should be able to listen without judgment, be able to offer advice, be supportive, and get the child to the help that they might need, if they are not a mental health professional.

If you speak to your child about your concerns, they may shut down, or avoid the conversation. However, if they tell you who they would be comfortable talking to, take advantage of that information. Ask that person to speak with your child about your concerns. They may be able to break through.

Setting up a supportive environment, normalizing conversations around mental health, and demonstrating to your child that you are there to support them will go a long way to building trust and confidence that they can come to you.

Trust Your Gut and Use Your Data

Let's talk about ways that you can support your child. First and foremost, trust them and trust yourself. We know that children feel stress. They have big feelings and they can't always recognize or verbalize them. Your child may experience difficult situations and emotions and it's really important that we're there to listen first and not necessarily problem-solve for them.

Over 90% of people that die by suicide have a mental illness. Depression is the most common.

It's important to trust your gut and if you suspect that something's going on and that your child is experiencing mental distress, even if they can't express that to you, have a conversation with them about how you can support them and get them the attention they need.

A helpful tool for you might be a [Mental Health Checklist](#). You can use this to start to record what you are seeing. It might be helpful for you to take this to the doctor, school social worker or counselor. The first nine items are the signs and symptoms of depression. The list includes other behaviors that you might be observing, like disrespect, withdrawal, crying or excessive risk-taking.

If you see that your child has something that's really concerning, ask yourself these things:

- Has there been a change in my child's behavior that is different from two weeks or a month ago?
- Is there a cause for this change?
- How is my child functioning?
- Are their grades slipping?
- Are they having a really hard time paying attention in class?
- Do they seem less interested in doing things that they once did?
- Do they no longer want to socialize?

Kids are changing rapidly at this developmental stage. They have growing bodies. They have hormones and mood changes. They tend to want to spend more time with their peers than with their families. But, we can still watch for their changes in behavior, thoughts and emotions that impact, and interfere with, everyday living and functioning.

It's really hard sometimes to tell the difference between what is typical adolescent behavior and is an emotional or mental health concern. If you have a child that prefers to be by themselves, you may just have a more introverted child and that is absolutely fine. Your child just needs more time alone to recharge their batteries. But this can also be a sign that your child is pulling away from others. Your child may want to drop an activity that they've participated in for years. This can be typical. Often, teens take on too much and need to let go of certain activities because they've developed a new interest. That's perfectly normal, but it can also be an indication of loss of pleasure in life's activity.

Ask questions of your child. If your child has trouble sleeping one night and has trouble getting to school the next day, is that normal anxiety over a test or a fight with a friend? Or is it part of a larger issue? There is a wide range of what is typical. Knowing your child is going to be the best way for you to tell when something is changing or is not part of your child's typical behavior. Our job is to be observant, to ask questions and to trust our gut.



Talking to Your Child

So then how do you talk to your child if you're concerned? You can say things like: I notice you're spending more time in your room than you used to, I care about you, is everything okay?, let's come up with a plan together, you deserve to feel better. Maybe they don't want to have that conversation with you. Maybe you need to find someone that they feel comfortable talking to. While it's hard to hear that as a parent, it's good to recognize that having your child be able to have that conversation with someone in their life is really important.

This conversation is done ideally in private in a time where emotions aren't raging, when you haven't just had a huge argument. It should be at a time when everyone is calm and you can say: I notice, I care, let's come up with a plan. Learn more through our [Model Language for Families](#) or our [Depression Discussion Guide](#). If you are concerned about your child, have a conversation with them. It's best to keep the language simple, like:

- I notice you've been pulling away.
- I notice you haven't smiled lately.
- I notice you're having difficulty completing your school assignments.
- I care about you, so let's figure out what's going on.
- You deserve to feel better.
- Do you want to talk to someone?



Simple language is going to help you stay calm and be able to really listen to your child. No one likes to have these tough conversations, but it is your job to listen and to validate their feelings. Kids tell us that nothing is more hurtful to them than when their feelings are not taken seriously.

When speaking with them, use the information you collected in the [Mental Health Checklist](#). It will help you refocus your conversation on what you have seen and why you are concerned.

It's your job to take action and follow up. When kids are struggling they want to know that someone is there for them. Let your child steer the ship as to how much help they need, but make sure they get that help. Parents and family members are often the first to notice when a child has an issue. If you suspect an issue, or have questions, it's important to contact a mental health professional. You can learn more about how to take action

by reading the third workbook in this series [Getting Help for Your Child](#).

Finally, there should be no shame and no blame. Guilt and shame might prevent you from giving the kind of support that your child needs. A mental illness is no one's fault.

Setting a Supportive Environment


If you are concerned about your child, it is even more important to foster supportive environments at home. Creating healthy meals and snacks is a really easy step to help promote good mental health. Nutrition plays a big role in mental health. Encouraging exercise as well as quiet time are also important. Lots of research suggests the benefits of being active, both for our body and our mind. Make sure that your child is getting enough sleep. Young people need at least eight hours of sleep.

Normalize Conversations

[Workbook One: We All Have Mental Health](#) offers extensive ways to encourage good mental health or promote positive coping mechanisms. However, there are other ways to help. One way is to set up a [Shared Vocabulary](#) in your home, so


Consider adopting a code word so you know when a conversation is a priority.

everyone is using the same language. Also consider a code word or phrase. We all have a lot happening, so perhaps your family could benefit from a particular word or phrase that everyone knows means we need to prioritize a conversation. It can be something as simple as watermelon or asphalt.


Seek opportunities to have conversations with your child, asking them how they feel today. A [Feelings Thermometer](#)  could be a great tool to use with your child. As we climb up in temperature on the thermometer, our feelings become more uncomfortable. You can use the thermometer to discuss with your child what was wrong in their day, and how they can take care of themselves to lower the temperature.

Encourage Positive Coping Mechanisms




We all want good mental and physical health. But how do we attain, and then keep it? We live in a world that constantly places stress on us, stress that can have an impact on our bodies and our minds. So, what can we do to lessen the impact of stress and increase our capacity for good mental health? Take care of yourself is the simple answer. [Positive Coping Mechanisms](#)  are strategies that we use to keep ourselves mentally healthy. Good mental health is good physical health. Here are a few ideas for you and your family.

Manage activities that are stressful. Of course, we can't avoid all things that are stressful in life, but we can manage at least some of them. The first thing to do is to identify those things that make you or your child feel stressed. You can then work to manage those situations—eliminate them altogether if you can, spend as little time doing them as possible, prepare and recover from them by doing something that relaxes you before and after, or talk to a

trusted friend/adult about the situations and brainstorm ways of dealing with them. These seemingly simple ideas can help you reduce the overall stress in your daily life. You can view our helpful tips on [Managing Your Depression](#) .

Do more activities that are not stressful. What do you and your children like to do? Paint? Read? Hike? Spend more time with friends? Listen to music? Do more of it!

Practice gratitude in your home. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation of what you have in life and an acknowledgment of the good in life, including the good qualities of others. In research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater optimism, happiness and a greater sense of belonging. It helps you focus on what you have, instead of what you lack. Use a [Gratitude Jar or Journal](#)  to help practice.

Take Care of Yourself

Of equal importance is taking care of yourself so that you can face and deal with problems or difficult situations in a calm, appropriate and successful manner. You can do something you love, journal, mindfulness exercises, meditation, breathing, or whatever works for you. Practice your own coping skills and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Many of the good mental health strategies shared above can work for you as well, in particular, [Deep Breathing Exercises](#) are incredibly beneficial to refocus our minds. It is also important to remember what we can and cannot control. This can be difficult for families, especially when it involves our children, but is vital for our own mental health. Consider completing the [Circle of Control](#) activity to remind yourself of our own capabilities and limitations.

Mental health is balance. It's the ability to manage our stress, to deal with our emotions and achieve our potential. Even small improvements in nutrition, sleep, exercise and coping strategies really can help us better manage stress and achieve mental health. Everyone deserves good mental health.



Additional Resources & Activities

You can learn more about how teen depression looks in real kids from our [Level III: Depression Education & Suicide Awareness](#) video.

Continue reading the *Family Workbook Series on Mental Health & Depression* with:

[One: We All Have Mental Health](#) and

[Three: Getting Help for Your Child](#).

We also have Family Workshops available for a better understanding of mental health, depression and suicide. These free workshops available on-demand:

[Family Workshop I: We All Have Mental Health](#) and

[Family Workshop II: Depression & Suicide](#).

Also check out our full suite of programs, resources and activities available for families at www.ErikasLighthouse.org/Families.

Support Our Work

Erika's Lighthouse provides free, donor-funded programs and resources to school communities around the world. Our work, to revolutionize how schools approach mental health, is only possible because of individuals like you financially supporting our work. Join us today at www.ErikasLighthouse.org/Get-Involved/.



www.ErikasLighthouse.org