

Vermont Department of Mental Health

MENTAL HEALTH

AWARENESS MONTH

Week One

May 2020

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Each year we celebrate mental health through the month of May. This year has an added focus with the current coronavirus pandemic.

Everyone has mental health. Mental health is an important part of our overall health. It's important to know that we all, at some point in our lives, have depression, anxiety, ongoing anger and other difficult feelings that don't go away easily or quickly. There are effective treatments that can help us regain our mental health and wellness. And for those of us — nearly one in five — who live with mental illness, wellness and recovery is possible.

Throughout the month, we will share ideas about how to take care of ourselves and support others during what is an uncertain and nervous time for all of us. While feeling worried or sad are completely normal emotions to be experiencing given current events, there are things we can do to help keep that anxiety or sadness under control and allow us to function and even thrive.

Thinking About Mental Health

Most people can name lots of ways to measure physical health: strong muscles and bones that carry us through the day, internal organs that work well, an immune system that kills germs and repairs injuries. You don't need a doctor to know you are OK.

Mental health is harder to define. We know what it's like to be happy, sad, angry, or content. But how much of any emotion is too much? At what point does joy become frenzy? When does anger turn to rage? How much sorrow does it take to have sadness become depression?

Though there are no easy answers, there is a simple way to think about mental health. We have good mental health when we can manage our emotions.

The same situation might make two different people feel very different emotions. But it is how we react to our emotions that effects our mental health. People who can name their feelings and talk about them are better at getting out of a slump. They notice what they are feeling and are quicker to figure out why they feel stressed. That makes it easier to choose what to do the next time to relax and feel better.

For Families

As a parent, we can teach our children how to identify and talk about their feelings. The ways we act when we are angry, upset, worried, sad, or happy and joyful effect how our children will behave when they feel those things. We can also talk with our children about how we handle stress and stay calm when under pressure.

Most importantly, we can let our children know that they matter. We can help them see that everyone, of any age, with any abilities, has value and can help others. Whether at home with siblings or pets, at school with friends or teachers, or in the community with clubs, sports, and recreation, each of us has something to give. Each of us can make a difference. Showing children how they fit in will help them see meaning in life as they grow. And having a purpose can help us through even the toughest and most troubling times.

As parents, we can help our children develop helpful mental health habits. Let's start today.



Resources:



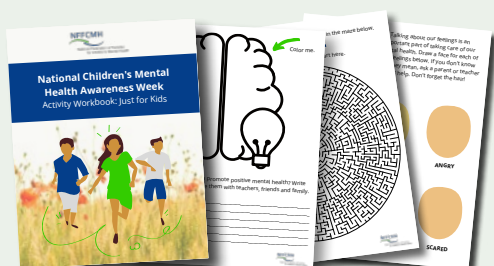
You Are Not Alone

Available 24/7 – If you need help, text VT to 741741

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 at 800-273-8255

Dial 2-1-1 to find mental health services in your area

Vermont Peer Support Line – open 24 / 7
Call or text 833-888-2557



The National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health has activities, worksheets and videos for children and youth on various mental health topics. Here is one [Activity Workbook: Just for Kids](#). Others can be found [here](#).

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What is Mental Health Wellness?

Wellness includes any steps we take to stay healthy physically, mentally and emotionally. Taking care of our wellness doesn't mean we will never be sick or depressed. But when we do get sick, we will be stronger and bounce back faster. Wellness comes from positive steps we take today for a better tomorrow.

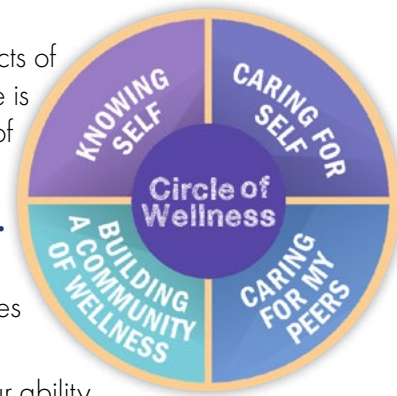
It is important our children know about wellness, too. We can talk with our children about the effects of substance use, for example. We can also talk about healthy food choices, and why regular exercise is important. We can also make sure our children know that being kind and generous to others is part of health and wellness.

The Umatter Circle of Wellness helps parents promote wellness for their children.

Examples:

Physical health- We can manage diabetes with medication, or we can prevent diabetes with a lifestyle of healthy eating and exercise. That's wellness.

Mental health- We can live with the stress of a bully at school or work, or we can build our ability to cope by practicing mindfulness, learning to be assertive, and getting help. That's wellness.



Knowing Self

A big part of parenting is teaching children to know themselves. Some questions we can talk about with our children are: What makes me angry? How do I handle setbacks? When am I happiest?

Children who can answer questions like these are better able to get help when they need it. They can figure out what they need in the moment and choose how to respond.

Caring for Self

Children need positive strategies for self-care. They might be physically hurt or get sick. They might get angry with a friend, or family member, or feel rejected by a friend. Talking with you or another adult about what they can do to feel better, can help a child cope well. You might ask the child

- What have you done in the past to get through a hard time?
- Who are the adults you trust?
- Do you know where you can get help?
- What helps you?

When children can answer these questions, they are building wellness resources for their future ability to cope and bounce back. This is also known as resilience.

Building a Community of Wellness

The sense of connection that grows through caring for friends strengthens everyone. We all have greater wellness as we build more connections with others. Whether your community is your town, neighborhood, street, or just your family, the health of others in that community affects the wellness of everyone.

As children learn the Circle of Wellness, they begin to see how they can make a difference in the Big Picture for others. Knowing our role as a helper in our community gives us hope for the future.

As an adult in the life of a child, you matter. You can teach that we all matter. And that is a part of wellness.

Caring for My Friends

A good way to care for ourselves is to care for others. The sense of meaning and wellbeing we derive from helping friends, family, and neighbors boosts our own wellness. Children who have learned to share, to understand others' feelings or to ask about the health of others, build their own wellness. When children teach other children, or care for a pet, they build their own wellness. Parents can model and encourage this behavior.

Resources:



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Caring During COVID

It can be challenging enough to be able to care for yourself and others during regular times, let alone during a worldwide pandemic. To help, experts at the Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families have compiled some tips and exercises you can try. Remember, physical distancing doesn't have to mean cutting yourself off from others, it just requires new strategies and methods. During this time, people you care about may be especially eager to connect with you. Consider reaching out to them.

http://med.uvm.edu/vccyf/resources_group/resources_for_families

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Week Three

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How Do I Feel? — Building Emotional Literacy

Being able to name and describe our emotions is a key part of wellness. It is also an important first step on the path towards managing emotions so that we feel better. “Don’t worry, be happy!” is easier said than done. Yet at the same time, we know that a positive mood helps us make better decisions. We’re also more creative when we feel “up,” and we are better at solving problems. We get along better with others, as well.

That said, feeling anger, anxiety or sadness is normal. There is no reason to deny or feel ashamed of those emotions. At the same time, it helps if we can manage these emotions so they don’t push us around and run our lives. And in fact, there is a lot we can do to help ourselves feel better.

How well do you know your own emotions?

How do you act when you’re feeling them? Some people feel emotions in different parts of their body like their muscles or stomach ([click here to learn more](#)). For others, emotions come with a lot more words and thoughts. What is it like for you? Can you notice your emotions but not let them run your life?



Try the exercises below to find out.

1. Think about how you act when you’re angry, scared, happy, disgusted or surprised (you can write this out if you want). Now think about how others might see you when you have these feelings. If it feels okay, ask someone close to you if they agree with your description.
2. Find a quiet place to sit comfortably and focus on taking slow and steady breaths. As thoughts and feelings come into your mind, try to notice them without judgment and see if you can just let them float away like a cloud drifting in the sky. Come back to your breathing and notice the next thought or feeling that comes. Try this for five minutes.

Knowing your feelings is important. So is knowing what to do to help yourself feel better more of the time. Getting regular exercise is important. Keeping a routine to make sure you sleep eight hours a night is key. Try practicing [mindfulness](#), taking time to feel gratitude and finding ways to help others ([mindfulness for children and youth](#)). Using drugs or alcohol may feel helpful when we feel stressed or down, but often makes things worse in the long run. Some specific tips and exercises can be found at the [Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families](#). Many people can also benefit from [working with a mental health professional](#) to help build these important skills.



KID'S TABLE

Children don't know about emotions on their own. Just like other skills, they need help making sense of their feelings. Parents can be important teachers of these abilities. How we are with our children is key. Are we happy to see them? Do we take time just to be with them? Do we ask them what they're thinking about and listen closely as they tell us? And what about when we feel angry, sad, or anxious? What kind of example do we set for our children? If we manage our feelings and talk about them, it can help our children do it too. The sooner children can name an emotion, the better they will be able to manage how they respond to the feeling.

Play Name that Emotion with your children. Ask them to look at the faces below. Ask if they can name the emotion each face is showing. Ask how they can tell. Listen carefully and tell them what you heard them say. If your child has trouble naming an emotion, you could make the face and ask them to make it too. Ask again what the emotion is. If your child still can't name one of the emotions, you could describe how you feel when you make that face, to help your child name the emotion.



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Week Four

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Offering Help

What can we do when someone is down and needs help? What do we do when we are concerned and want to talk about it? And what if the person we're concerned about is a child?

For starters, when we talk with children about good mental health, it is important to make it clear that moods and emotions are different. The cause of our mood is wide-ranging and hard to pin to a specific event. The cause of an emotion, on the other hand, can be connected to something specific that happened. When we are concerned about someone, we can ask them about their emotions and their moods. It can open the door to talking and lead to getting help when it is needed.

When a child, adolescent or young adult is experiencing a low mood over an extended period of time- days or weeks- it is important to make a connection, check in, and offer help. We can tell them we notice they have been low lately and we are checking in because we care about them. It is okay to ask questions. We need to be prepared for what we may hear and avoid acting shocked, interrupting, or offering advice. We need to just listen! We can say back to them what we hear, and ask, "Do I have that right?" That will encourage more conversation.

People are more likely to share what is concerning them when we simply listen. Interrupting, offering advice, minimizing the problem, or arguing about whether their feelings are right or wrong will decrease the chance that they will talk. It is important to remember that everything people do is done to meet a need. If we don't get what we need, we may become frustrated to the point of choosing dangerous or self-destructive behavior in the hope that will solve our problem.

While it is rare, some people – including children and adolescents – may feel so low and disconnected from others that they consider self-harm, up to and including suicide. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents.

We know that some people are at higher risk of self-harm and suicide due to things in their lives that they may have little or no control over. When children grow up in poverty, for example, or if there is violence at home, they may have more difficulty meeting their needs and dealing well with stress. A list of factors that can put us at higher risk of self-harm or suicide is below, but it is important to remember that most people who have these risk factors do not go on to attempt suicide. It is also important to be aware of them, to pay attention to our children's moods and emotions, and to offer opportunities to talk.

Factors that put someone at risk for suicide

- Poverty
- Violence at home, school or work
- Verbal, emotional or sexual abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Easy access to a firearm
- Divorce of parents/partner
- Harsh or inconsistent discipline styles
- Loss of a loved one or a significant relationship
- Poor health mentally or physically
- Lack of life skills
- One or more prior suicide attempts
- Academic failure
- Unrealistic expectations of oneself or inability to accept failure
- Rejection by peers
- Harassment due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity
- Bullying or being bullied at school/work
- Moving to a new community
- Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Incarceration
- Natural disaster
- Lack of support services

U matter Suicide Prevention offers these steps to help someone who may be at risk of suicide:

1. Show You Care

- ◆ Listen. Give the person your full attention.
- ◆ Be supportive and non-judgmental.
- ◆ Be honest and direct. Speak slowly and calmly.
- ◆ Be positive and reassuring.
- ◆ Acknowledge the person may feel very sad, alone or in pain.

2. Ask About Suicidal Intent

- ◆ "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- ◆ "Do you have thoughts of killing yourself?"

3. Get Help

- ◆ "You are not alone. Help is available."

You can find help through any of these sources listed here.

Remember: Talking, reaching out for help can be just what someone needs to move from a place of aloneness and isolation to a place of connection and hope.

Adolescents may find these conversations awkward. There are some videos to help us to [Seize the Awkward!](#)



Helping Children Who are Nervous About "Restarting"

Vermonters have been staying home and staying safe for a long time. While many children are eager to see their friends and return to their regular activities, the transition can still be difficult. Here is how you can help.

- ◆ **Take stock of your own feelings to help separate your emotions from theirs.** Your own anxiety might influence how you perceive your child and could influence their own level of fear.
- ◆ **Talk about it.** This can help children feel better and will give you a better idea of the many reason your child might be hesitant.
- ◆ **Take things in small steps.** If your child is nervous about returning to a childcare center, consider a visit (if possible) before opening day, or planning a "warm hand-off" with someone your child can meet beforehand.