

ROADMAP TO BACK TO SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH



FOR PARENTS

**A new normal doesn't
have to be scary.**

BACK TO SCHOOL SEASON IS AN EXCITING TIME, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE NERVE-RACKING.

This year is unique in so many ways, and being mindful about how to support mental wellbeing during this time can go a long way to make the experience smoother for both kids and parents.

This guide is a resource for parents with children of all ages to learn more about mental stress during this time. Read on for tips to increase wellbeing in both your child and yourself. A new normal doesn't have to be so scary.

What is mental wellbeing, and why is it important during back to school time?

Mental wellbeing is a sense of emotional and cognitive wellness that is fueled by feelings of belonging, safety, and meaning in one's life (more info [here](#)). While it is always important, its importance becomes stronger during life changes, such as going back to school.

The back to school season usually causes stress because of the many unknowns related to it. Some common questions kids have include:

“What will the new school year be like?”

“Will the classes be hard?”

“Am I prepared?”

“What will my teacher(s) and classmates be like?”

“Will I fit in?”

And the questions that parents have are often similar, with the addition of,

“Will my kids be happy this school year?”

“Will they do well?”

“Did I do enough to prepare them?”

“Will they manage ok?”

Not knowing the answers to these questions can cause stress that takes a toll on mental wellbeing. However, there are also simple actions you can take to help manage this stress, as we outline in this guide.

WHY IS THIS SCHOOL YEAR UNIQUE?

Although there might be excitement about getting back to learning in a way that looks more like pre-pandemic times, discomfort about the uncertainty is normal. Adapting to remote or hybrid learning took a lot of energy, and the thought of adapting to another learning approach this year can be exhausting. Ongoing COVID-related anxiety covid-related anxiety can also make it difficult to ease into a new school year.

The bigger the change, the bigger the possibility for mental stress. This year, we are returning to schools that look different after a year no one expected, and this shift can cause both stress and opportunity for growth.

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HOW TO MANAGE STRESS DURING BACK TO SCHOOL

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For your child/children

#1 PAY ATTENTION

Look out for signs of mental health concerns like these:

Body	Mind	School and Friendships
Changes in appetite	Irritability, feeling down, or other changes in mood	Change in academic performance or attitude toward school
Shifts in energy (fatigue, taking long naps every day)	Feeling anxious, or worrying about typical daily activities	Signs that your child is being bullied or is bullying others
Difficulty sleeping	Trouble breathing, or new nervous habits/behaviors	Wanting to stay home from school more often
Headaches, stomachaches, nausea, or other aches or pains	Avoiding responsibilities	Isolating themselves, feeling lonely, or less interested in friends
Feeling jittery or needing to move constantly	Difficulty thinking clearly	Losing interest in activities or friends they used to enjoy
Not taking care of themselves (personal hygiene, wearing dirty clothes)	Feeling defeated or hopeless	

More information from: [On Our Sleeves](#), [NAMI](#), [Mental Health America](#)

Sometimes clues that your child is dealing with back to school stress can be difficult to catch, so try to pay close attention to changes. The more they're dealing with, the more support they may need. Here are a few resources and tools to help you support your child...

If your child talks about or shows signs of self-harm or suicidal thoughts, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text the **Crisis Text Line** by texting: "START" to 741-741.



If there is an immediate safety concern, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

#2 ACTIVELY SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL WELLBEING

Don't wait for the problem to get so big that it's unmanageable. Here are some tools to support your child during the back to school time even if they only seem a little nervous.

Talk it out

Engage in discussion about what is worrying your kid about returning. Only after that and fully validating their feelings, you might ask them to consider the bright side about returning to school.

Use teamwork

Engage in a collaborative process with your child around managing the stress of going back. Ask them what they think would be helpful to address their fears/discomforts.

Get creative

Consider other ways of creating a supportive environment when addressing back to school stress. Depending on the age of your child, writing, drawing, using clay, or using action figures to express

feelings could be less intimidating than just talking.

Enlist others

If your child is having a tough time, reach out to their teacher or support people in their school so they can get further help. Explain to your child why you're doing this so it doesn't surprise them. Also consider reaching out to a mental health clinician to work with your child if they're having trouble functioning or their difficulties don't improve after a couple weeks.

Create fun to look forward to

Plan an after school or weekend activity during the first week of school that your child can look ahead to with excitement. This will make the back to school adjustment not feel like the only thing in their life right now.

Plan ahead

Run through with your child how the days will look and the details of their schedule. Do this in a fun way, perhaps with drawing, stickers, etc.

More information from: [ADAA](#), [AFSP](#), [Bring Change to Mind](#), [Child Mind Institute \(a\)](#), [Child Mind Institute \(b\)](#), [Jed](#), [Mental Health America \(a\)](#), [Mental Health America \(b\)](#), [On Our Sleeves\(a\)](#), [On Our Sleeves \(b\)](#), [The Steve Fund \(a\)](#), [The Steve Fund \(b\)](#), [The Trevor Project \(a\)](#), [The Trevor Project \(b\)](#)

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

Here are some specific things you can say to start the conversation about back to school stress.

“It’s ok if going back to school feels hard this year. It would be hard for me too.”



Be sure to adapt these to an age-appropriate level for your child.

“What feels hard about going back to school? What feels exciting? It’s normal to have different feelings about the same thing.”

“How are you feeling about going back to school?”

“It’s ok to ask for help, and you can always ask me.”

“I noticed you haven’t liked talking about going back to school (or any other behavior you’ve seen that shows they are nervous). That’s ok. If you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

More information from:
[Bring Change to Mind,](#)
[On Our Sleeves](#)



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For yourself

#1

Pay attention to your own mental wellbeing

Mind	Body
Trouble concentrating	Low energy
Feeling irritated, worried, or preoccupied by back to school tasks	Feeling distant, foggy, or not like yourself
Feeling down or sad most of the day	Difficulty sleeping
Lack of interest in activities you typically enjoy	Feeling fearful about your child attending school
Guilt or shame about how you are filling your roles (e.g., parent, partner, friend, colleague)	Changes in appetite, body aches, headaches, tension, nausea, or chest pain
Difficulty making decisions	

#2

Actively support yourself

Get organized:

Create two lists - one of your worries related to back to school (to address your emotional needs) and one of your to-dos to get your kid ready for back to school (to address your practical needs).

Put things into

perspective:

Remind yourself that your kid has done difficult things before, and so have you – you'll both be able to get through this adjustment. You can also consider specific coping strategies you have used for difficult situations in the past and

use them here. Chances are what's been helpful before will be helpful again today.

Take care of yourself:

Be purposeful about taking time for your own self-care. You might feel pressure to support your child as much as possible, and while that's important, you can only do that if you are well taken care of. Thinking of 3 specific ways to engage in self-care this week and actually putting them on your calendar can ensure that your wellbeing doesn't get pushed to the backburner (more [info](#)).

Don't go it alone:

Reach out to friends or family for support. This can be a tough time for not only children but parents as well.

More information from:
[Child Mind Institute](#)

WHY BACK TO SCHOOL IS A GOOD TIME TO CREATE MENTAL WELLBEING

The back to school time, although it can cause stress, provides a unique opportunity for growth. Periods of transition allow you to do things in a new and improved way. This is a good time to create healthy habits for both physical and mental wellbeing. For example, if you're not used to checking in on your child's mental health, this could be the time to start. Take the back to school time as an opportunity to bond, connect, and support your child through this change.

More information from:

[On Our Sleeves](#)

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RESOURCES

For Further Learning

Bring Change to Mind*

is a nonprofit dedicated to encouraging dialogue about mental health and raising awareness about mental illness stigma and discrimination. Check out some of their multimedia campaigns and storytelling content [here](#), their [Talk Tool](#) to explore the many ways you can talk about mental health with people in your life, and their [High School Program](#) to give teens a platform to raise awareness around mental health.

The Child Mind Institute

is a nonprofit organization dedicated to understanding and treating children's mental health and learning disorders. Here are their [resources for families](#) with detailed information about children's mental health concerns, disorders, and resources.

Girls Inc.*

is a nonprofit inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold through direct service and advocacy. Here's their [resource library](#) with fact sheets and articles about how to talk to

your kids, as well as [tips for encouraging young girls](#).

Jed

is a nonprofit organization promoting emotional health and suicide awareness and prevention among teens and young adults. Here is their [resource center](#) with tips and information about promoting young adult mental health. They also offer [campus based programs and guides](#) for high school and college students.

On Our Sleeves

is an organization working to end the stigma around children's mental health. Here is their [Back to School Wellness Tool Guide](#) with information on how to prepare children for back to school.

The Steve Fund

is an organization dedicated to supporting the mental health of young people of color. Here is their [blog](#) with information for students and families.

The Trevor Project *

is a nonprofit organization that provides crisis and suicide intervention services for LGBTQ youth. Here is their [resources](#) with information for LGBTQ youth and allies, and here is their [support center](#) for school-related topics.

*** Saks Fifth Avenue Foundation Partners**

For more information on mental health and wellbeing across various areas, check out the Mental Health Coalition's [Resource Library](#).

