

### Back to School Tips for Better Mental Health

Summer is wrapping up, and many of you are prepping to get back in the swing of things with school. If the thought of going back to school fills you with dread and anxiety, you're not alone. Going back to school can be stressful for the student, parent and family. Everyone needs some time to transition.

I spoke with Susan Lindblad, PhD, the school psychologist for Hastings Public Schools, and asked her what she suggests for promoting mental health and a positive attitude as school begins. She shared these tips to help you, your student and the whole family reduce stress as you navigate into the beginning of a new school year:

1. Schedule physicals, eye appointments, dental checkups early, and share any concerns you may have with your medical provider.
2. Review all information from the school as it arrives. Make a commitment to completing all required paperwork early and returning it to the school.
3. Mark your calendar. Put all the important dates in your calendar now, including Open Houses, Parent-Teacher Conferences, athletic or music events, etc. This is especially important if you have multiple children at multiple schools.
4. Work with your children to establish an after-school routine. Determine a schedule for your children to play after school, complete chores and homework, and have dinner, as well as bath time, reading time, and bedtime.
5. Organize spaces. Set aside a location for children to complete homework. Younger children will likely need to complete homework in an area that is quiet, yet has adequate supervision and monitoring. Older children may have the option of studying in their room or another quiet area. Designate areas for children to leave their backpacks, lunchbox, shoes, etc.
6. Help your child address any concerns sooner rather than later. Encourage your child to discuss concerns with his/her teacher, or accompany your child as he/she shares concerns with the teacher. For help addressing mental health concerns, reach out to your school counselor or school psychologist. Most schools have tiered interventions to assist youth who are experiencing social, emotional, or behavioral struggles, and your school counselor or psychologist can help connect your child with those services.

I learned from [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net) that half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14 and about 75 percent begin by the age of 24. It is important to know the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and to seek help. Dr. Lindblad suggests watching for the following signs:

1. Regressive behaviors, such as reverting to bedwetting, increased tantrums, or being excessively clingy to parents.
2. Frequent complaints of physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches.
3. Extreme mood changes, such as intense and prolonged temper tantrums or crying.
4. Significant changes in sleep or appetite.

Dr. Lindblad told me it is important to remember that children can display a variety of behaviors, and it is generally wise to not over-interpret those behaviors. More often than not, time and a few intervention strategies will remedy the problem. Most children are resilient and, with parental support and encouragement, will thrive throughout their school experiences.

However, it is also important to know that mental health issues are common and treatable. Free, confidential, and anonymous screening tools are available at Mental Health America. These tools can help you identify symptoms of behavioral, emotional or cognitive disorders that your child may be experiencing.

If you are concerned that someone you care about is experiencing symptoms of mental distress or mental illness, it is important to act. Start the conversation and seek help from a trusted individual. Remember there is nothing to be ashamed of and that there is help and hope.

I also reached out to Brindi Streufert, PsyD, a behavioral health consultant for Mary Lanning Healthcare clinics. She had several suggestions and tips for promoting complete family mental health:

- Get good sleep. Sleep improves attention, concentration, learning, and memory. It decrease risk of developing mental illness, while improving management of existing mental illness. Sleep also improves the immune system and lowers risks of disease.
- Get 30 minutes of moderate physical activity 5 days a week. Physical activity improves attention and concentration. It also improves management of mental illness and promotes resilience to stress. Physical activity improves sleep, improves self-esteem and increases energy.
- Limit screen time (TV, computer, video games, phone, tablet). Reduced screen time improves academic development and learning, decreases risk of obesity, decreases risk of depression and anxiety, and improves social skills and peer interaction.
- Eat dinner together as a family (without TV and electronics) at least 5 days a week. Family interaction enhances children's feelings of security and safety, promotes their language development and increases their likelihood of better grades in school. Eating together increases healthy eating and decreases likelihood of eating disorders. It also decreases teens' risk of drug and alcohol use and other risk-taking behaviors and improves emotional health and family relationships.

While we can't always control what happens to us, we can work at how we respond to what life throws at us. This school year help your student and your family make smart choices about how to deal with difficult or uncomfortable feelings - and learn why your mental health matters. Just like with physical health, taking care of mental health struggles early can help to prevent more serious problems from developing in the future.

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