

# Supporting Mental Health

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are at a higher risk of experiencing mental illnesses than society as a whole. It can be difficult to diagnose a mental disorder in people with I/DD, especially if they have limited verbal communication. However, treatment is available for most mental illnesses.

Families, support workers, and disability professionals need to be alert for signs of mental health concerns and then seek advice from appropriate health professionals.



## Signs That a Person Might Have a Mental Health Issue

There are many mental illnesses. The most common include anxiety disorders where a person feels panicky most of the time and mood disorders where a person is overwhelmingly sad. If the person is very sad, confused, worried, angry, or scared and this lasts for an extended time or keeps coming back, then a mental health professional may be needed.

If a person's normal behavior changes, this might signify a mental health concern. For example, the person:

- Does not want to do things they would normally do.
- Seems anxious, down or very elated.
- Is hurting themselves or others.
- Appears to be talking to themselves.
- Has unusual changes in sleeping, eating patterns or in weight (gain or loss).
- Starts to have challenging behavior, it gets worse or the person's behavior seems to go in cycles – normal behavior, then unexplained harmful behaviors.

## What to Do if You See These Signs?

- Check with the person's doctor who can look for a medical cause for the behavior- like the person is in pain and cannot express it.
- A behavior support practitioner could look into the reasons for the behavior change, including: Is the person bored or frustrated by something? The practitioner can design behavior support strategies that address the cause of the behavior.
- In serious situations – such as the person appears to be suicidal or is harming themselves or others – you may need to get help from the local mental health crisis team or other emergency service.

**Mental Health Crisis Line: 988**

# Ways to Promote Positive Mental Health

## Encourage Activities that Promote Positive Mental Health Such as:

- Spend time with family and friends.
- Getting enough sleep.
- Being active.
- Eating healthy meals.
- Writing in a journal/diary/voice to text.
- Prayer/meditation.
- Having a positive outlook.
- Asking for help – It is OK!



## Finding a Suitable Mental Health Professional

When looking for a mental health professional, it is important to remember that it may take some time to find someone who meets the needs of the person.

Sometimes, primary care providers (PCPs) treat certain mental illnesses. Other times, they refer the person to a psychiatrist or other mental health provider.

Pediatricians sometimes treat mental illnesses in children with I/DD. However, they may also want the advice of a mental health professional.

Diagnosing the condition is often difficult with a person who has difficulty describing their thoughts and feelings. Also, mental illnesses sometimes have different symptoms for people with I/DD than they have for those without I/DD. Sometimes, a psychologist or other mental health professional will base treatment on a prediction about what is likely to be the person's mental illness and the person's response to the treatment helps clarify the diagnosis.

### Acknowledgement

The Iowa Taking Charge of My Health (TCMH) curriculum, including power points, worksheets and fact sheets is inspired by Oregon's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) Taking Charge of my Healthcare Toolkit which can be found at <https://www.ohsu.edu/oregon-office-on-disability-and-health/taking-charge-my-health-care>.

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The information provided is for general use and not medical advice or intended to address any individual situation.