

# Mental Health and HighSchool

a guide  
for  
**students**



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

# Acknowledgements

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# Welcome

Welcome to the students' guide to mental health and high school. In this guide we'll explore some of the issues related to being a teen and experiencing mental health problems and mental illness.

We'll also look at how mental health problems and mental illness can affect your life at school, and ways of dealing with some of the things you may be experiencing so that you can get through high school and get on with your life!

As you read through this guide, you'll come across lots of things that teens (and a few parents and school staff) told us about their experiences and thoughts about mental health and high school. Some of them got in touch with us through our website, and others took part in focus groups.

## Who's this guide for?

The information in this guide is for **all** teens struggling with mental health problems, whether or not you've got an actual diagnosis. That's because when you're a teen experiencing mental health problems, it can sometimes take a while to actually figure out what's going on—if what you're going through, like feeling down or stressed, is temporary, or if it could be a sign that a serious mental illness is a possibility. Either way, you're probably having a hard time dealing with the challenges of high school.

The purpose of this guide is to give youth who are having mental health problems some tools to help them get through high school and go on to work or further studies at college or university.

*So read on, and find out more about the issues that concern you!*

## Introduction

Why is it that we are happy discussing our physical aches and pains but not so keen to talk about our mental health? The truth is, our mental well-being is just as important as our physical health.

As a teenager you have to cope with lots of changes, both physical and emotional, and you need the support of friends and family to help you through. You'll be faced with growing independence, mood swings, new anxieties and realities.

Most people experience mental health problems at some time, and they can affect your ability to handle day-to-day situations and enjoy life. These problems can be caused by lots of different things, like stress at school, relationship problems or the death of someone close.

Sometimes your feelings can really get to you, and you may find you have a hard time dealing with them. We all get sad, angry or stressed out sometimes. Mental distress is common and can happen to anyone, so if you have moments when you feel you really can't cope, you're not alone.

Teenagers often worry that they may be "going crazy" when they are feeling stressed, confused or very upset. In fact, feelings like these are only rarely a sign of mental illness. Usually, they get a lot better if you talk about them to someone you trust.

Mental illness is far less common than mental health problems are, but still more common than you might think. As many as one in five teenagers have experienced a major mental disorder, so chances are that you or someone you know will have a mental illness if they haven't already.





## Mental health problems

Sometimes teens are afraid to talk about stuff because they are afraid that people will think they are crazy. That's because mental illness is still feared and misunderstood by many people. The sad thing is this prevents them from finding out how common and normal their struggles are. Even sadder, it means that when people are actually experiencing a mental illness it prevents them from receiving the kinds of help that will allow them to get better.

In this guide we talk about both “mental illness” and “mental health problems.” There's a difference between the two. When we say **mental illness**, we mean a diagnosable condition, like Bipolar Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), or Schizophrenia, and Depression that

## and mental illness

usually requires medical treatment. **Mental health problems** refers to the more common struggles and difficulties that affect everybody from time to time. Teens experiencing these types of problems may not require medical treatment, but can still benefit from some of the help and support that we talk about in this guide.

If you want more information about the differences between the normal ups and downs of being a teen, and some of the most common mental illnesses that affect youth, take a look at a cool resource called “Mood Swings.” It was developed by and for youth, and is available online in the Student Section of the Mental Health and High School website at [www.cmha.ca/highschool](http://www.cmha.ca/highschool).

## Signs of trouble

So, how do you know if what you (or a friend) are going through is something that you should be concerned about?

Here are some of the most common signs that there may be something serious going on.

Keep in mind that these symptoms are very general and could be signs of many different things, including just being a normal teenager. It is important, though, to be on the alert for such changes in thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviour especially when they last for a while, or keep coming back.

## Pay special attention if.....

*You are feeling:*

- really sad and hopeless without good reason and the feelings don't go away
- very angry most of the time, cry a lot, or overreact to things
- worthless or guilty a lot
- anxious or worried a lot more than other teens
- unable to get over a loss or death of someone important
- extremely fearful, or like you have unexplained fears or more fears than most teens
- constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance
- like you're detached from your life, disconnected from things and people around you
- like nothing matters to you anymore
- paranoid and suspicious of other people
- like your mind is being controlled or is out of control.

# Pay special attention if.....

*You notice big changes in the way you are getting along;  
for example, you:*

- ❑ do much worse in school
- ❑ lose interest in things you usually like doing
- ❑ have unexplained changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- ❑ avoid friends or family and want to be alone all the time
- ❑ daydream so much you can't get things done
- ❑ lose your motivation and energy (or sometimes the opposite – if you feel like you've got way too much energy)
- ❑ feel as if you can't handle life or consider suicide
- ❑ hear voices talking to you or about you.

*You find yourself repeatedly frustrated by:*

- ❑ not being able to concentrate, think straight or make up your mind.
- ❑ not being able to sit still or focus your attention.
- ❑ worrying a lot about being harmed, hurting others, or about doing something "bad."
- ❑ feeling like you have to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day in order to avoid danger.



# Pay special attention if.....

*You start behaving in other ways that cause you problems, for example:*

- ❑ using alcohol or other drugs.
- ❑ eating large amounts of food and then making yourself vomit or abuse laxatives.
- ❑ continuing to diet and/or exercise obsessively.
- ❑ repeatedly violating the rights of others or breaking the law without regard for other people.
- ❑ doing things that can be life threatening.

Unfortunately, the person who's going through these difficulties may not realize what's happening to them, or even that they're ill at all. This can be confusing and frustrating for those around them who are concerned and wish to help but do not understand what is happening.

Because the signs and symptoms of mental illness can come and go, and can be confused with other things, like normal teenage behaviour, it can take some time to figure out what's really going on.



## Getting help

*"We totally need help for those of us who are battling with ourselves to finish high school while having a mental illness."*  
**student who responded to our online survey**

*The trick is to know what's happening, and get help as soon as possible.*

So if you or someone you know might be having the sort of experiences described above, seeing a doctor (your family doctor is a good place to start) is a very good idea to get some help and advice. They can refer you to a specialist if necessary.

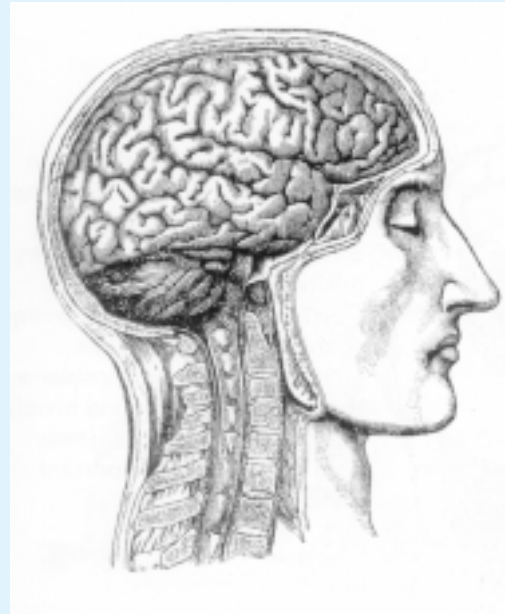
As with all serious illnesses, the sooner people get some proper help for mental illness, the quicker and easier they tend to get better. Not only that, but this sort of "early intervention" also means that people have a far greater chance of staying better too.

*"It would have helped if someone had confronted me about the fact that it seemed like I had a problem. I wasn't doing a good job of hiding it... (If they had)... confronted me in a caring way to make me aware that I needed help."*  
**student who took part in a focus group**

## Why does it happen?

Well, no one's quite sure of the exact cause of mental illness, but most current theories suggest that it has something to do with the chemistry of the brain.

There are a bunch of different things that have been identified as having a possible role in causing or triggering a mental illness to develop. Genetic factors, such as having a parent or close relative with a serious mental illness (like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder) will mean that a person will have a slightly greater chance of developing the condition. Severe or prolonged stress also does seem to play a part, and although we don't really know if it can cause mental illness, we do know that it can act as a trigger for the illness or make it worse.



## Can you recover from mental illness?

While there isn't really a "cure" for mental illness yet, people can and do get better with help and treatment.

The most important thing is to get help. It's important to note that medical treatment is a stepping-stone to wellness, not a cure. Most people combine good medical care with their own coping methods.

Most people now believe that in order to successfully deal with and recover from mental illness, you have to take into account several things, including:

- Biological influences:** things like general health and medical treatment
- Psychosocial influences:** things like a person's outlook, their friends and family
- Socioeconomic influences:** things like income, employment, and housing

Because all of these different influences play an important role in helping people get over mental illness, it's important that everyone has access to:

- 1) appropriate medical treatment, including medication and other kinds of therapy**
- 2) support from people like friends and family**
- 3) enough income, a decent place to live, and something meaningful to do (like school or work)**

Some people will get ill once, but others will be at risk of getting ill again. Today, many people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness talk about how they have been able to put the illness in perspective and get on with their life. Although some symptoms may remain at times, this experience of "recovery" brings new hope to teens who are experiencing mental illness for the first time.



## Who can you talk to?

People often try to deal with emotional problems themselves, but usually it isn't enough. Talking to other people you trust can give you a different perspective on your situation. They might have some ideas you hadn't thought of, or it may just be helpful talking to someone who understands what you're going through.

### Family

Often members of your family are the ones who can help you the most, in terms of getting things sorted out and getting better. Don't forget to talk to your parents, extended family members like aunts, uncles, grandparents (or other trusted adults outside your family) about what's going on with you.

*"My family has supported me during psychotic attacks and suicidal periods, reminding me that they love me and of my responsibilities."*

**student who took part in a focus group**



## What do your family members want you to know?

### You can talk to us!

We need to know what is going on with you. Even though you may sometimes feel like withdrawing into your room and not talking to us, we love you and want to help you get through the difficulties you're having. We can't help if we don't know what's going on.

### Let us help

When you're experiencing the pain and suffering that mental health problems can bring, you'll need the help and support of those around you to keep you going and help you succeed. Let us be your partners in dealing with your problems, and in talking to school staff and mental health professionals. You can't do it alone.

### Don't lose hope

When you are in the middle of a mental health crisis, things may seem very dark and bleak. Try not to forget that things will get better, and you will feel like your old self again, with some help and patience. It may be hard for us too sometimes, but we'll do our best to always be there to support and reassure you.

# Friends

For most teens going through high school, friends are just as important as grades. Friends and peers are an especially important source of support when you're going through tough times.

At the same time, you may find that you lose touch with some of your friends when you're dealing with your mental health problems. This can happen for several reasons - either because you've isolated yourself, or because they are scared away by the stigma or discomfort that people sometimes have about mental health problems and mental illness.

While friends can be helpful, and a good source of support, talking with them doesn't replace talking with your parents or other adults, like a doctor, teacher or guidance counsellor, who can help you get the professional help you need.

*"My friends were there when everything got to be too much and they even visited me in the hospital."*  
**student who responded to our online survey**

*"My friends help me calm down and they help me talk things out."*  
**student who took part in a focus group**

*"My friend talked to me, came with me to the guidance counsellor, came to visit me in the hospital, and brought me stuff to make me feel better."*  
**student who took part in a focus group**

## ***How can you help a friend?***

**If you are worried about a friend, it's important to be supportive and to say things like "I am very concerned about you. You are saying things that I am really worried about, and we need to tell someone." You need to let a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, or counsellor, know what's going on. Don't promise to keep secrets, especially if your friend is talking about suicide. As a friend, you must tell an adult so that they can get help right away.**

- ❑ Offer to accompany your friend to talk with an adult they can trust.
- ❑ Let your friend know that you care, and that you haven't forgotten about them, even if they repeatedly try to put you off. Stay in touch and reach out to them.
- ❑ Stand by your friend during their recovery. Reinforce your positive feelings about them, and your confidence in their continued recovery.
- ❑ Find ways of having fun together that don't involve using drugs or alcohol.
- ❑ Offer to go to support groups or important meetings (such as with teachers, counsellors or doctors) with your friend, and to be another set of eyes and ears in meetings.

## School Staff

Teachers, Guidance Counsellors and even people like the Vice Principal or Principal can be great people to talk to about what you're going through.

There are a lot of tools and resources within the school and the school system that they can arrange to help you deal with your problems at school and get the help you need.

*"My guidance counsellor was really good. She visited me in the hospital and helped me to organize my courses so that I could deal with them."*  
**student who responded to our online survey**

## What do school staff want you to know?

### Keep us in the loop

It's our job to help you successfully complete high school and make the transition to post-secondary school or work. Remember that there are many resources within the school system (including special educators, psychologists and social workers) that we can access to support you and help meet your needs. School staff also have wide networks with youth and other community-based social services that we can draw on to help support you.

### Tell us what you need

Don't be afraid to tell us about the kind of support and special accommodations that will make it easier for you to get through high school while dealing with your mental health problems. Remember that you can get special help in the classroom, with homework and assignments, as well as tests and exams.

### Take your time

Lots of students take longer than four years to complete all their high school credits, not just students with mental health problems. Consider taking fewer courses, or limiting your homework-heavy courses. We can help you find a balance between your courses and extra-curricular activities that works for you.

## Family Doctor

If you have talked with your family, friends, teacher, school guidance counsellor, or whomever you trust with your feelings, and you still don't feel right, you might want to make an appointment with your family doctor.

Family doctors are not experts on mental illness in particular, but they are often a good place to start, and can act as the stepping stone to getting further help.

By talking things through with your family doctor, you will get the ball rolling on getting more specialized help, like from a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Your family doctor may also be able to put you in touch with a support organization.

## *What does your doctor want you to know?*

### **Be open and honest**

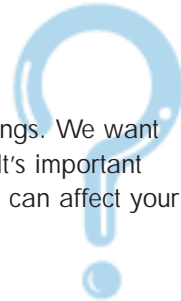
Please tell us as much as you can about your experiences and feelings. We want to help you understand what is going on, and help you get better. It's important that we have a clear picture of your use of drugs and alcohol, as it can affect your symptoms, treatment and recovery.

### **Treat us as partners**

Try to view your relationship with us as a partnership. Along with you and the members of your family, we're working as a team toward finding treatments and approaches that work for you and help you recover.

### **Keep us informed**

Let us know if your symptoms are getting worse, or if you're experiencing some of the unwanted effects of medications you are taking. We can work together to find a therapy that does work for you.



## Helping yourself

### Get smart

Find out more about mental health and mental illness. The websites and resources listed in this guide (and on the website) are a good place to start.

### Talk it out

Don't keep your mental health problems to yourself. Share your worries and fears with someone you trust. Get as much help as you can. Use your parents, teachers, guidance counsellors, and doctors as resources to get the help you need.

*"I didn't know about mental illness at the time, so how could my peers? We need to be educated about mental illness."*

**student who responded to our online questionnaire**

### Don't blame yourself

None of this is your fault. Having mental health problems doesn't mean that you are weak or a failure. It doesn't mean that you aren't trying. Whatever the cause, the important thing is to get help.

### Keep active

As much as you can, try to stick with your usual activities, in terms of both academics and leisure. Staying physically active is an important part of feeling better. Keeping your mind occupied and your day structured will help you recover and feel good about yourself.



## Find an advocate

Advocacy is all about supporting and helping people to:

- express their ideas and concerns
- get the information and services they need
- defend and promote their rights and responsibilities
- explore their choices and options.

Having a mental health problem can mean that your opinions and ideas are not taken seriously, or that you are not offered the opportunities and choices you would like.

Having an advocate might help you to get the kinds of help you need to continue and succeed in school, like special accommodations and support.

An advocate could be a parent, a teacher, a guidance counsellor, a mental health professional, or someone else who cares about you.

Being your own advocate is about speaking up for yourself and making your views and wishes clear. This can be very difficult to do at times, especially when you're trying to deal with your illness. But once you're starting to feel more stable and like you know what works for you, you might want to take on more of a self-advocacy role.

*"I talked to my teacher. He had a degree in psychology. He drove me to the hospital. I moved into a group home. He made sure I went to my appointments."*  
**student who responded to our online questionnaire**



## Take care

**There are things that you can do to try to make sure that you stay well:**

- Keep track of your moods and symptoms, and try to take note of what kinds of things set you off
- Eat well, get plenty of sleep and stay physically active
- Avoid using alcohol and drugs. They definitely make things worse, and can be especially dangerous when combined with certain medications.
- Keep in touch with friends and try to get out of the house
- Be consistent with your therapies—including taking prescribed medications, and attending counselling.



## Join a support /self-help group

Self-help groups support and educate people who have mental health problems, as well as their families and friends. **There are many advantages to getting involved with self-help/support groups:**

- a chance to talk about your feelings and experiences with others who have “been there”
- a chance to use your own experience to be helpful to others by giving and receiving practical coping advice and support
- a chance to learn more about your illness/problem.

**Have a look in the links/resources section for some ideas on how to find self-help groups in your area.**



## Don't give up

Getting the help you need and finding the right combination of therapies can take a while, but it's definitely worth the wait. You will probably have to be persistent and patient.

Things may be pretty difficult for a while, and they may even get really bad before they get better. But remember, people recover from mental illness. Do everything that you can to help yourself recover, and give it time.

## High School

Adults often say that school days were the “best days of their lives,” but for young people actually going through high school, this can seem a long way from the truth.

This is especially true if you're dealing with mental health problems on top of all of the other pressures that are part of adolescence and high school.

*“High school was like junior high. I lost friends, I started acting weird enough to be ostracized and outcast. I numbed right up. The only thing I gave a damn about was getting through school 'cause that's what people told me mattered.”*

**student who took part in a focus group**

## How can mental health problems and

Although mental health problems and mental illness affect each person differently, there are some common issues that many people experience. **These include things like:**

- feeling exhausted and having low energy—difficulty getting up for school, staying awake in class
- having a hard time concentrating,
- having a hard time getting along socially
- feeling really low and down on yourself
- having weird and scary thoughts that make it hard to concentrate
- being distracted by everything around you
- being organized—setting priorities, keeping track of time and responsibilities
- trouble solving problems and coping with everyday stuff
- behaving in weird ways—feeling unpredictable and impulsive,
- reacting inappropriately,
- isolating yourself from friends and family

## mental illness affect my life at school?

You may also be dealing with the side effects of medication (if you're taking it as part of your treatment for a mental illness). While medication may be necessary to control some of the symptoms of your illness, it can also affect the way you think and feel in unwanted ways. These changes are called side effects.

Some of the potential side effects of medication include things like: restlessness, irritability, drowsiness, fatigue, dry mouth, trembling, memory lapses, blurred vision, and feeling “brain dead.”

Side effects can sometimes decrease over time, but they also may be a sign that there's a problem either with the type or dose of your medication. Remember to talk to your doctor and about the side effects that you may be experiencing, so that you can work out a solution.

**Although there may be some downsides to taking your medication, most people find that the advantages of taking their medication are much greater than the disadvantages.**

## Disclosure: telling people about your situation

Deciding whether or not to tell people about your mental health problems or mental illness (often called “disclosing”) is a really tricky thing. Some people find that the idea of disclosing is too risky, especially because people have so many wrong ideas about what mental illness really is. Others find that by letting people at school know about their problems or their illness, that they can get the support and help they need.

Either way, you have to think about the benefits of disclosing versus the possible negative things, like the reactions of people you know, that can come from disclosing. Here are a few ideas about both sides to get you thinking. You’ll have to decide what’s best for you.

## Potential benefits

Sharing information about your problems or illness with teachers and counsellors will help them understand so that they can make special arrangements and support you at school.

It can also be really helpful if teachers and other school staff know about your problems or illness so that they’ll know how to help you if there’s an emergency or crisis.

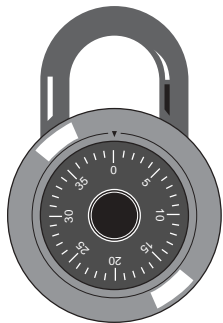
By disclosing your problems or illness, you’ll be educating others about the reality of mental health problems and their impact on life and learning.

*“My guidance counsellor was really good. She visited me in the hospital and helped me to organize my courses so that I could deal with them.”*

**student who responded to our online questionnaire**

## Potential Risks

On the other hand, there are some potentially negative things that can happen if you decide to disclose. Because many people have a lack of understanding about the causes and reality of mental illness, you may not want to tell people for fear that they'll react badly, or that they will treat you like you're "crazy."



You may also be afraid that if you tell school staff about your problems or illness, that everyone will end up knowing. In fact, school staff are required to treat your disclosure with respect and confidentiality. That means they can't go around telling everyone about it just because they feel like it. Keep in mind, though, that school staff are required to report anything you might tell them about your thoughts of self harm or suicide. That can't be kept a secret under any circumstances, because your health and safety has to come first.

## Tips around disclosure



### What do you want to accomplish by disclosing?

Think clearly about why you're choosing to disclose, and what you hope to get out of it. This will help others understand what you're expecting or asking of them, and how best to support you.

*"I got sick before exams. The teachers decided to take points off for not writing exams, and wouldn't let me rewrite them. No one knew about my illness. I had friends but had to hide my illness and pretend to be well. I was paranoid people would find out. It was easier to pretend I was a stoner than to have them believe I was stupid or unable."*

**student who took part in a focus group**

## Tips around disclosure

### Follow your instincts

Make sure that you believe a person is trustworthy before you decide to disclose to them.

### Plan ahead

If you decide to disclose, plan in advance how you'll handle it. Who will you disclose to? Do you want to do the talking, or would you like someone close to you to speak on your behalf, e.g. a parent, a friend, a mental health professional?

### Make up your own mind about it

Remember, no one can force you to disclose if you don't want to. Not even your parents. It has to be something that you are comfortable with.

### Hard to hide

Think about how stressful it will be for you to hide, or keep your problems or illness a secret. Sometimes telling someone can make you feel like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders.

## Getting help at school

There are a number of different kinds of support and special accommodations that can help you succeed at school while you're dealing with your mental health problems. The following are some suggestions for supports that can help:

- **in the classroom**
- **with assignments**
- **with exams**

*"I just wish that people could be a little more understanding! I'm not an idiot, I just need some extra time. I just wish people understood that my brain isn't as fast as other peoples' but I'm not stupid."*

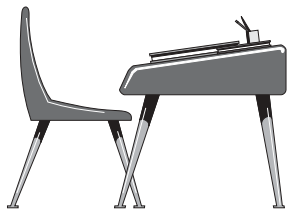
**student who responded to our online survey**

# In the Classroom

Here are some ideas of the kinds of supports and arrangements which you can ask for that may make it easier for you to feel at ease and succeed in the classroom:

## Pick your own seat

Think about where in the classroom you would feel the most comfortable and the least distracted by other students, and things going on in the classroom.



## Buddy/Accompanier

Ask someone (another student, or a counseling staff member) to accompany you to class and stay with you if you need it. A buddy can also help you take notes and give you support when you need it.

## Bring a drink to class, or chewing gum

This helps with dry mouth or tiredness that can be caused by medications.

## Arrange to take breaks during class

Arrange breaks with your teacher before class. Knowing when a break is coming can really help you cope with feeling anxious, stressed out, and restless.

## Copy another student's notes / Tape Recording

Sometimes the anxiety of attending class can make it hard to take good notes. Having a friend or another student in the class take notes that you can copy afterwards, or tape recording the class so that you can take notes later can help you relax and pay attention to what's going on in the class without having to worry about writing everything down.



# Assignments and homework

## Substitute assignments

Lots of people get stressed out at the thought of giving an oral presentation. If you are dealing with mental health problems, having to get up in front of the class can seem completely impossible. Ask if you can substitute written exercises or some other kind of assignment instead.

## Advance notice of assignments

Knowing about what's expected of you ahead of time can help you get ready and plan your time, energy, and workload. It can also help you to arrange for any extra help you might need to get things done.

## Extra time to finish assignments

Having extra time can be very helpful, and may make the difference between passing and failing a course. Make sure to negotiate the extra time in advance of the due date, and put a specific date on it.

## Help when you're in the hospital

Staying in touch with your teachers and your guidance counsellor while you're in the hospital can help you stay connected with your school work. It may even mean that you can finish some of your courses, instead of having to do them again when you get out.

## Alternative ways to show what you're learning

There may be other ways that you can show teachers that you're learning and doing the required work. If doing lots of writing is hard for you, ask your teacher(s) if you can submit a recording instead of a written assignment. If dealing with your illness has kept you from doing as well as you wanted, ask if you can write an extra paper to make up for the lousy marks you got when you were having a hard time coping.

## Peer support/ homework clubs

Some schools have a peer tutoring system, or homework clubs which can help you with your work. Find out if these are available at your school.



# Tests and exams

## Change the format

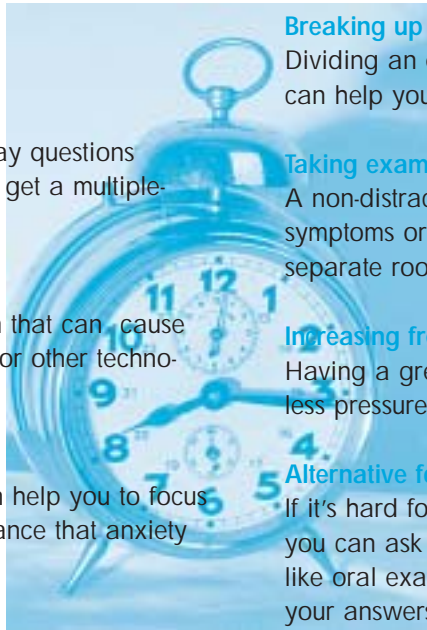
If multiple choice tests and exams stress you out, ask to have essay questions instead. On the other hand, if writing lots is hard, see if you can get a multiple-choice test instead of essays.

## Technical assistance

Writing may be difficult because of the side effects of medication that can cause muscular or visual problems. Some computer software programs or other technological assistance might be able to help.

## Extended time

A specific amount of extra time (negotiated before the exam) can help you to focus on the exam content instead of the clock, and may lessen the chance that anxiety or other symptoms will interfere with your performance.



## Breaking up exams

Dividing an exam into parts that can be taken in 2 or 3 sessions over 1-2 days can help you maintain focus and prevent you from getting too worn out.

## Taking exams in an alternate location

A non-distracting, quiet setting helps reduce interference from anxiety or other symptoms or the side effects of medication. Ask if you can write exams in a separate room, with someone overseeing you instead of in a crowded classroom.

## Increasing frequency of tests or examinations

Having a greater number of opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge may put less pressure on you than having only a midterm or a final exam.

## Alternative formats for exams (e.g. read orally, dictated, or typed)

If it's hard for you to do a lot of reading or writing, there are accommodations you can ask for that might make it easier for you to demonstrate your knowledge, like oral exams, having someone else do the actual writing for you, or typing your answers.

## Tips for making high school work for you

### Give yourself some time

You may need to take some time away from school completely, either because you're getting treatment in the hospital, or because you just need to focus all your energy on getting better.

Just because you take a break from school doesn't mean you can't go back when you're ready—even if you've left on less than great terms. Keep in touch with teachers and guidance counsellors when you're out of school so that they know how you're doing, and so that they're in the loop about your plans to return.

### Lighten your load

Lightening your load may mean the difference between being able to stay in school and having to leave because it's all gotten to be too much. You don't have to take on a full course load - three courses might be lots right now, and that's OK.

### Mix it up

Think about taking a mix of subjects instead of straight academics, like English and Math, that require lots of homework. Some classes, like Music and Phys Ed aren't usually so homework-heavy.

### Give yourself a break!

Lots of people, whether they are dealing with mental health problems or not, take more than four years to get through all their credits and finish high school. Think about spreading out your required courses over a longer time frame, like a five-year plan instead of four.

### Focus on your strengths

Ask your teachers and guidance counsellors about academic testing that can help you identify your particular strengths. Knowing more about the areas where your strengths lie will help you to choose courses (and eventually a career) successfully.

### Investigate alternatives

If continuing to attend classes in a regular school setting is not working out, there are a number of alternatives that may be available to help you maintain your studies. While the educational services and supports that may be available vary greatly depending on your school district, it's worthwhile to speak with the Principal, your guidance counsellor, and the Director of Special Education Services in your School District/ local School Board about the alternatives available in your area. These include correspondence courses, General Educational Development (GED) equivalency diploma, alternative schools, specialized programs within mental health facilities, etc.

## Getting back into the groove

Dealing with mental health problems or mental illness can be pretty hard on your confidence, and it may have made you lose touch with some of the things you used to like doing, or people you used to see.

Sometimes people need to focus completely on getting better, and have to leave their educational goals and social life aside for a little while.

When you're feeling up to it, try to start building things back up again. As you do, you may find your confidence gradually returns, especially if you keep physically and socially active. This may be easier said than done, but you will be surprised at what you can do if you put your mind to it, especially if you build up to things slowly and gradually.

**Here are some suggestions\* (from teens who've been through it) of things you can do to get ready to get back into the groove of school or work:**

### Make positive lifestyle changes

When you're recovering from any illness, you need to get some balance and activity in your life before tackling school or work. Stop abusing drugs and alcohol if this is an issue. Figure out ways to cut down on stress. Have some fun doing sports, hobbies or other things you enjoy.

### Figure out what you want to do

This can be tough, but everyone needs direction. Talk about your ideas (even the ones you think might be a little weird) with other people. Figuring out what you want to do can take some time, but try to set some goals: big (like choosing a career) or little (like taking a walk).

### Take it one step at a time

Your full-time job is regaining your health: having patience and pacing yourself are really important parts of recovery. Don't expect to be able to pick everything up where you left off right away—it may be too much to take on at first, so take it easy. Consider returning to school or work part-time when you feel ready.

### Take control of your life

The people who are most successful at returning to school or work are the ones who made their own decisions, set their own course, and took personal control. You might have trouble getting motivated and feeling energetic but remember that no one can “rehabilitate” you. Make a plan that's really yours.

\* These tips are adapted from Family to Family Newsletter, Issue #5, Summer 2003. Full text of this and other newsletters available to view or download at <http://www.cmha.ca/english/intrvent/>




## Moving On: Making decisions about your future

The decision to attend college, enter an apprenticeship, or go on to university or look for a job can be a complicated one, and there are lots of different issues to think about.

In addition to the usual concerns about whether you have the time and money for further schooling, you also need to take into account how your mental health problems or mental illness may affect your ability to reach your goals. You'll need to look at this question from two perspectives: whether you can handle the demands of your educational career, and whether the institution you want to attend can accommodate your particular needs.

Not everyone decides to go on to pursue further education as soon as they finish high school, either. Sometimes it's important to take time to figure out what you want to do, and give yourself time to recover from your mental health problems, and figure out what lies ahead.

This next section focuses on transitions to higher education. If you're not thinking about going on to more schooling right now, you might want to check out the links on the Student Section of the Mental Health and High School website to some resources for youth looking for work.



*"I'm scared of not being able to cope in university."*  
**student who responded to our online survey**

**You may want to begin sorting things out by asking yourself these questions\***

## **Questions to ask yourself:**

- Is education a priority for me? Is there anything else that needs to be a higher priority for me right now?
- Am I clear about what I want to study?
- Is my mental health stable enough to allow me to concentrate on my education?
- What was my previous experience with school? Are there any issues I need to resolve from that experience?
- Do I have a clear and realistic idea about the demands of academic life, such as registering for classes, navigating a campus, taking notes, reading and writing assignments, and taking exams?
- What are my physical, intellectual, and emotional needs and limitations in dealing with those demands?
- What are my academic strengths, and am I choosing courses that will maximize them?
- Do I have the persistence and confidence to face frustrations, get the information I need from school administrators, and advocate for myself if necessary? If not, can I get a support person to help me? Who will my support person be?
- Am I able to keep good records of applications, forms, and other paperwork?
- Can I stick to my educational goals for at least one semester?
- If my situation changes, will I be able to reassess and adjust my plans accordingly?

## Questions to ask the college or university:

- Who is responsible for helping students with mental illness? How hard is it to find that person or service on campus?
- What kind of accommodations has the school made for students with mental illness? Ask for specific examples. Will those accommodations work for you? If not, will they provide the accommodations you need?
- What happens when students become ill during the semester? Can you finish assignments or exams at other sites? What's the process for a grade of "incomplete"?
- Are there peer mentoring or other support groups on campus? Do any of them focus particularly on students with mental illness?

- Has the school offered its faculty any training or information about working with students with mental illness? If so, what was it about? How long ago? How many faculty members attended?
- How open are faculty and staff to working with students with mental illness?

Pay attention not just to the answers you get, but to the way people react to your questions—it will tell you a lot about how comfortable they are with the issues that concern you.

\* questions based on material developed by Steve Fishbein of the New Jersey Department of Mental Health and Hospitals:© 1997, 1998 Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University

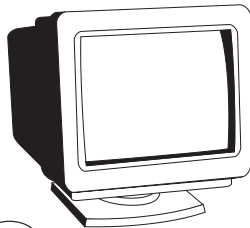
## Tips for making a successful transition

### Plan for a realistic course load

Learn as much as you can ahead of time about the demands of the course of study you're interested in. Think about whether you'll be able to handle these demands, in addition to the stress of other major changes like moving away. Can you arrange to study part time?

### Get in touch with Special Needs/Disability Offices

It helps to speak directly with someone from the Special Needs office ahead of time, like when you're considering applying to the school. Find out what kind of services they offer, and what kind of documentation (e.g. Doctor's notes, etc.) that you may need to bring in order to access their services.



### Check it out

Visiting the campus before classes begin will help you get your bearings so that you feel comfortable when the time comes. While you're there, go in and meet with the Special Needs/Disability workers in person.



### Think about attending part time

Lots of students attend college or university part time, whether or not they have mental health problems. Try to set realistic expectations about how many courses you can handle at once. It's better to pass two courses than to fail four.

### Keep a handle on your stress level

Make sure to check in with yourself regularly about how you're handling things. Some students find that keeping a journal helps them to recognize patterns and know when they're getting stressed.

### Exercise your rights!

Remember that you're entitled to special help and support. The counsellors are there to listen and help you get the support and accommodations you need on campus.

### Peer support

Other students who've been there will know better than anyone about managing the stress of university or college life with a mental illness. See if there are peer support groups for students with mental illness available on campus. They're often available through the Campus Student Association/Union (or whatever the equivalent group is on your campus).

*For more information on managing post-secondary education, please check out the "Higher Education" website at <http://www.cmha.ca/english/highered/> and at the other resources listed in the "Cool links and Resources" section of the Mental Health and High School website.*

## Websites and Resources

In this section you'll find links to online resources and websites where you can get more information about some of the issues we discuss on this site, like:

- ❑ More detailed information about mental health problems and mental illness
- ❑ Resources, projects and services for youth
- ❑ Links to higher education and employment information

**For descriptions of the resources and websites listed below, please visit the Student Section of the Mental Health and High School website at [www.cmha.ca/highschool](http://www.cmha.ca/highschool).**

## **Mental health-related websites / online resources**

### **Face the Issue**

[www.facetheissue.com](http://www.facetheissue.com)

### **get on top**

[www.getontop.org](http://www.getontop.org)

### **Psychosis Sucks**

[www.psychosissucks.ca](http://www.psychosissucks.ca)

### **Sheffield Early Intervention Service**

[users.breathe.com/day](http://users.breathe.com/day)

### **SSO Aware – Schizophrenia Society of Ontario**

[www.ssoaware.com](http://www.ssoaware.com)

### **Reach Out!**

[www.reachout.asn.au](http://www.reachout.asn.au)

### **Open the Doors**

[www.openthedoors.com](http://www.openthedoors.com)

### **Orygen Youth Health – Youth Mental Health Fact Sheets**

[www.orygen.org.au/clinicalprogram/pppfactsheets.html](http://www.orygen.org.au/clinicalprogram/pppfactsheets.html)

### **CMHA Mental Health Pamphlet Series**

[www.cmha.ca/english/info\\_centre/mh\\_pamphlets](http://www.cmha.ca/english/info_centre/mh_pamphlets)

### **Youth Net**

[www.youthnet.on.ca](http://www.youthnet.on.ca)

## **General health and related issues**

### **AlterHeroes**

[www.alterheros.com/english/youth](http://www.alterheros.com/english/youth)

### **Cyberisle**

[www.cyberisle.org](http://www.cyberisle.org)

### **Youth Information: The information toolkit for young people**

[www.youthinformation.com](http://www.youthinformation.com)

## Crisis lines

Centre for Suicide prevention – Crisis lines and centres across Canada

[www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca)

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

[kidshelp.sympatico.ca](http://kidshelp.sympatico.ca)

## Publications

It Starts Here – A guide to Mood Disorders for Teens

Mood Disorders Association of Ontario, Toll free: 1-888-486-8236

## Post-secondary education

Student Awards

[www.studentawards.com](http://www.studentawards.com)

University Report Card

[www.universityreportcard.com](http://www.universityreportcard.com)

Higher Education website – CMHA National

[www.cmha.ca/english/highered](http://www.cmha.ca/english/highered)

## Publication Information

"Mental Health and High School: A Guide for Students" ISBN 1-894886-10-0

également offert en français sous le titre: « La santé mentale et l'école secondaire: un guide à l'intention des étudiants » ISBN 1-894886-11-9

These publications are also available on the Internet at the following addresses:

[www.cmha.ca/highschool](http://www.cmha.ca/highschool)

[www.acsm.ca/ecolesecondaire](http://www.acsm.ca/ecolesecondaire)

**For further information or to place an order please contact:**

Canadian Mental Health Association, National Office

8 King St. East, Suite 810

Toronto, ON M5C 1B5

Tel: (416) 484-7750

Fax: (416) 484-4617

Email: [info@cmha.ca](mailto:info@cmha.ca)

[www.cmha.ca/highschool](http://www.cmha.ca/highschool)

[www.acsm.ca/ecolesecondaire](http://www.acsm.ca/ecolesecondaire)

The Canadian Mental Health Association, a nation-wide voluntary organization, promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.



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