Selfies, Social, & Screens:

Navigating Virtual Spaces for Youth

MHA — Mental Health America

Walgreens

Otsuka

As we step into another school year, it remains crucial to recognize the mental health challenges our nation's school-age children face.

Going back to school can be an exciting time filled with new friends, new social events, and new extracurriculars. But returning to school also means re-entering the virtual spaces that exist in tandem with the classroom – which can be both helpful and harmful. For young people, online spaces can bring with them feelings of exclusion, body image concerns, misinformation, cyberbullying, harassment, and violent content – all of which have an impact on mental health.

The early challenges a child experiences, including traumatic events that might occur while online, play a significant role in their future mental health. That is why, in this digital world dominated by selfies and social media, it is important to foster a welcoming, supportive, and compassionate environment where young people feel comfortable discussing the unique difficulties and pressures that arise.

Mental Health America (MHA) is dedicated to providing quality resources that can be used to facilitate these kinds of conversations. Through this toolkit, we aim to equip you with the social media knowledge you need to support the young people in your life, whether that is as a parent, caregiver, teacher, coach, counselor, or school administrator.

As an adult, it may seem like you will never fully "get" the complex social dynamics that play out behind a young person's phone screen, even after reading through the information in this toolkit. Remember that you do not have to understand every social media trend or new term that a young person uses in order to provide effective emotional support. Being a trusted role model that does their best to empathize with the issues in a young person's life goes a long way.

If you do understand the ins and outs of today's social media platforms and are an avid user of virtual spaces yourself, remember that young people constantly look to the adults in their life as they build habits. Parents, caretakers, and household members act as the main influence on a child's use of technology. While you may be using this toolkit mainly to learn how to support a young person, you can use many of the tips and takeaways to model good habits in your own life.

We thank you for taking the time to educate yourself with this toolkit, we are grateful for the support you are providing, and we thank Walgreens and Otsuka for their commitment to youth mental health. By working together, we can build a more mentally healthy world for the next generation, both on and off screens.

Schroeder Stribling
President & CEO
Mental Health America

At Walgreens, we're committed to doing our part to help address the most pressing needs in health care and we're proud to have partnered with Mental Health America since 2016 to heighten mental health awareness and improve access to screening tools and a range of other resources.

We continue to build on this critically important work together, from our collaboration on improving workplace mental health and well-being to this year's back-to-school campaign and much-needed focus on youth mental health.

This isn't just an urgent need, it is a health crisis in our society today. We know the impact that social media and the latest technologies can have on the overall mental health of children and adolescents, especially. It's also why this is the focal point of the 2023 back-to-school toolkit, with tools and information to help support the young people in our lives while trying to navigate these spaces in a healthy way.

It is our hope that by providing more resources for teachers, administrators, parents, and others who play such an integral role during these pivotal years, it will be another step toward ensuring the health and well-being of our nation's youth and the communities we serve.

Holly May
Executive Vice President and Global Chief Human Resources Officer
Walgreens Boots Alliance, Inc.

How To Use This Toolkit

SCHOOLS

- Provide teachers with a training session using information from the toolkit to guide the presentation.

- Have printouts of the fact sheets and resources for immediate help available in classrooms, counselor offices, and nursing offices.

- Provide handouts from the toolkit at PTA meetings.

- Use the sample newsletter content in your next school-wide parent email.

- Share resources from the toolkit in parent emails throughout the school year.

- Print posters from the toolkit and display them in the hallways, teacher lounges, and other youth and staff-facing spaces.

- Create a lesson plan for students guided by the information in the toolkit.

- Consider getting a copy of Mental Health America's "Where to Start" book for your school library.

- Check to see if there is a Mental Health America affiliate in your area. If there is, reach out to them about the possibility of them providing school training, assemblies, or helping to raise awareness with students and parents about what youth-facing programs they provide within the community.

- Post the social media images in the toolkit to your school's page to encourage awareness.

- Consider utilizing the Mental Health America Screening program within your school as a free resource for students and staff. Learn more in the MHA Resources section.

- Encourage staff to attend Mental Health America webinars that provide information on various youth mental health-related topics. See details on the Virtual Events page.

PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

- Read the fact sheets and resources in the toolkit to learn more about your child's mental health and technology use.

- Watch for the signs that your child might be struggling. If you suspect they are, tell them they are not alone and encourage them to discuss it with you. Utilize the resources within the toolkit to find support and next steps.

- Talk to your child about their online habits. Encourage healthy social media use and inform them about safe and best practices. See the "social media do's" section of the toolkit for guidance.

This toolkit includes

- **Key Messages**
- **Drop-in Article**
- **Sample Social Media Posts and Images**
- **Resource Guide**
- **Fact Sheets for Adults**
- **Fact Sheets for Youth**
- **Posters**

- Educate yourself on mental health topics. By learning more about mental health, you can best support the young person in your life. Reading through the toolkit, gathering the resources provided, and attending online learning events can help prepare you to meet your child's evolving needs.

- Utilize Mental Health America's online screening program. If you suspect your child is struggling, go to mhascreening.org. There you will find free, quick, and easy online screens to determine whether they are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. You will then be provided with a series of resources and next steps you can take.

- Check if a Mental Health America affiliate near you provides youth-focused programming that your child could benefit from. See the MHA Affiliate Programs section of the toolkit for guidance.

- Consider purchasing a copy of MHA's "Where to Start" book for your child.

- Follow Mental Health America on social media to stay updated on information, resources, and events.

- Attend Mental Health America webinars, listen to the In the Open Podcast, or keep up to date with our blogs. These free resources provide information on various youth mental health-related topics. See details on the Virtual Events page.

- Share the toolkit and its resources with other parents or parent groups you are connected to.

YOUNG PEOPLE

- Review the "Social Media Do's" list to help you build a healthier relationship with social media and technology.

- If you are struggling and need support, look at the immediate help resources, Mental Health America resources, and MHA partners to help best support your current needs.

- Take a mental health test at mhascreening.org to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. Our screening provides quick and free information, resources, and the next steps you can take.

- Consider asking a parent, guardian, or local library to purchase the "Where to Start" book. This book can provide you with some direction and resources if you are struggling.

- Check if there is a Mental Health America affiliate program in your area that could help you feel connected and improve your mental health.

- Participate in the Walgreens Expressions Challenge. This program encourages you to use your voice creatively through art, writing, spoken word, and multimedia to provide your perspective on mental health topics. Get more information in the Resources section.

- Visit the new youth section of MHA's website at mhanational.org/youth for more information and resources designed for you.

Key Messages

VIRTUAL ACTIVITY CAN AFFECT MENTAL HEALTH

- Children and teens are dealing with the intense emotions of growing up in a digital age where much of their lives are spent online.

- Social media and other online activities are not going anywhere anytime soon. Adults can help youth in this virtual world through various means, including helping them clean up content feeds, explaining that profiles and pictures can be curated to show only the best of a person's life, and being mindful that algorithms can lead to dangerous content if not careful.

- Fear of missing out (FOMO), comparing themselves to others on social media, and cyberbullying can have a profound negative impact on a young person's mental health. However, supportive online communities can help young people feel less alone when they find it difficult to connect to those physically around them.

- Adults can and should prepare children and teens to protect themselves online, and then be there to help them understand what they're seeing and hearing to minimize negative effects on mental health.

MHA RESOURCES

- Mental Health America has developed its 2023 Back-to-School Toolkit and campaign to help increase understanding of how online activity affects the mental health of children and teens. Mental Health America is providing materials on these topics for parents and caregivers, school personnel, other adults in a young person's life, and young people.

- When the online world gets overwhelming, one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take an anonymous screen at www.mhascreening.org.

- Mental Health America has online screening tools, including one that is youth-focused and one for parents. After the screen, Mental Health America will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps based on your results.

- Starting the mental health journey doesn't have to be confusing. Mental Health America's new book, "Where to Start," breaks down mental health terms in a jargon-free and even humorous way. Youth and adults alike can check on their symptoms, learn how to talk about mental health needs, find out about help options, and discover tips to care for themselves.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

- Knowing and addressing early signs of mental health conditions can increase the chances of recovery and positive outcomes.

- Because so much time is spent in the classroom, teachers and other school personnel may be the first to notice symptoms of depression and anxiety in students, and it is important to let children and teens know that support is available.

- The combined efforts of parents, teachers, and other adults can significantly improve the well-being of students. Working together to educate about mental health and online behavior, as well as acting as good models of what to do, can positively impact a young person.

- Parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults in a young person's life can provide different perspectives on a child's behavior. By sharing information, a clearer picture of the student's well-being can be established.

- Consistent support from both home and school can be crucial in helping students feel secure, understood, and open up about their feelings. However, if a young person isn't getting that support in one area of their life, having one or a few adults to lean on makes a huge difference.

- School personnel and parents/caregivers can work together to find help for students who are struggling through mental health professionals, such as school psychologists or outside therapists.

Feel free to supplement these key messages with language from the fact sheets and other materials included in this toolkit.

Drop-in Article

Use this article in your next e-blast or share in school newsletters.

There is growing evidence linking heavy social media use with increased risks for anxiety and depression. These mental health issues can, in turn, impact a student's school performance, such as difficulties focusing, studying, or even simply attending school. It's important for caregivers and school personnel to understand what is happening on social media and how to reduce its negative impact.

Virtual spaces are everywhere in today's world and have become a constant presence in the lives of young people, offering social connectedness and the ease of instant communication. But the online world of selfies and social media also brings with it challenging situations that can have a negative impact on youth mental health.

The pressure to maintain a perfect online image, fueled by constant comparison to peers, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Young people may experience fear of missing out (FOMO) when they watch the highlight reels of their friends' lives, bringing on feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, exposure to cyberbullying and negative comments can take a toll on their self-esteem, putting them at risk of experiencing depression.

As the new school year begins, it is crucial for parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches, counselors, and school administrators to work together to educate and support young people in navigating responsibly the challenges of a digital world while fostering a healthy sense of self-worth and resilience.

The new Mental Health America toolkit, "Selfies, Social, and Screens: Navigating Virtual Spaces for Youth," provides educational resources that tackle these topics. For caregivers and school personnel, they cover the basics of what youth are doing online, how online activity can impact mental health, tips for talking to youth about difficult feelings they may experience, and how to help young people reduce the potentially harmful effects of social media.

The toolkit also includes information and tips written exclusively for youth. Whether young people read the information on their own or discuss the topics with an adult, it is important they understand that they are not alone when they experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness and that help and support are available.

Free, confidential, anonymous screening tools are available at mhascreening.org for youth and parents who are concerned about their mental health. After taking a screen, results are provided along with tips for next steps. For even more information, youth and adults can check out MHA's book, "Where to Start: A Survival Guide to Anxiety, Depression, and Other Mental Health Challenges," which was written for young people in order to provide clear, honest, and reassuring information about the most common mental health conditions.

Sometimes conversations about mental health can reveal that a young person has thoughts or plans to hurt themself or another person. If this happens, they are in crisis and need help promptly. If you think a child or teen is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988. Trained crisis counselors can help find local resources and suggest next steps.

Sample Social Media Posts

GENERAL

- Children and teens are experiencing intense emotions while spending much of their lives online. Learn more and find #mentalhealth resources from Mental Health America: mhanational.org/youth-tech

- Excessive social media use has been linked to increased risks for #mentalhealth conditions, which can impact school performance for children and teens. Learn more and find resources to help your child or student at mhanational.org/youth-tech.

- Parents, caregivers, and school personnel can make a positive impact by educating young people about #mentalhealth and modeling healthy social media use. Learn more and find resources: mhanational.org/youth-tech

TOOLKIT

- Adults can and should prepare children and teens to protect their #mentalhealth online. Mental Health America's "Selfies, Social, and Screens" toolkit is a great, free resource to help you get started: mhanational.org/youth-tech

- Social media isn't going anywhere anytime soon. Mental Health America has the #mentalhealth resources you need to help young people navigate the virtual world: mhanational.org/youth-tech

- Mental Health America's "Selfies, Social, and Screens" toolkit can help parents, caregivers, and school personnel reduce the negative impact of social media and leverage its positive qualities. Learn more: mhanational.org/youth-tech

SCREENING

- When the online world gets overwhelming, take a moment to check in on your #mentalhealth. Taking a free, anonymous screen at mhascreening.org is one of the quickest and easiest ways to do so.

- Mental Health America offers free #mentalhealth screenings for children, teens, and adults. After the screen, you'll receive more information to help you determine next steps. Get started at mhascreening.org.

- If you think your child's time online is impacting their #mentalhealth, take the parent mental health test and find resources at mhascreening.org.

CRISIS

- Online spaces can expose young people to cyberbullying, harassment, and body image concerns—all of which can impact #mentalhealth. If you believe a child or teen is in crisis, call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org. You can also text MHA to 741741.

- Serious signs that a child or teen is in crisis should be addressed immediately. If you believe a young person is experiencing a mental health crisis, call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org. You can also text MHA to 741741.

Share our resources

Download social media images, posters and more

Download

mhanational.org/youth-tech/graphics

Resource Guide

For Immediate Help

MHA Screening
Online screening at mhascreening.org is one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine if you're experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. Our screens are free, confidential, and scientifically validated.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
The Lifeline provides 24/7, free, and confidential support to people in distress – you don't need to be suicidal to reach out. Call 1-800-273-8255 to be connected with a crisis counselor. Crisis counselors who speak Spanish are available at 1-888-628-9454.

988 Textline
When you text 988, you will complete a short survey letting the crisis counselor know a little about your situation. You will be connected with a trained crisis counselor in a crisis center who will answer the text, provide support, and share resources if needed.

Crisis Text Line
If you prefer texting to talking on the phone, text MHA to 741-741 to be connected with a crisis counselor who will help you get through your big emotions.

Domestic Violence Hotline
If you're experiencing domestic violence, looking for resources or information, or are questioning unhealthy aspects of your relationship, call 1-800-799-7233 or go to thehotline.org to virtually chat with an advocate.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline
If you or a child you know is being hurt or doesn't feel safe at home, you can call or text 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) or start an online chat at childhelp.org to reach a crisis counselor. They can help you figure out next steps to work through what is happening and stay safe.

The Trevor Project
The Trevor Project is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth. Trained counselors are available 24/7 to youth in crisis, feeling suicidal, or in need of a safe and judgment-free person to talk to. Call 1-866- 488-7386, text START to 678-678, or start an online chat at thetrevorproject.org/get-help.

Trans Lifeline
Dial 877-565-8860 for US and 877-330-6366 for Canada. Trans Lifeline's Hotline is a peer support service run by trans people, for trans and questioning callers.

StrongHearts Native Helpline
Call 1-844-762-8483. The StrongHearts Native Helpline is a confidential and anonymous culturally appropriate domestic violence and dating violence helpline for Native Americans, available every day from 7 am-10 pm CT.

The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids Helpline
Call 1-855-378-4373 if you are having difficulty accessing support for your family, or a loved one struggling with addiction faces care or treatment challenges, the Partnership for Drug-free Kids' specialists can guide you. Support is available in English and Spanish, from 9 am-midnight ET weekdays and noon-5 pm ET on weekends.

Caregiver Help Desk
Contact Caregiver Action Network's Care Support Team by dialing 855-227-3640. Staffed by caregiving experts, the Help Desk helps you find the right information you need to help you navigate your complex caregiving challenges. Caregiving experts are available 8 am–7 pm ET.

MHA Resources

Addressing the Youth Mental Health Crisis: The Urgent Need for More Education, Services, and Supports
Indicators of youth mental health and well-being indicate a growing public health crisis. Yet, public policy has been slow to respond. This report is designed to guide advocacy at the state level and begin to create a framework for federal policy. The report aims to document the alarming trends in youth mental health and the disparities in access to care; address several innovative state legislative solutions to promote school-based mental health education, supports, and services; and highlight the effect of these policies on advancing equity and the role of youth leadership in securing legislation. Visit MHA's website to access the report.

Back-to-School Toolkits
An archive of Back-to-School toolkits (like this one) from previous years can be found on MHA's website. Some materials are also available in Spanish.

Screening in Schools
Providing mental health screenings in schools is one of the best ways to catch mental health problems when and where they are likely to arise. Fifty percent of individuals who struggle with a mental health condition will show symptoms during their adolescent years. Childhood brain development research indicates that puberty is especially an important time for monitoring the onset of mental illnesses, including depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. This period is when individuals are most vulnerable to poor outcomes, but also where intervention has the best chance for building resiliency and change. Mental health screenings can be implemented in schools through sharing resources with students on school posters or handouts at the nurse's office, by providing screenings and education in health or physical education classes, or as part of an extensive mental health screening and education protocol. MHA Screening is a free program designed to support schools in any district, across various levels of investment. Learn how to get started at screening.mhanational.org/mental-health-screening-in-schools.

State of Mental Health in America Report 2023
The State of Mental Health in America report is intended to provide up-to-date data and information about disparities faced by individuals with mental health challenges and serve as a tool for change. Learn more about disparities in mental health treatment for youth by downloading the report.

MHA's Young Leaders Initiatives
Mental Health America's youth programs empower aspiring and established young advocates to ignite their communities and build a mentally healthy future for all. Through leadership development, policy, and research, we're cultivating the next generation of mental health leaders. Young people power all of our programs, where individuals, initiatives, and knowledge converge to transform youth mental health. We provide young leaders with the tools they need to drive change in their communities. Our programs help young people expand their reach, grow their skills, and get connected to the greater ecosystem of mental health advocacy. Learn more about MHA young leaders initiatives at mhanational.org/young-leaders.

MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA HAS LOTS MORE!

Visit mhanational.org/youth for hundreds of resources for and about young people.

Find articles, videos, DIY tools, and more for youth, caregivers, school personnel, and young adults.

LEARN MORE

Virtual Events

The Distorted Mirror: Technology's Impact on Youth Body Image
August 17, 2023 | 1 pm ET/10 am PT

Endless scrolling through feeds and photos of celebrities, influencers, friends, classmates, and strangers is all too familiar for today's youth and teens. But how are these images, fads, diets, exercise routines, get-ready-with-me videos, and so many other forms of content really influencing the body image and self-confidence of youth? With constant comparison at the tip of your fingers, technology can pose new challenges when considering disordered eating, body dysmorphia, and general mental health struggles of youth.

Register and access the recording at:
https://mhanational.org/events/distorted-mirror-technologys-impact-youth-body-image

Safe Spaces: How Digital Environments Can Serve Youth
September 12, 2023 | 1 PM ET/10 AM PT

Technology plays a large role in our lives, especially the lives of youth, teens, and young adults. Accepting this new reality and the importance of the digital world allows us to figure out how it can be a positive in our lives and even benefit our mental health. For many youth and young people, online communities can provide safe, inclusive, affirming environments, where they can be themselves and connect with others who are similar to them.

Register and access the recording at:
https://mhanational.org/events/safe-spaces-how-digital-environments-can-serve-youth

I Don't Know How to Navigate My Child's Use of Technology
September 20, 2023 | 1 PM ET/10 AM PT

Living in the digital world can be overwhelming. Between the constant use of technology and new and emerging platforms of social media to keep up with, we can be left feeling stressed. This is especially true when it comes to youth utilizing these platforms. For parents, keeping kids safe is a number one priority, and online safety needs to be at the front of our minds. This webinar will focus on providing parents with information about how youth are utilizing online spaces, what social media addictions can look like, and what adults can do to monitor safety online. We will hear from experts, parents, and young adults throughout this panel-style discussion on their experiences with youth technology use.

Register and access the recording at:
https://mhanational.org/events/i-dont-know-how-navigate-my-childs-use-technology
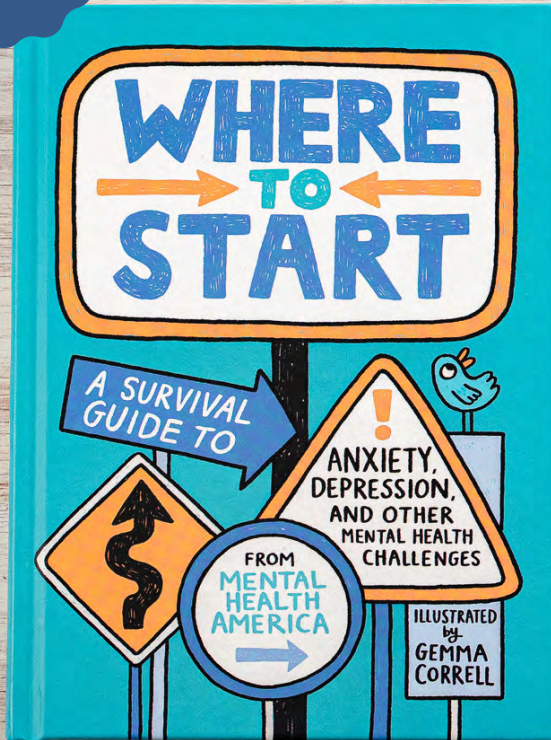
MHA will also produce a number of blogs and podcast episodes throughout the months of August and September to provide additional Back-to-School information.

Read our MHA blogs at mhanational.org/newsroom/chiming-in.

Listen to our MHA "In the Open" podcast episodes at mhanational.org/podcast.

Sign up to receive information about future MHA webinars at mhanational.org/mha-webinars.

MHA Partners

The AAKOMA Project builds the consciousness of youth of color and their caregivers on the recognition and importance of mental health, empowers youth and their families to seek help and manage mental health, and influences systems and services to receive and address the needs of youth of color and their families. Learn more at aakomaproject.org.

Brightline is reinventing behavioral health care for children and families, bringing together innovative technology, virtual behavioral health services, and an integrated care team focused on supporting children across developmental stages and their families. Brightline is headquartered in Palo Alto, California, and expanding quickly to support families across the country. Learn more at hellobrightline.com.

The Cook Center for Human Connection brings together the best organizations, programs, and products to prevent suicide, provide mental health support, and enhance human connections essential for people to thrive. The Cook Center has created My Life is Worth Living, an educational animated series that includes five powerful stories told over 20 episodes. In each episode, relatable teen characters wrestle with challenges that are all too familiar for many viewers and discover strategies to cope when it feels like their own thoughts are against them. Learn more at mylifeisworthliving.org. The Cook Center has also created parentguidance.org a free resource that helps parents find answers to help their child(ren). Its content is led by therapists who provide trusted and specialized courses, professional support, and a safe community of parents helping each other. It includes a free "ask a therapist" feature.

Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation's Welcoming Schools is the most comprehensive bias-based bullying prevention program in the nation to provide LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive professional development training, lesson plans, booklists and resources specifically designed for educators and youth-serving professionals. The program uses an intersectional, anti-racist lens dedicated to actionable policies and practices. It uplifts school communities with tools to embrace family diversity, create LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying, and support transgender and non-binary students. Learn more at welcomingschools.org.

imi is a series of guides designed with and for LGBTQ+ teens to help explore and affirm their identity. Guides are free, backed by science, and help teens learn practical methods to cope with sexual and gender minority stress in ways that are helpful, relevant, inclusive and joyful. Learn more at imi.guide.

The Mental Health Collaborative works to build resilient communities through mental health education and awareness. Mental Health Collaborative programs decrease stigma, increase knowledge, and give people the skills they need to flourish. Programs focus on increasing mental health literacy in school, community, and organizational settings. Learn more at mentalhealthcollaborative.org.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a federation of state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands that represent locally elected school board officials, serving approximately 51 million public school students. Working with and through state association members, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. Learn more at nsba.org.

On Our Sleeves Movement for Children's Mental Health envisions a world where mental health is part of the upbringing of every child. They are on a mission to give free, expert-created resources to all U.S. communities so everyone can understand and promote mental health for children. Since its inception in 2018, they have supported millions of people each year with evidence-informed resources to promote mental health and wellness. Learn more at onoursleeves.org.

Project Heal works to break down systemic, health care, and financial barriers to eating disorder healing. Project Heal's goal is to change the system and, in the meantime, provide life-saving support to people with eating disorders who the system fails. Learn more at theprojectheal.org.

Q Chat Space provides live, chat-based discussion groups for LGBTQ+ and questioning teens ages 13 to 19. It is not a forum, and there is no video or audio. Everyone is chatting during the same pre-scheduled time. Q Chat Space chats are facilitated by experienced staff and volunteers from youth programs at LGBTQ+ centers across the U.S. Q Chat Space facilitators are not mental health professionals. Learn more at qchatspace.org.

Teen Talk App is a free, safe, and anonymous space where teens can freely speak to their peers about everyday issues and their overall mental health. Teen Advisors are trained to support their peers through a wide range of experiences, including anxiety, depression, relationships, family issues, school, and more. Teen Advisors are supervised by licensed mental health professionals. Learn more at teentalkapp.com.

WithAll aims to serve millions of people with simple, accessible resources that work to reduce the risk of eating disorders through upstream prevention and help people break through practical barriers in pursuing recovery. Learn more at withall.org.

EXPRESSIONS
by Walgreens

The Expressions Challenge by Walgreens program initially launched in 2009, is about guiding students to make better life choices for their overall health and well-being. There is no means of expression more personal or self-revelatory than art. Teens are encouraged to use their voice through art, creative writing, spoken word and multimedia to communicate their perspective on topics that impact them and their peers including mental health challenges, cyber-bullying, self-esteem, gender identity, body image, the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice, equity and more. High School Teens from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, participate in Expressions for the opportunity to creatively express themselves for a chance to win up to $2000.

Expressions was created for the unprecedented times we are living in today. Now, more than ever, teens need an outlet to express themselves and find their voice. Students have never received such unlimited access to information and the power to communicate this information globally. We believe the peer-to-peer messages students are sending via Expressions Challenge by Walgreens are extraordinary and being heard loud and clear around the world.

The Walgreens Expressions Challenge Contest includes digital and social engagement, Influencer partnerships, participation in virtual events, educator engagement, organization engagement and in-store visual communication, all designed to build awareness of a digital Expressions Challenge contest for high school teens. The 2024 contest will be open for submissions from January 3, 2024 - March 30, 2024.

For more about the Expressions by Walgreens, visit
www.expressionschallenge.com
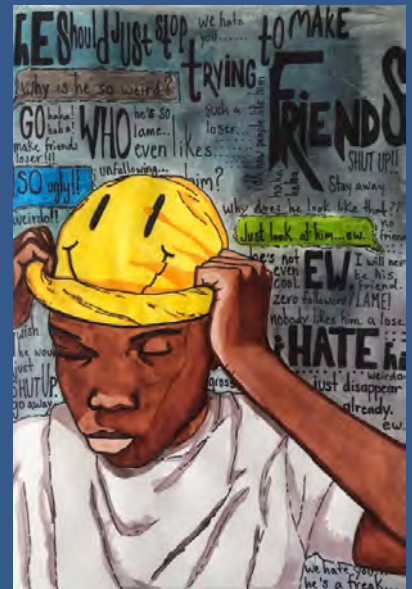
MHA Affiliate Programs

FLORIDA – Mental Health America of Southeast Florida

Mental Health America of Southeast Florida provides **HOPE Sunshine Clubs**. HOPE stands for "Helping Overcome Problems Effectively." Clubs host after-school meetings for students in local middle and high schools with a sponsor trained by Mental Health America of Southeast Florida. Members develop new skills as they learn to support each other. Florida Initiative for Suicide Prevention provides support and a curriculum to sponsors on subjects such as bullying, substance abuse prevention, dating violence, and coping skills. The club can also develop their own activities based on the member's needs and creative input.

Listen to Children is a mentoring program that pairs trained volunteers with children in need of additional support to engage in active listening sessions. Children benefit from an ongoing supportive relationship with a caring nonjudgmental friend who is not an "authority figure." Parents and caretakers identify children projected to benefit from this prevention program and must sign consent for the child to participate. This program is not recommended for children with severe behavioral issues. Volunteers undergo training with Mental Health America of Southeast Florida and must pass a screening process that includes Level 2 FBI FDLE Security Clearance. Children dealing with stressful situations or social issues can better focus when they have listeners to talk with and trust.

FLORIDA – Tampa Bay Thrives

Started by the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Blue, **Strike the Stigma** brings community partners together with high school students on a day highlighting practical ways to take care of their mental health.

HAWAII – MHA Hawaii

The **Youth Suicide & Bullying Prevention** program is an evidence-informed curriculum aimed to increase knowledge and understanding of bullying and suicide, identify risk factors and warning signs, and provide skills and resources to help prevent or intervene. This training can be done virtually with safety guidelines and is approved to meet the Hawaii State Act 270 requirement.

Become a Defender Training follows the model of bullying prevention developed for their original YSBP curriculum. This interactive training was created to introduce older elementary students to the subject of bullying, how to prevent it, and how to talk about dealing with difficult emotions positively in fun ways specifically tailored for this age group. This training can be done virtually with safety guidelines.

Training for Trainers – Youth Suicide and Bullying Prevention (YSBP) is a workshop allowing participants to be introduced to and unpack the YSBP curriculum, explore recommended best practices for working with youth in bullying and suicide prevention, and practice facilitating the YSBP Training. Participants who complete the T4T Workshop are then certified YSBP Trainers who are qualified to deliver trainings to youth in their communities with the necessary training materials. This training can be done virtually.

Self-Care for Youth is designed to teach youth tools to help them feel stronger, more hopeful, and able to cope with stress. It is ideal for high school-aged youth and young adults who want to learn tools to take care of their mental health and wellness.

KANSAS – Mental Health America of the Heartland

Mental Health America of the Heartland (MHAH) has partnered with PAXIS Institute and Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services to present **PAX Good Behavior Game (GBG)** to elementary school personnel and PAX Tools to parents and caregivers in Kansas. These trainings focus on increasing positive behavior and building emotional skills. The GBG training consists of a set of research-based, trauma-informed strategies based on behavioral science, neuroscience, and cultural wisdom that improve behavior, academic performance, and a host of lifetime outcomes for children. PAX Tools Workshop utilizes evidence-based Kernels for use with children in the home. These strategies promote the development of self-regulation, reduce conflict and decrease problematic behavior, and improve relationships. MHAH is also offering PAX Partners training for those who want to support, sustain, and expand PAX implementation in elementary schools.

KENTUCKY – MHA Kentucky

Youth Mental Health First Aid teaches you how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders in youth. This seven-hour training gives adults who work with youth the skills they need to reach out and provide initial support to children and adolescents (ages 6-18) who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem and help connect them with the appropriate care.

MASSACHUSETTS – Massachusetts Association for Mental Health

The Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH) has curated **mental health education resources** for students and families on its website. Understanding and maintaining your mental health is a lifelong process that is essential to health and well-being. The webpage includes videos, articles, activities, apps, and more to empower students K-12 to take charge of their own mental health. Resources are organized by grade level (K-4, 5-8, 9-12).

Network of Care Massachusetts is an online tool that helps users find information about resources in their communities for people of all ages with mental health and substance use needs. Network of Care Massachusetts is designed to serve individuals at risk for or living with mental health and/or substance use conditions, their families and friends, care coordinators, district and school staff, and other staff at provider organizations and state agencies. The Culturally Responsive Behavioral Health Resource Hub contains information on online support groups, local and national organizations, therapist directories, culturally responsive clinics and programs, and wellness resources for Black, Latinx, Asian, and people of color. Finding a provider, support group, or community space where individuals feel safe and supported is extremely important to mental health and well-being.

MINNESOTA – Mental Health Minnesota

We Can RELATE provides peer support to teens and young adults who are struggling with their mental health. The service is delivered via online chat, which can be accessed through the MHM website, Instagram, and Facebook. The service is staffed by trained volunteers, who are young adults (ages 18-25) who have also faced mental health concerns and can relate to what teens and young adults are going through. Visit mentalhealthmn.org to learn more.

The **"I'm Here to Listen"** campaign works to foster an environment within schools that allows students to feel comfortable opening up about their mental health. The "I'm Here to Listen" stickers can be placed on classroom doors, whiteboards, lockers, laptops, water bottles, or anywhere a student could see. The hope is to start conversations and decrease stigma surrounding mental health by identifying students, teachers, and staff willing to listen and provide support. Order stickers and posters at mentalhealthmn.org.

MISSOURI – Mental Health America of Eastern Missouri

The goal of Mental Health America of Eastern Missouri's **Student Wellness Program (SWP)** is to enhance every young person's learning and living by offering students, families, and schools the insight, language, knowledge, and support in understanding the necessity of and need for mental health in a child's education. To achieve this goal, the Student Wellness Program provides mental wellness screenings in partner schools and offers customized referrals to trusted mental health practitioners and follow-up case management for students and families.

NEW JERSEY - Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris, Inc.

Beginning September 2023, the **New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Morris/Sussex Hub** will provide prevention programming and brief clinical intervention to students, families, and school faculty of Morris and Sussex counties. The HUB will offer a tiered menu of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that can be deployed in high-need districts. Resources and targeted support through the HUB will focus on promoting positive mental health; teaching and strengthening social, emotional and behavioral skills; and supporting a positive school climate and staff well-being. The HUB will consider the needs of the entire family in the context of serving individual students and serve as a connector to existing supports through the Children's System of Care and other state and local resources.

NEW JERSEY – Mental Health Association of Monmouth County

The **Family Crisis Intervention Unit** stabilizes youth (ages 10-17) in crisis and encourages positive development through connections to community resources, interpersonal relationships, and academic success. The program is available 24/7 and may be provided in the family's home. Services include but are not limited to: crisis intervention, stabilization, and short-term family treatment. Licensed clinicians assess behaviors and prevent involvement with the juvenile justice system. When all resources have been exhausted and the child's difficult behavior persists, the Family Crisis Intervention Unit may request court involvement.

Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) teaches how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges among children and adolescents (ages 6-18). It covers common signs and symptoms of mental health challenges in this age group, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and ADHD; common signs and symptoms of substance use challenges; how to interact with a child or adolescent in crisis and connect them with help; content on trauma, substance use, self-care; and the impact of social media and bullying.

The **Parent Child Conflict Resolution** (WRAP) program's licensed clinicians provide free in-home counseling and case management to children with behavioral difficulties, with a focus on improved academic performance and reduced family conflict that prevents involvement with the juvenile justice system. Intensive services include but are not limited to: trauma-informed counseling for individuals and families, comprehensive assessment, community linkage, case management, and referrals for other resources and services as needed. Clinicians have specializations in sand tray therapy and certifications in mindfulness and yoga. Youth ages 10-17 are eligible to receive up to 16 weeks of in-home counseling and case management. Referrals are made through Monmouth County schools and the Mental Health Association of Monmouth County's Family Crisis Intervention Unit.

Lifelines is a three-part, evidence-based suicide prevention program that builds competent communities and educates Monmouth County schools on assessing youth and adult suicide risk.

NEW YORK – Mental Health Advocates of Western New York

Credentialed **Youth Peer Advocates** use their own lived experience to connect with at-risk youth through peer-led support groups, educational trainings, and one-on-one non-crisis support for youth and young adults ages 13-26.

JustTellOne.org is a peer-to-peer prevention and early intervention awareness campaign targeted to teens and young adults and focuses on depression, suicide, alcohol, and drug abuse. Its mission is to give youth the tools, language, and confidence to start the conversation about their mental or behavioral health issues.

Basic Emotional Skills Training (BEST) is a classroom-based program that helps students in pre-K through second grade develop healthy social and emotional skills.

OKLAHOMA - MHA Oklahoma

The **Student Mental Health Screening** program offers a free and voluntary adolescent screening tool that assesses physical and emotional well-being. It is a proactive step designed to ensure Tulsa and Oklahoma City students' safety and get them help when they need it. The young people who participate in Student Mental Health Screening are sixth- through 12th-graders who have expressed interest in the screening and have parental permission. Teens review the results in a conversation with a licensed clinician. If the screening indicates a need for further evaluation, the clinician makes contact with parents and, typically, refers the teen to appropriate community resources for further evaluation. Student Mental Health Screening staff continue to follow-up with teens and parents to ensure they receive appropriate resources.

PENNSYLVANIA – Mental Health America of Lancaster County

MHA of Lancaster County provides **school advocacy** where they can act as your educational advocate for the special education system by supporting you through the IEP/504 process. They can educate and empower you to advocate for your child and help facilitate conversations with the school to support your child. This can include reviewing plans, advising on next steps, and attending meetings.

TEXAS – Mental Health America of Greater Dallas

The **WHO© (We Help Ourselves) Program** is a series of research-based curricula that are formed on sensitive, non-threatening content and methodology. The WHO Program has allowed school counselors, child advocates, nurses, teachers, case workers, and volunteers to present WHO in classroom or group settings for ages pre-K through 12th grades. Follow-up activities and evaluation instruments are also included in WHO Program materials. WHO teaches anti-bullying and anti-victimization strategies to build resiliency in kids.

TEXAS – Mental Health America of Greater Houston

The **Center for School Behavioral Health Youth Art Showcase** is an annual celebration and awareness event highlighting youth voices and experiences in conversations about mental health. Greater Houston area students ages 5-20 are invited to submit visual art in the following forms: collage, drawings, mixed media, mosaics, needlework, paint, photography, and 3D. The goals of the Youth Art Showcase include promoting art as a healthy means of coping and expression, increase conversations about mental health, and decrease mental health stigma.

The **Youth Advisory Board** provides a space for the voices of youth to improve policies, practices, and programs that support youth mental and behavioral health throughout the region.

Mental Health America of Greater Houston has partnered with **Child-Friendly Cities Initiative Mental Health Committee** to develop student mental health educational materials.

TENNESSEE – Mental Health Association of East Tennessee

Mental Health 101 is an early intervention program for middle and high school students across Tennessee. Mental Health Association staff visit more than 160 schools annually, serving over 34,000 students in the academic year. Outcome data show gains in demonstrable knowledge of mental illness signs and symptoms, symptom duration, suicidal behaviors, and how to intervene.

VIRGINIA – Mental Health Association of Fauquier County

Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (ages 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addiction challenge or is in crisis. The class is two hours online and six hours in person.

Teen Mental Health First Aid teaches high school students how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders among their friends and peers. The training gives students the skills to have supportive conversations with their friends and get a responsible and trusted adult to take over as necessary. It is designed to be delivered in schools or community sites in three interactive classroom sessions of 90 minutes each or six sessions of 45 minutes each.

Parent Research Institute Drug Education Survey (PRIDE) is one of the largest surveys of adolescent drug usage. It has been in use since 1982 and utilized by hundreds of school systems across all 50 states. Over 14 million students have taken the survey. It surveys: the frequency of drug and alcohol use, time of first use, where drugs are used, when drugs are used, mental health issues, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, protective factors, and risk factors. The MHAFC presents the findings to the community.

Every three years, the Mental Health Association hosts a **Community Dialogue for Youth Voices**. This all-day program invites teams of students from all middle and high schools within Fauquier and Rappahannock counties together to learn about mental health issues. They present the latest findings from the PRIDE Survey from the previous fall and allow students to create plans to address a mental health or substance use issue within their own school. The teams take the ideas they develop at the dialogue back to their schools to work on creating a healthier environment for all students.

VIRGINIA – Mental Health America of Fredericksburg

MHA of Fredericksburg provides **suicide prevention education** by partnering with local schools and youth groups across the region to present an evidence-based curriculum proven to reduce the occurrence of self-harm and suicide ideation.

Support services are available through a contract with local licensed mental health providers to provide in-school therapy sessions for middle school and high schoolers who are identified to be at risk for suicide. There is also a drop-in psychoeducational group for teens with a focus on mental health-related issues.

WISCONSIN – Mental Health America Lakeshore

The **Resilient Classroom Program** is rooted in evidence-based practices, which are effective within classrooms. It's an awareness-based self-regulation framework that establishes protective factors in youth and educators.

The **Student Ambassador Program** allows student ambassadors to play an important role in supporting each other and their mental health.

The **Resilient Classroom Project Educator Training** consists of a four-hour workshop on resilience and implementing resilient practices in the classroom. The second component is in-class learning, which includes 10 video lessons, 10 video practices, and classroom discussions for each lesson. The videos are designed for students K-5. This course can be completed online. Videos are provided for educators and support staff to implement the curriculum after completion of the course.

Online Behavior and Mental Health

As an adult, it's likely you have a different view of the virtual world than people just a few years younger, and today's tweens and younger are growing up at a time when online spaces are just as prevalent as physical ones. Whether you're 20 or over 65, most adults need to do some catching up to understand what daily life looks like for younger people.

WHERE AND HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR TIME ONLINE?

The virtual universe is just that – entire worlds of platforms. Taking the time to understand what that world looks like is crucial in supporting young people.

CONTENT: POSTING & SCROLLING

When we think about youth and technology, most people jump to social media – and for good reason. Up to 95% of teens ages 13-17 and 40% of children ages 8-12 report using a social media platform – an experience many adults never had in their youth. Popular platforms among today's kids and teens include TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and more (learn more from our Social Media Cheat Sheet).

Social media sometimes gets a negative reputation, but many young people benefit by using it to express themselves and connect with others. Concerns arise, though, because social media is designed to be addictive. It provides instant gratification and constant hits of dopamine, the "feel good" chemical in the brain. No matter how a young person feels, the wide range of social media content can seem to fulfill a youth's needs, even if that means endless scrolling to numb emotions.

ONLINE INTERACTIONS & MESSAGING

Social media
Social media is meant to be social. Most content includes interactive comment sections, and some platforms – such as Discord, Reddit, and Snapchat – are designed just for chatting. Teens are more likely to report positive than negative experiences from using social media, primarily because of the sense of connection it can provide. While young people are usually talking online to their friends, virtual communication comes with risks. Cyberbullying, explicit content (nudes), extortion, and online predators are very real threats.

Video games
Gaming is an entire world of its own within the virtual universe. Like most things, gaming is unlikely to be a problem when done in moderation. In fact, gaming has been linked with some positive effects like improved decision-making and time management skills. But it becomes too much when someone feels like they need to play rather than want to. This has been associated with many mental health challenges like insomnia, low self-esteem, anxiety, aggression, and loneliness. Frequent gaming can also be a coping mechanism or response to symptoms of depression or ADHD.

WHAT KIND OF CONTENT ARE KIDS AND TEENS CONSUMING THAT MIGHT IMPACT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

The internet is endless, and it doesn't only show you what you search for or who you follow or subscribe to. Young people see all kinds of content online every day, including unwanted content due to ads, algorithms, comments, and more.

ALGORITHMS

The content that social media users see on their feeds is controlled by an algorithm, which is a set of rules about how data behaves. Companies analyze user information, preferences, and behaviors to deliver personalized content and keep users on the platform. Algorithms are why we generally see content that interests us. But they can also be used to target vulnerable individuals, pushing pro-suicide, self-harm, or pro-eating disorder content.

Because algorithms are designed to keep people engaged, they feed internet addiction. We can't protect young people from everything that could hurt them, and it is no different online. Instead, you can educate yourself, teach and model healthy habits, and prepare them for the dangerous situations they could find themselves in.

PEER CONTENT

While connectedness is one of the benefits of social media, young people can struggle with constantly seeing what their peers are posting. Whether they're reading posts about friends getting into their top choice colleges, judging their bodies against their favorite influencers, or seeing pictures from someone's seemingly perfect family vacation, comparing themselves and their lives to that of others can lead to dissatisfaction, depression, and anxiety. In addition, FOMO, or "fear of missing out" is common – seeing that friends are getting together without them can hurt. Social media and social comparison to peers may also be factors in the current rise in body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem among adolescents.

FEEL-GOOD CONTENT

There is a lot of uplifting and helpful content on the internet. Humor is beneficial to mental health, and young people seek out comedy content more than any other topic across all platforms. A simple YouTube video can help someone feel understood and like others relate to them, and TikTok videos can be an easy way to have a quick laugh. In moderation, spending some time online can boost your mental health.

VIOLENT & DANGEROUS CONTENT

Devices and screens expose youth to more violent and inappropriate content than ever before. This doesn't only happen if they go looking for it, and social media algorithms are known to push unsuitable content. This can include graphic violence, pornography, dangerous challenges, tips to restrict eating, self-harm how-to videos, suicide challenges, and more. The online universe also creates more ways for cyberbullying and sextortion to occur.

If you think your child's time online is impacting their mental health, take the parent mental health test at mhascreening.org, and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

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Protecting Your Child's Mental Health Online

Technology is evolving fast – it can be hard to keep up with the new platforms, content trends, and potential dangers that young people may be exposed to. Kids and teens see traumatizing events and controversial opinions in the news on a regular basis, and social media is a way to see in real-time what their peers are doing.

The type of content young people see affects their mental health. Like anything, there can be pros and cons to this. Unfortunately, we can't fully protect young people from all the bad stuff. What we can do is prepare them to protect themselves and be there to help them understand what they're seeing and hearing.

COMPARISON & FOMO (FEAR OF MISSING OUT)

It's natural to compare ourselves to others from time to time, but feeling like everyone else has better grades, social lives, home lives, etc. can stir up dissatisfaction with kids and teens about their own lives. We're in a culture of seeking validation through likes, comments, and follower counts, and it's easy to feel inadequate if numbers are low.

TIPS

Help young people understand that peers only post the highlights of their lives. Social media is designed to show the best parts of life. High school seniors aren't putting up pics holding college rejection letters, only acceptances. Nobody is bragging about losing the big game. For every post about a party, there is another party that person didn't get invited to. People only share what they want others to see, and some people with the happiest online presence have many bad days.

Encourage kids and teens to connect offline. Time spent with others doesn't just reduce screentime, but can also help kids and teens avoid some of the triggers they might see while scrolling. It also builds resiliency to FOMO – after all, it's harder to feel left out of one activity when you are busy doing something else.

BODY IMAGE & DISSATISFACTION

Social media feeds are full of images of celebrities, influencers, and peers who young people may perceive as more attractive than themselves. Photo filters and editing impact this, too. Some people have even requested plastic surgery to look like a filtered Snapchat picture. Body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are commonly triggered by social media, especially among adolescent girls.

TIPS

Remind kids and teens that social media isn't showing real life. Pictures are often edited or filtered, and there are lots of tips and tricks people use to take flattering photos. Beyond that, influencers often exaggerate the power of beauty products (especially if they are being paid to promote them).

Encourage young people to reduce their social media use, at least for a few weeks. Teens and young adults who reduced their social media use by 50% for just a few weeks saw significant improvement in how they felt about both their weight and their overall appearance compared with peers who maintained consistent levels of social media use.

Seek professional support if needed. Body dissatisfaction and disordered eating can be a slippery slope, especially when algorithms push harmful related content. If you think your child might have symptoms of an eating disorder, a free and anonymous online eating disorder test is available at mhascreening.org.

NAVIGATING MISINFORMATION

There's an endless amount of information online, and it is hard to know what is true and real. Altered and AI videos, images, and audio can make things especially complicated.

There's also a lot of misinformation related to mental health terms. While it's great that young people are talking more openly about mental health, language is important. Using clinical terms in a negative way can contribute to stigma, and using them casually can make it hard for people who truly need help to be taken seriously.

TIPS

Encourage young people to question things. Teach them how to dig deeper before taking something as fact. It's important to check multiple sources (and make sure those sources are credible) and think critically about if the information makes sense.

When it comes to mental health, it's better to be safe than sorry. If a young person says they're "traumatized," "triggered," or another mental health term, it's worth gently following up. They may need support, or, if they used the term lightly, take the teaching moment.

VIOLENT & DANGEROUS CONTENT

Technology exposes youth to several dangers, and they're able to access more violent and inappropriate content than ever before. This doesn't only happen if they go looking for it; social media algorithms are known to push this kind of content into young people's feeds. This can include graphic violence, pornography, dangerous challenges, tips to restrict eating, self-harm how-to videos, suicide challenges, and more.

TIPS

Be a trusted person or help identify one. Make sure there's a safe person in your child's life for them to go to if they see something online that makes them uncomfortable or scared. As a parent or guardian, you may want to be this person for your child, but they may feel better talking about things with a teacher, coach, aunt/uncle, or other adult.

See some of it for yourself. Knowledge is power. Be aware of any dangerous challenges that are trending, know what video games your child is playing, and be ready to talk about troubling current events.

CYBERBULLYING & HARASSMENT

Unfortunately, bullying is nothing new. But these days it doesn't just happen at recess or after school, and online bullying, or cyberbullying, can be nonstop. This can look like posting unflattering or edited images of someone, spreading rumors, or sending disrespectful messages. Being able to hide behind a screen can give people a false sense of security and confidence to be meaner than they would in real life.

Online bullying and harassment aren't only coming from people your child knows. Connecting with new people is a huge benefit to youth being online, but not all strangers have good intentions. The internet can be a hotbed for people pressuring teens for explicit content, or people who simply aren't who they say they are.

TIPS

Ask your child about their social media and online life. Know what platforms they're using, who can see their profiles, and who they may be talking to. Online friends – people they only know online – aren't automatically dangerous, but it's important to be cautious.

Know when to contact the authorities. Any inappropriate online contact between a child and an adult should be reported to the police. Schools, counties, and states have different policies and laws related to cyberbullying to protect youth. There are also federal laws in place regarding exploiting youth and sharing explicit content with/of them. Learn more <u>here</u>.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Keep in mind that you'll never fully relate or "get it." Youth are growing up in a truly different culture when it comes to technology. It may be tempting to leave this as a "young people's problem." But young people model the adults in their life – caretakers and household members are the main influence on how kids use technology. Being an informed, trusted role model in a young person's life can go a long way in ensuring their social media use does more good than harm.

If you think your child's time online is impacting their mental health, take the parent mental health test at <u>mhascreening.org</u>, and check out MHA's book <u>"Where to Start"</u> for tips on how to take action.

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Social Media, Youth, and Comparison

With so many posts across feeds, timelines, and social media apps, young people today may start to compare themselves and their lives to what they see on their screens. Sometimes this can help them make sense of the world, be motivated, or get inspired. But other times this can negatively affect their confidence, self-esteem, and body image. They may not even be aware that they are comparing themselves to others and the negative thoughts that come with it.

As adults in young people's lives, it's natural to want to protect children from what they see online. While it's not always possible to protect them in a world where social media is unavoidable, we can look for signs they are struggling and provide support and resources to help them cope and be confident in themselves.
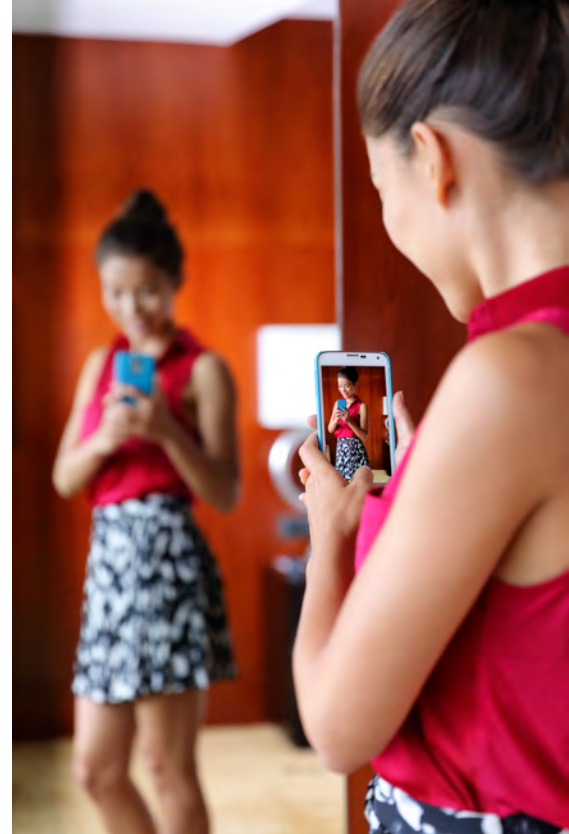
COMMON COMPARISON TRAPS

BODY IMAGE

Many young people today are struggling with body image and insecurities. Social media is full of classmates, influencers, and celebrities showing off their seemingly perfect looks – most of which are edited.

What you can do: Remind youth that they are only seeing a small sample of what people really look like, and how those people want to look online. Social media doesn't represent all the different body types, skin tones, and hair textures in the real world. Encourage kids and teens to think about all the things they appreciate about themselves and their bodies and make a list in a journal or the notes app on their phones. This list is something that they can go back to when they feel comparison thoughts creeping up.

ONLINE POPULARITY

For young people, their social media profiles are extensions of themselves. When they don't have as many likes, followers, or views as their peers, they often take this personally, which can make them feel isolated, rejected, and hurt.

What you can do: Acknowledge their feelings – when something hurts, it hurts, no matter how trivial it may seem to you. Remind them of all the people who support them in their lives offline and that there is more to life than social media profiles. Let them know that the number of likes or anything else on social media doesn't define who they are. This may be a good moment to remind them that only they can define themselves.

FOMO: FEAR OF MISSING OUT

FOMO is the feeling of worry or insecurity about missing out on something like an event or opportunity. You may have experienced this but called it something else, like being left out or feeling unpopular. Young people can experience FOMO more often as social media is an endless stream of posts about parties, games, or celebrations they couldn't attend. Or maybe youth are watching others hang out with friends, do activities they've always wanted to try, or take trips to places they have never been. All of this can make them feel left out and lonely.

What you can do: Encourage youth to make real experiences and memories offline. Tell them that they don't have to do what everyone else is doing online to feel fulfilled. They can create their own goals, discover new hobbies or clubs, and build stronger relationships with those who are already in their lives. Remind them that a lot of what gets posted online is staged to some degree, and things tend to look more exciting than they actually are. If you also find yourself experiencing FOMO while on social media, be honest about it with your kid and work together to find space offline – being a healthy example is important for them to see.

If you think your child's time online is impacting their mental health, take the parent mental health test at mhascreening.org, and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

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Tips to Help Youth Avoid Social Comparison

Social comparison is an unfortunate part of the social media experience, but there are things you can encourage young people to do to avoid it:

REMIND THEM TO TAKE SOCIAL MEDIA BREAKS.

The break can be for a few days, hours, or weeks. No matter the length of time, it will help give them a break from what they see online.

ENCOURAGE THEM TO CONNECT OFFLINE.

While social media is great for building relationships virtually, it doesn't replace our need for face-to-face interaction and connection to others. Hanging out with friends or talking on the phone is a good way to combat the loneliness they may experience when scrolling on social media.

SUGGEST THEY CLEAN UP THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA FEED.

Have them think about what on social media makes them feel bad about themselves, scared, anxious, or lonely. Remind them that it's always OK to mute, snooze, unfollow, block, and report harmful posts and accounts. Also, remind them that they do not need to react to, respond, or engage with posts that make them uncomfortable.

HELP THEM BUILD SELF-ESTEEM.

Teach them that they can find validation within themselves instead of seeking it from others online. They can reflect on their own lives – what makes them proud, what they love about themselves, their goals, hopes, and dreams.

Someone's life on social media is only a fraction of what their life is really like. Reminding young people that what they see online isn't always accurate and that they can create real and valuable experiences offline will help them cope with social comparison.

If you think your child's time online is impacting their mental health, take the parent mental health test at mhascreening.org, and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

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How to Find Healthy Online Communities

Sometimes we find support and connections in online communities and on social media that we can't find in real life. This support helps us feel seen and heard and validates our interests and identities. We can connect to others with similar ideas, experiences, and struggles, which can make us feel less alone when we find it difficult to connect to those around us physically.

But not every online community is healthy. So how can we determine what a healthy one looks like? The truth is that the perfect safe space doesn't exist online, but you can determine what feels healthy and safe for you.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY ONLINE COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE?

For many young people, social media leads to better overall well-being. A majority of adolescents report that social media helps them feel more accepted (58%), like they have people who can support them through tough times (67%), like they have a place to show their creative side (71%), and are more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives (80%). Being a part of healthy online communities has a positive impact on our mental health.

But what does a healthy online community look like, and how do you know if you are a part of one? Here are some ways to determine if you are:

IT FEELS SAFE.

A healthy online community is free from bullying, offensive content, judgment, and harassment. It doesn't require you to send anything – pictures, contact information, address, etc. – that makes you feel uncomfortable.

IT HOLDS EVERYONE ACCOUNTABLE.

In a healthy online community, there are moderators and rules that are enforced to protect and defend users from offensive language, content, and trolls trying to hurt, harm, or demean others.

IT'S A SPACE WHERE YOU FEEL CONNECTED TO OTHERS.

You can express yourself and discuss your hobbies, ideas, opinions, and perspectives. You freely like, share, comment, and have conversations.

IT ALIGNS WITH YOUR VALUES AND WHO YOU ARE AS A PERSON.

Maybe this space helps you set goals and discover new things like shows, movies, and hobbies. Or maybe this community allows you to showcase your art, creativity, or talent. You feel that you want to be a part of this space because it relates to who you are and what you like in some way.

IT DOESN'T DRAIN YOU OR MAKE YOU FEEL BAD ABOUT YOURSELF.

You should feel inspired, educated, and welcomed – in other words, good about yourself. If you find yourself feeling like you don't fit in or are pressured to change to be accepted, then chances are this isn't a healthy community.

WHERE CAN I FIND HEALTHY ONLINE COMMUNITIES?

A healthy online community can be a conversation with one other person – like someone who reacted to your Snapchat or Instagram story and became your friend. Or it's the comment section of your favorite YouTuber or Tik Toker. Maybe you find your people in a forum, like Reddit or Discord, or in another online support group. There are many places where you can find healthy communities online, and there are steps that you can take to find that space:

FIGURE OUT YOUR VALUES.

This basically means to think about what you are interested in and what's important to you. *Why do you want to be a part of this space? What do you want to learn or gain from this community? What do you bring to this community? Is this something you do for fun, does it help with your mental health?* Figuring out your values can help you find a community that both interests you and where you feel like you belong.

SET BOUNDARIES.

Think about what you don't want to interact with. Stay away from content, creators, influencers, or people who make you feel bad about yourself or uncomfortable. It's always OK to block, unfollow, report, or mute others to protect yourself online.

MONITOR YOUR FEELINGS.

Pay attention to if or how your energy changes when you engage. *How does being a part of your community make you feel? Are you anxious, angry, or sad?* A healthy community should make you feel connected, respected, and accepted.

If you think your time online is affecting your mental health, take the youth mental health test at mhascreening.org, and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

In crisis? Help is available! Call 988 or chat 988lifeline.org. You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting MHA to 741741.

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The Do's of Social Media

When it comes to social media, you've probably had a lot of people telling you what not to do. But the reality is that there are a lot of things you shouldn't do in every life situation, and that's not always helpful. Instead here's a list of do's for social media to help your mental health.

DO SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

LIMIT SCREEN TIME.

Do some research to figure out what works best for you to limit screen time. Some people like to have social media use blocked between certain hours or timeframes, while others prefer to have time limits on certain apps. Check your phone settings or download a website/app blocker. You can also try to make it harder for yourself to log on in the first place by removing the apps for a few days or longer. The goal is to make sure you aren't spending excessive amounts of time on social – it's up to you how to achieve that.

Teens and young adults who <u>reduced</u> their social media use by 50% for just a few weeks saw significant improvement in how they felt about their weight and overall appearance compared with peers who maintained consistent levels of social media use.

BE INTENTIONAL.

When you do use social media, it can be easy to keep scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling. But it is possible to break this cycle. Decide your reason for logging on before you do. Did you just want to share a picture or see what someone specific is up to? Do you need a quick laugh or to send a message? Do whatever you meant to do and sign off when you're finished. This is extra important during bad or breaking news when it's easy to start doomscrolling.

DO FOCUS ON GENUINE CONNECTIONS

STRENGTHEN EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS.

Social media is meant to be social. Use the platforms you're on to boost the friendships you already have. It's a great way to stay in touch with friends who go to other schools, classmates who have moved away, or faraway family.

ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS.

There are lots of ways to connect online about things you're interested in and care about. Sharing your experiences and interests in a positive way can bring healthy connections. Just be careful of comment sections that are more arguments than conversations.

DO CREATE A FEEL-GOOD FEED

UNFOLLOW OR MUTE CONTENT THAT BOTHERS YOU.

Certain accounts might come to mind, like ones that post images that make you uncomfortable or promote extreme dieting. But this can even extend to influencers who trigger thoughts of self-comparison, an old friend, or an ex. Muting users or groups that post content that bothers you is a great option if you don't want to unfollow, and they won't even know.

FOLLOW ACCOUNTS THAT INSPIRE AND UPLIFT YOU.

Just like social media can have negative content, there is also good out there. Look for accounts that post the kind of things that make you feel good – funny animal videos, good news, memes, or even just pretty nature photos.

DO KNOW WHAT'S REAL AND WHAT'S FAKE

REMEMBER SOCIAL MEDIA IS ONLY A HIGHLIGHT REEL.

No matter how perfect someone's life seems, everyone has insecurities, challenges, and plain old bad days – they just aren't posting about it. It's not fair to compare your entire life to the Insta-worthy parts of someone else's.

CHECK YOUR SOURCES.

There's a lot of misinformation on social media, from rumors to clickbait to inaccurate news, and it can spread quickly. It's important to be mindful of who is sharing information and where they got it from. Do some fact-checking if something seems too good to be true or feels off.

DO PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY

BE CAUTIOUS OF WHAT YOU POST AND SEND.

Once something is posted online, it's out there forever, and it could potentially come up when you (or your parents) Google your name. Something you post today could be found years later – by your family, a partner, or the person hiring for the job you really want. Even if you're sharing things privately, the person you're sharing with might not respect your wishes to keep things between the two of you.

BE CAREFUL WITH STRANGERS.

It's pretty common to interact with people you don't know online, and a lot of people make new connections and friendships on social media. But being behind a screen can also make it easier for someone to pretend to be someone else or take advantage of you. If you feel weird about a stranger online, your best bet is to block them.

DO HANDLE OFFENSIVE AND UNSAFE CONTENT

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.

If something on social media seems suspicious, uncomfortable, or potentially harmful, trust your instincts and take it seriously. Avoid interacting with the content or the person involved. Engaging further might escalate the situation or put you at risk. Do report to a trusted person any threats of violence to you, a classmate, or anyone else.

ASK FOR HELP IF THINGS GET OUT OF HAND.

If you don't know what to do in a situation, look for an adult you trust, such as a parent, guardian, teacher, coach, school counselor, or another responsible adult in your life. Choose someone who is approachable, understanding, and supportive. It can be embarrassing to talk about the situation but be honest and straightforward about the problem you're having – even if it started because you shared something you probably shouldn't have. Explain how it's affecting you. If you have screenshots, messages, or any other evidence, share it with the adult to help them better understand the situation and figure out what to do.

FLAG AND REPORT IF NEEDED.

Many social media platforms have mechanisms for reporting inappropriate content or behavior. If you see something that troubles you, do report or flag the user or content. Odds are, if you find a post disturbing, others have thought the same thing.

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Why Do I Compare Myself to Others Online?

Social media can be hard to escape – <u>nearly everyone</u> (95%) ages 13-17 uses social media, and more than a third of young people say they use it "almost constantly." While a lot of good can come from social media, it also allows us to be very aware of others' lives and judge ours against theirs.
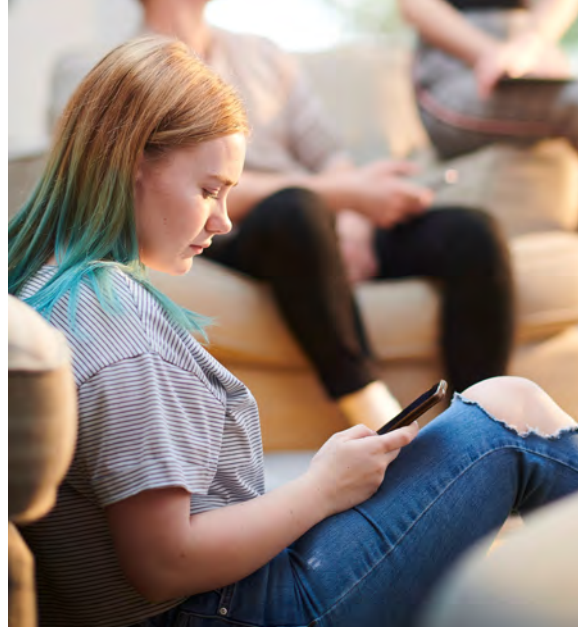
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUELS COMPARISON

The tendency to compare yourself to others is normal. It's human nature to look to others to guide your own thoughts and actions, and sometimes this can help provide inspiration or motivation. But online, we see what more people are doing more often than we would in real life, and it can make them seem "better" than us in some way. Algorithms play a role in this by promoting already-popular posts and content designed to go viral. You might not even realize these thoughts of comparison popping up as your mind moves just as fast as you scroll.

COMMON COMPARISON TRAPS

BODY IMAGE

Many young people today are struggling with body image and insecurities. Social media is full of classmates, influencers, and celebrities showing off their "perfect" looks – most of which are edited and filtered.

The reality is that you only see a small sample of what people look like the way they want to be seen. Even if you know that social media doesn't represent all the different body types, skin tones, or kinds of hair people have in the real world, seeing what and who gets likes and views might make you feel like you also need to look like that.

ONLINE POPULARITY

Your social media profile can feel like all of you instead of just part of what you show the world, which makes it easy to take things personally. Maybe you have fewer followers than your classmates, don't get many views on TikTok, or know people watch your stories but they don't like your posts. It can be hard to ignore the reaction – or lack of reaction – you get online.

FOMO: FEAR OF MISSING OUT

Having FOMO – that feeling of worry or insecurity about missing out on an event or opportunity – is common. Everyone misses out on different things occasionally, but it might feel like these missed opportunities are thrown in your face on social media. Maybe everyone's posting about the big game that you had to skip, or your feed is full of prom-posals while you're still waiting.

These feelings can snowball and contribute to loneliness and low self-esteem. FOMO can even be part of why it feels so hard to disconnect from social media. Many people feel like they're addicted to checking social media and knowing what their peers are up to. Completely disconnecting isn't always the answer, and not participating in social media can leave you feeling like you're also missing out.

TIPS TO AVOID SOCIAL COMPARISON

TAKE BREAKS.

Whether you log out for a few days or set daily time limits, spending less time on social media can give your brain a rest. Judging yourself is exhausting, and it's healthy to take a step back and reconnect with the world outside of your phone.

CONNECT OFFLINE.

Don't let online relationships replace face-to-face interactions. Gather some friends and spend some time with each other in person. Try putting phones out of reach to help break the habit of mindless scrolling or checking notifications.

CLEAN UP YOUR FEED.

Pay attention while scrolling. What things make you feel insecure, anxious, or lonely? Your social media is meant to be for you. Unfollow accounts that post triggering content, mute/snooze posts from the classmate whose relationships you're jealous of, and absolutely remove and report people who are bullying you in comments or posts.

BUILD YOUR SELF-ESTEEM.

Everyone is good at different things, and some of these talents are hard to show off online. Think about what makes you feel good about yourself. Doing more of those activities can make it easier when you see other people succeed.

REMEMBER: PEOPLE ARE ONLY SHOWING YOU WHAT THEY WANT YOU TO SEE.

No one's life looks exactly like it does online. Social media is a "highlight reel." Most people aren't posting the other hundred selfies it took them to get "the one," a test they failed, or how many times they fell before they did the perfect kickflip.

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