

# → WHERE TO START ←

## Fact Sheets

## 4 THINGS LIKELY AFFECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH, AND 4 THINGS YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

Relationships or the pressures of performing at work or school are things we all know can have an impact on mental health, but sometimes it's less obvious when the world around you is what's causing problems. Whether you realize it or not, one or maybe all of these four things are probably affecting your mental health in some way right now.

### CURRENT EVENTS

Violent events impact people across the world. Maybe you have family in a conflict zone, are worried about increases in identity-based hate, or have no personal ties to a particular news event but are constantly seeing graphic images online. A 2022 study found that 73% of American adults reported being overwhelmed by the number of crises going on in the world.

### LONELINESS

Recent survey data show that more than half of U.S. adults (58%) are lonely, with those who are low income, young adults, parents, part of an underrepresented racial group, or living with a mental health condition experiencing even higher rates of loneliness. Loneliness increases the risk of developing anxiety and depression, and has been associated with psychosis and dementia. A low level of social interaction was found to have an impact on lifespan equivalent to smoking nearly a pack of cigarettes a day or alcoholism, and was twice as harmful as being obese.

### TECHNOLOGY

Having the internet at your fingertips can be a fantastic thing – you can learn, connect with healthcare providers, keep in touch with friends and family – but it isn't without its downfalls. Exposure to constant [bad] news coverage and contentious political campaigns can make anyone's mood sour and cause anxiety about what lies ahead. In fact, almost 60% of young people (ages 18-25) expressed considerable worry about the future of the planet. Social media can cause FOMO (fear of missing out), depression, and reduced self-esteem as a result of comparison. Furthermore, the lines between work and personal time are blurred by working from home and after-hours email notifications on your phone, increasing the likelihood of burnout.

### SOCIAL DRIVERS

Social drivers (also called social determinants) of health are the conditions in which you live, work, learn, and play. These include economic status, education, your neighborhood, access to resources (nutritious food, health care, green space, transportation, etc.), and social inclusion, and can have a far-reaching impact on not just your physical health, but also your mental health. One social driver that seems to be on everyone's mind is the economy.

Research shows a strong connection between worrying about money and mental distress, and for many people, salaries can't seem to keep up with rising inflation and cost-of-living expenses. A 2023 Gallup poll found that 42% of Americans are worried that they don't have enough money to pay their normal monthly bills.



# WHAT CAN YOU DO IF THE WORLD IS WEIGHING ON YOU?

## FIND YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

Having people around you to support your mental and emotional health can make all the difference. Finding those who lift you up, provide a listening ear, and help you through stressful times can make all the difference for your mental health. There are many places to seek support, including friends and family, online support groups, or community spaces. Therapy and counseling can also provide you with an extra layer of support. Seeking out groups where you have similar interests, such as a book club, running group, crafting class, or spiritual community, can offer comfort and connection. Ultimately, you want a support system that suits your needs and provides a safe space for healing.

## SET TECH LIMITS/BOUNDARIES

You can create space for a healthier relationship with technology by setting boundaries. Do some research to figure out what works best for you to limit screen time. Some things to try are blocking social media use between certain hours, putting time limits on apps, checking your phone settings, or downloading a website/app blocker. Decide your reason for logging on before you do, and sign off when you've finished doing what you need to do.

## CHANGE WHAT YOU CAN

With the state of the world, life can feel overwhelming, and as if nothing you do will make a difference. The good news is there are some things you can do. Taking action and advocating for causes important to you can be therapeutic in its own way. Advocacy and action as a form of healing can be powerful. Knowing you are doing what you can to make a difference can give you hope for the future. Try getting involved in causes near you, join advocacy groups, get out and vote, do your part in helping the planet, or stay informed and speak up on topics that need support.

## FIND HEALTHY COPING SKILLS

It can be tempting to ignore your feelings or numb them with substances, but this doesn't help anyone in the long run. Invest some time into figuring out what works best to help you manage your feelings. You may have to try a bunch of things until you find something that works, but it will be worth it. Check out MHA's list of coping skills in our [Building Your Coping Toolbox article](#).

Sometimes trying to manage your mental health by yourself is too much. Seeking professional help shows strength and can provide you with the support you need to manage life's stressors. Talking to a counselor or therapist can help you identify what might be affecting your mental health and how to best cope.

If you're taking steps to help yourself but still feel like you're struggling, take a mental health test at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org), and check out MHA's book "Where to Start" for tips on how to take action.

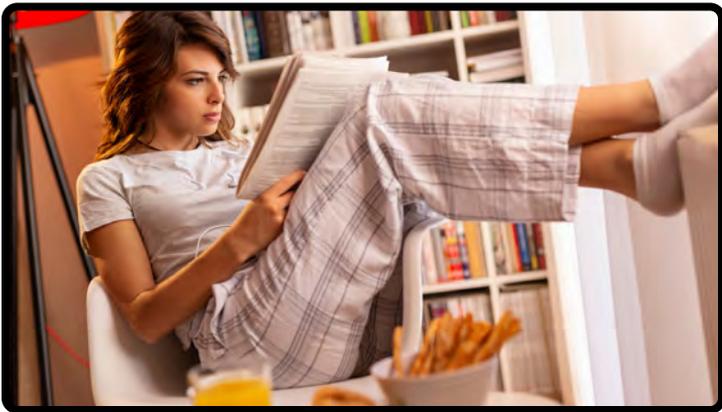
In crisis? Help is available! Call or text 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org). You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting HELLO to 741741.

# → WHERE TO START ←

## NEGATIVE NEWS COVERAGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

In today's fast-paced media climate, the 24-hour news cycle can seem impossible to avoid. We are bombarded with dramatic news coverage and endless clickbait, which has more of an impact on mental health than we may realize.

According to [a survey of 266 therapists by GrowTherapy](#), 99.6% said watching or reading the news can have a negative impact on mental health. People who belong to the [BIPOC](#) or [LGBTQ+](#) communities are more vulnerable.



### HOW DOES NEGATIVE NEWS COVERAGE IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH?

- **Watching upsetting news footage starts the body's "fight or flight" response.** [Adrenaline](#) is then released, and so is the stress hormone, cortisol. When our bodies are in this state, we experience the same symptoms we may experience if we were under threat. These symptoms include rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, upset stomach, etc.
- **The news increases depression and anxiety symptoms.** [One study](#) found that people showed an increase in symptoms after only 14 minutes of news consumption. These symptoms are made worse when people feel they have no ability to improve the situations they are learning about on the news.
- **Relying on social media for your news can drive addictive behavior.** This is important to note since [more than 50% of Americans receive their news via social media](#). Clickbait headlines and social media algorithms are designed to keep you coming back for more, making it difficult to stop returning to apps for your news.

### IDENTITY MATTERS

People are more likely to be negatively affected by the news when it is [personally relevant to them](#). This is also true when they share an identity with the people involved in the news story. **Because the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities are more often targets of violence and hate crimes, the mental health of people from these communities is impacted more severely by the news.**

According to [a study by Washington University in St. Louis](#), Black Americans experience an increase in poor mental health days during weeks when two or more incidents of anti-Black violence occur. However, this same study showed that white respondents' mental health was not significantly correlated with the timing of racial violence.

In terms of the LGBTQ+ community, there has been a [rise in the negative impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ policies on LGBTQ+ youth](#).

Kasey Suffredini, VP of Advocacy and Government Affairs at the Trevor Project, stated: "Right now, we are witnessing the highest number on record of anti-LGBTQ bills introduced this early in any legislative session...LGBTQ young people are watching, and internalizing the anti-LGBTQ messages they see in the media and from their elected officials. And so are those that would do our community harm."

## HOW CAN WE PROTECT OUR MENTAL HEALTH?

So, what can we do to support ourselves and each other in the face of negative news coverage?

- **Identify your triggers.** Take some time to think about what subjects stir symptoms of anxiety and depression. Some people may be more reactive to global conflict while others may feel more affected by racial injustice. Once you've figured out what has the strongest impact on you, you can limit your consumption of media with triggering content.
- **Try reading the news** instead of watching video, as [studies](#) show this can be less triggering, in part due to less disturbing imagery with written articles.
- **Limit your time with the news.** Doomscrolling might help you feel more informed about how to protect yourself from the troubles of the world, but it ultimately does more harm than good. Aim for no more than 30 minutes per day if possible.
- **Plan an enjoyable activity after taking in the news,** like engaging in a hobby, to decompress.
- **Take action by [getting involved with a group](#)** that is working on the issues that you are most passionate about. This can help you feel empowered to make change instead of feeling helpless about the world around you.
- **Join an affinity group.** Affinity groups are supportive communities of people who share a common identity, often including their allies. These groups can help foster resilience and create solidarity during times of prejudice or injustice, especially for people from BIPOC, LGBTQ+, or other minoritized groups.
- **Be mindful of your sources.** Sometimes what feels like news can be more based on opinion than facts, so where you get your news can make a big difference. Make sure the information you're getting is accurate and provides a variety of perspectives.
- **Enhance optimism** in your life by doing more of what brings you [joy and satisfaction](#). Some examples include: [social activities](#), [spiritual practices](#), [physical movement](#), mindfulness, creative hobbies, journaling, and gratitude practices. Or, it could be something simple like spending time with a pet.

It can feel hard to escape from the chaos of constant news coverage. While some groups are impacted more significantly, the long-term effects on all of us can include desensitization to such events, as well as [a reduced ability to cope with the stressors of everyday life](#).

If you still feel sad, worried, or scared after trying to help yourself, you might be showing the early warning signs of a mental health condition.

Visit [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to take an anonymous, free, and private mental health test. It only takes a few minutes, and after you are finished you will be given information about the next steps you should take based on the results.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org). You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting HELLO to 741741.

# → WHERE TO START ←

## THINGS YOU CAN SAY WHEN YOU'RE NOT "FINE"

A simple "hello" is usually followed by "how are you" or "how have you been" – and most of the time the answer is "good" or "fine." But what if you're struggling? Here are some things you can say when you're not okay.

I'M NOT FINE	I WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT	I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT
I'm actually going through some stuff.	Do you want to get coffee/lunch/dinner and chat later?	Thanks for asking, but I don't feel like going into detail.
Thanks for asking. _____ has been stressing me out lately.	Did you hear about _____ (something from the news that's bothering you)?	I appreciate that, I'm just not ready/don't have the time to talk right now.
I'm in my feels/I've got all the feels.	I'd love to get your advice about something.	I'm still trying to find the right words.
I'm having a day/It's been one of those days, well, weeks really.	Can I text you?	I'm not in a talking mood right now. Thanks, though.
I'm feeling some kind of way.	Want to take a walk with me?	I don't feel like talking, but I'll take a hug.
Ugh. I can't stop thinking about _____.	I need to vent.	I don't want to talk, but I don't want to be alone. Do you have time to just hang out for a bit?
Not so great, to be honest.	Do you have time to listen?	Can I come to you when I'm ready to talk?
On the struggle bus.	I'm having some issues with _____. Do you have time to talk?	I'm still thinking things through.
Feeling rough.	Can I bounce some thoughts off you?	Let's talk about _____ instead for now.
Today is not my day.	Have you ever felt like _____ (how you're feeling)?	I'll reach out when I'm ready.

Life can be challenging, but every day shouldn't feel hard or out of your control. If it does, there is hope and help. One free, private, and easy way to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take a mental health test at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org).

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## → WHERE TO START ←

### WHAT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE TELLS YOU THEY'RE FINE, BUT THEY'RE NOT

*Fine. Okay. Alright.* We've all had someone tell us they were one of those things and known that it couldn't be further from the truth. Maybe it was the look on their face, the tone of their voice, or their body language that gave them away – or maybe you've noticed that they have been acting differently lately. Distress can show up in many ways.

Whether someone thinks they are doing a good job of masking their emotions, or they are obviously being sarcastic when they say that they're alright, it's normal to want to help in some way. While what you say will likely be different depending on how well you know the person, here are some ideas for things to say to create an environment that encourages someone to open up about what they're going through.

- "Are you sure? If you want to talk, let me know."
- "It seems like something is bothering you. I'm here to listen if you want to share."
- "I've been 'fine' before – I'm here if you want to talk about it."
- "Do you want to (get coffee/go to lunch/grab a bite/take a walk) later? I feel like we have a lot to catch up on."
- "That wasn't very convincing – I'm here if you want to chat."



# SOMEONE IS OPENING UP TO YOU. NOW WHAT?

## DO...

- Listen. Really listening means actively paying attention to the person who is speaking and resisting the urge to talk about personal experiences unless asked. This is hard for everyone, but practice helps!
- Ask if they've thought about what they might need to feel better. If they haven't, offer to support, listen, and talk it out with them. If they have, support them in following through with their needs.
- Make sure to keep things confidential, unless it is life threatening.
- Normalize. Assure the person you're talking to that having a mental health concern is common, and there are lots of resources to help them feel better.
- Prepare to follow up. It takes courage for someone to speak up about what is bothering them. Exchange contact information (if you don't have it already) and touch base in a few days to see how the person is feeling and if there is anything you can do to help. You may want to research some resources like websites, hotlines, text lines, and community organizations so you can be prepared to offer them if it seems appropriate.

## DON'T...

- Tell them, "You shouldn't think that way." It can be difficult to have conversations about mental health concerns, and they may have worried about it for some time before talking to you.
- Use the word "crazy."
- Tell someone what they SHOULD do; instead, ask what they want you to help them with.
- Assume that they want your advice. Many times, people just want someone else to listen to them and help them feel less alone.
- Make comparisons. Telling someone "it could be worse" minimizes their experience and invalidates their feelings.
- Take on trying to fix all the person's problems. Offer help where appropriate, but don't get into a trap of trying to solve the problem, especially if it seems like a professional should be involved.

Visit [mhanational.org](https://mhanational.org) for additional information and resources about how to support someone who is struggling with their mental health.

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## BUILDING YOUR COPING TOOLBOX

Everyone goes through periods of hardship and stress, and it's important to take care of yourself and have tools on standby to use when times get tough.

A coping toolbox is a collection of skills, techniques, items, and other suggestions that you can turn to as soon as you start to feel anxious or distressed. No one thing works for everyone, and it may take some trial and error, but building a coping toolbox is a great way to be prepared for those times when your mental well-being starts to slip – think of it as a safety net.

Creating your toolbox can be as simple as writing a list (on your phone or on paper) of what helps, like breathing exercises or going for a run – this way, when you start struggling with your mental health, you don't have to remember what to do or search for tips. You can also have a physical toolbox and fill it with things like a stress ball, written notes to yourself, and photos that make you happy. If you make a physical toolbox, it's a good idea to still include a list of (non-physical) coping skills that help.

### IF YOU'RE STARTING FROM SCRATCH, HERE ARE SOME IDEAS:

#### Mood Boosters

- Read the story of someone you admire.
- Watch a funny YouTube video.
- Play with an animal.
- Watch a movie you loved when you were younger.
- Reorganize your room.
- Make a list of places you want to travel or things you want to see in your own town.
- Repeat affirmations. Saying an affirmation or statement with positive and personal meaning can bring calm. Pick something that speaks to you: I believe in myself. Fear doesn't control me. I let go of my sadness. I am safe.

#### Address Your Basic Needs

- Eat a healthy snack.
- Drink a glass of water.
- Take a shower or bath.
- Take a nap.
- Brush your teeth.

#### Process Feelings

- Draw how you're feeling.
- Make a [gratitude](#) list. Reflecting on things you are thankful for can help you change your mindset.
- Punch a pillow.
- Scream.
- Let yourself cry.
- Rip paper into small pieces.
- Vent. Venting is not the same as asking for help—it's taking an opportunity to share your feelings out loud. We do this naturally when we talk with someone we can trust about whatever is upsetting us. You can also vent by writing a letter to the person who upset you. Keep the letter a couple of days and then tear it up. Stick to pen and paper—using social media when you are highly emotional can be tempting, but you might say something you regret.

#### Volunteering/Acts of Kindness

- Do something nice for someone you know.
- Help a stranger.
- Volunteer your time.

## Problem Solving

- Make a list of potential solutions to problems – it can help to brainstorm with a friend or family member.
- Make a list of your strengths. There are plenty of things about you that are awesome, no matter how down you are feeling at the moment.
- If a person has upset you, talk with them directly. Fill in the blanks to this sentence – “I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when (this happens) because \_\_\_\_\_. Next time, could you please \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Example: “I feel left out when you make plans and don’t tell me until the last minute, because then I can’t join. Next time can you please invite me earlier?”

## Hobbies/Stress Relievers

- Learn something new – there are tutorials for all kinds of hobbies online.
- Create – try a craft project, color, paint, or draw. Invite a friend to join you for added fun.
- Write – you could write a story, a poem, or an entry in a journal.
- Get active – dancing, running, or playing a sport are some good ways to get moving.
- Play a game or do a puzzle.
- Get a plant and start a garden.

## Relaxation Exercises

- Practice belly breathing – put one hand on your stomach and start to inhale slowly. As you breathe in, imagine a balloon in your stomach filling up and continue to inhale until the balloon is very full. Put your other hand on your heart, feel your heartbeat, and hold your breath for 5 seconds. Now let your breath out slowly for 10 seconds – feel your belly flatten like a deflating balloon. Repeat this process 4 or 5 times and you should notice your heart beat slow down and your muscles relax.
- Try progressive muscle relaxation – clench your toes for a count of 5, then relax them for a count of 5, then move to your calves, then your thighs, then your abs, then your arms, then your neck.
- Play with a fidget toy.
- Go for a walk – feel the ground under your feet and the air on your skin. Focus on your senses.
- Find a [guided meditation](#) on YouTube.
- Do yoga – you can find videos on demand using your TV or online.
- Read a book.
- Listen to music, a podcast, or an audiobook.
- Unplug – turn off your phone, tablet, and/or computer for an hour or so.
- Use your five senses. Tuning into your sensory experiences can be comforting during intense moments.
  - Touch: stress ball, silly putty, a pet or stuffed animal, blanket
  - Hear: click a pen, pop bubble wrap, listen to a calming playlist
  - See: photos with loved ones, snow globe, affirmation/quote cards
  - Taste: sour candy, mints, tea
  - Smell: candle, scented lotion, essential oils

## Ask for Help

- Text a friend.
- Ask someone to just sit with you.
- Call a family member.
- Call a friend you haven’t talked to recently.
- Call a warmline if you can’t think of anyone to reach out to.
- If you are in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK or text HELLO to 741741.

If you still feel sad, worried, or scared after trying to help yourself, you might be showing signs of anxiety or depression. Taking a mental health test at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) can help you find out if you are at risk for a mental health condition.

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# → WHERE TO START ←

## HELPFUL VS. HARMFUL: WAYS TO MANAGE EMOTIONS

**Content warning:** This article mentions topics such as suicide, self-harm, and substance use.

Negative emotions like fear, sadness, and anger are a basic part of life and sometimes we struggle with how to deal with them effectively. We often learn how to manage or cope with emotions from the environments we are in and the people we are around. Some of the coping styles we learn may be more helpful, while others may be more harmful.



### SOME OF THE HARMFUL WAYS THAT PEOPLE DEAL WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE:

#### Denial

**Denial is when a person ignores their feelings or does not accept that they are dealing with a challenging situation.** They may do this if the situation does not seem like a big deal or if they feel they need to prioritize other things, like work or school. When people deny their feelings, those feelings don't just go away and can build up over time. This can lead to a person "exploding" or acting out in a harmful way.

#### Withdrawal

**Withdrawal is when a person doesn't want to be around, or participate in, activities with, other people.** This is different from wanting to be alone from time to time, and can be a warning sign of depression. Some people may withdraw because being around others takes too much energy, or they feel overwhelmed. This can be especially true for many neurodivergent people who need alone time in order to recharge their social and sensory batteries. In this case, taking "me time" is a helpful coping tool for keeping you healthy.

This is different from someone withdrawing because they don't think other people like them. People also may withdraw if they have behaviors that they are ashamed of so other people don't find out about what they are doing.

But withdrawal brings its own problems: extreme loneliness, misunderstanding, anger, and distorted thinking. We need to interact with other people to keep us balanced.

## Aggression

**Aggression is when a person uses force, threats, or ridicule to show power over others.** People typically take part in aggressive behavior because they don't feel good about themselves or are taking their emotions out on someone else. Making someone else feel bad makes them feel better about themselves or feel less alone. This can also show up as bullying or cyberbullying on online forums where the person can remain anonymous. This behavior is harmful to both the bully and the person being bullied, and does not address underlying issues.

## Self-harm

**Self-harm can take many forms including: cutting, starving oneself, bingeing and purging, or participating in dangerous behavior.** Even though this causes the person physical pain, many people self-harm because they feel like it gives them control over emotional pain. While self-harming may bring temporary relief, these behaviors can become addictive and can eventually lead people to feel more out of control and in greater pain than ever.

## Substance use

**Substance use is when people turn to alcohol and other drugs to make themselves feel better or numb about painful emotions or situations.** Alcohol and drug use can damage the brain, making it need higher amounts of substances to get the same effect. Over time, this can lead people to feel they need to use substances in order to feel "normal," especially if there are emotions that have never been properly dealt with that underlie their substance use. They may eventually feel desperate that this habit has gotten out of control, which can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Substance use and [overdose-related deaths have been on the rise since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Stress about health, finances, and social isolation led people to use substances to cope.

With practice, everyone can learn how to manage their emotions in healthy ways and many people find it helpful to [work with a therapist](#). You can also work on trying to cope in healthier ways on your own. Learn more from MHA's [Building Your Coping Toolbox article](#).

If you're working on improving your coping skills, but still find yourself struggling to deal with emotions, you might be showing the early warning signs of a mental health or substance use condition.

Visit [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to take an anonymous, free, and private mental health test. It only takes a few minutes, and after you are finished you will be given information about the next steps you should take based on the results.

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# → WHERE TO START ←

## DECISION MAP: WHERE TO GO

When you've decided to seek help, knowing what resources are available and where to start can be tricky. Use this decision map to help you figure out your options. If you don't find help where a path ends, try any of the resources in the gold boxes.

