Each school year can bring more homework, projects, tests, and drama into your child's social life. As a parent, it is natural to want to shield them from pain and make their life easier, but that is not always what they need.

Coping Skills and Mental Health

Learning to deal with adversity and overcome obstacles builds self-confidence and self-esteem. Support and help your child, but don't try to fix everything. Kids are amazingly capable! Remind them of that.
It can be difficult to know when our children, or we ourselves, are in need of mental health support.

Knowing potential signs of struggle or distress is important to keep us safe.

Discussing and learning together is a great way to de-stigmatize mental health as a family and can help each person better support one another (as well as themselves)!

- Being able to label and identify our emotions and moods helps us to better process them and communicate them.
  - How many emotions can you list?
  - What emotions did you feel today?
  - Is there an emotion your child has never heard described?
- **Look for mood changes.** Feelings of sadness or withdrawal that last more than two weeks, or severe mood swings, may be a sign that your mental health is in need of some attention and supports.
- All emotions are normal and human. Sometimes, though, our emotions can be overwhelming or can cause unpleasant physical symptoms. Knowing when an emotion is getting overwhelming and how to calm down can help us stay healthy.
  - When you are feeling an overwhelming emotion, what is one safe thing you do to calm down or feel better?
  - Cry! Research has found that in addition to being self-soothing, shedding emotional tears releases oxytocin and endorphins. These chemicals make people feel good and may also ease both physical and emotional pain. In this way, crying can help reduce pain and promote a sense of well-being. When is the last time you cried?
- Be aware of feelings of excessive worry or fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or fast breathing. If these overwhelming emotions occur often and are pervasive, this may be a sign that your mental health is in need of some attention and supports.
- **Watch for drastic changes in behavior or personality, dangerous or out-of-control behavior, frequent fighting, extreme aggression, using weapons, or expressions of a desire to hurt oneself or others.** Withdrawing yourself or isolation from friends and family may also be a sign that supports are needed.
- **Difficulty concentrating, hyperactivity, and trouble focusing or sitting still** may all lead to decreased performance in school. "Daydreaming" or staring off into space frequently may signal an inability to focus on the here and now and may be a sign that supports for mental health are needed.
- **Changes in eating habits and/or weight,** a sudden loss of appetite, excessive worry about weight gain, frequent vomiting, or use of laxatives may indicate an eating disorder.
  - Eating disorders are mental health disorders that can often be improved or cured with treatment.
- Mental health issues can sometimes lead to self-harm such as cutting or burning yourself. Children may also develop suicidal thoughts or actually attempt suicide.
- **Alcohol and drugs are often used as coping mechanisms,** even as young as elementary school.
- **Changes in sleep patterns** that are unexplained, such as sleeping too much or too little, or persistent nightmares, may be a sign that mental health supports are needed.
What is a standard drink?

Not all alcohol products are created equal. Understanding how much alcohol you are consuming is key to practicing moderation when drinking.

The USDA's guidelines state 0.6 ounces of alcohol (ethanol) constitutes a standard drink.

Because of new products, container sizes, serving practices, and variations in alcohol concentrations, this no longer tells the whole story.

*ABV stands for Alcohol by Volume, which is a standard measure of how much alcohol (ethanol) is contained in an alcoholic beverage.
Youth who eat dinner with their family are less likely to:

- Use tobacco/nicotine
- Use alcohol
- Use marijuana
- Have friends that use tobacco/nicotine, alcohol, or marijuana
- Plan to use drugs in the future
- Feel depressed
- Think about suicide
- Have sex early
- Engage in risky behaviors
- Make poor decisions

Consistent and open communication with your children will boost their self-esteem, improve their self-image, and empower them to make long term healthy decisions.

When they begin to feel heard and understood by the most important people in their life, they will be less likely adhere to the voice of other influences.

If you suspect a problem or have any questions, talk with your pediatrician, a mental health professional, or your school counselor. They can help you navigate this time in your child's life. If the person you are working with doesn't seem to be adequately equipped to help you and your child, or if they dismiss your concerns, seek a second opinion.

Use your school as a resource. Teachers see your child regularly in an orderly setting and may see behaviors or concerns that you do not. Talk to your child's teacher and ask how they are doing.

If you are struggling:

Journaling, talking to a trusted friend or loved one, and remaining or getting connected in social settings are all protective factors for our mental health.

Your doctor can also be a resource for support.

9-8-8 is a mental health crisis phone number that anyone in the US can text or call for free and confidential support 24/7.

Why Dinner Dialogues?

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Have an idea for a topic, issue, or something else you'd like to see in a future edition of Dinner Dialogue?

Please submit your anonymous feedback by scanning this QR code with your phone's camera! Alternatively, visit www.dacac.org to find the survey.