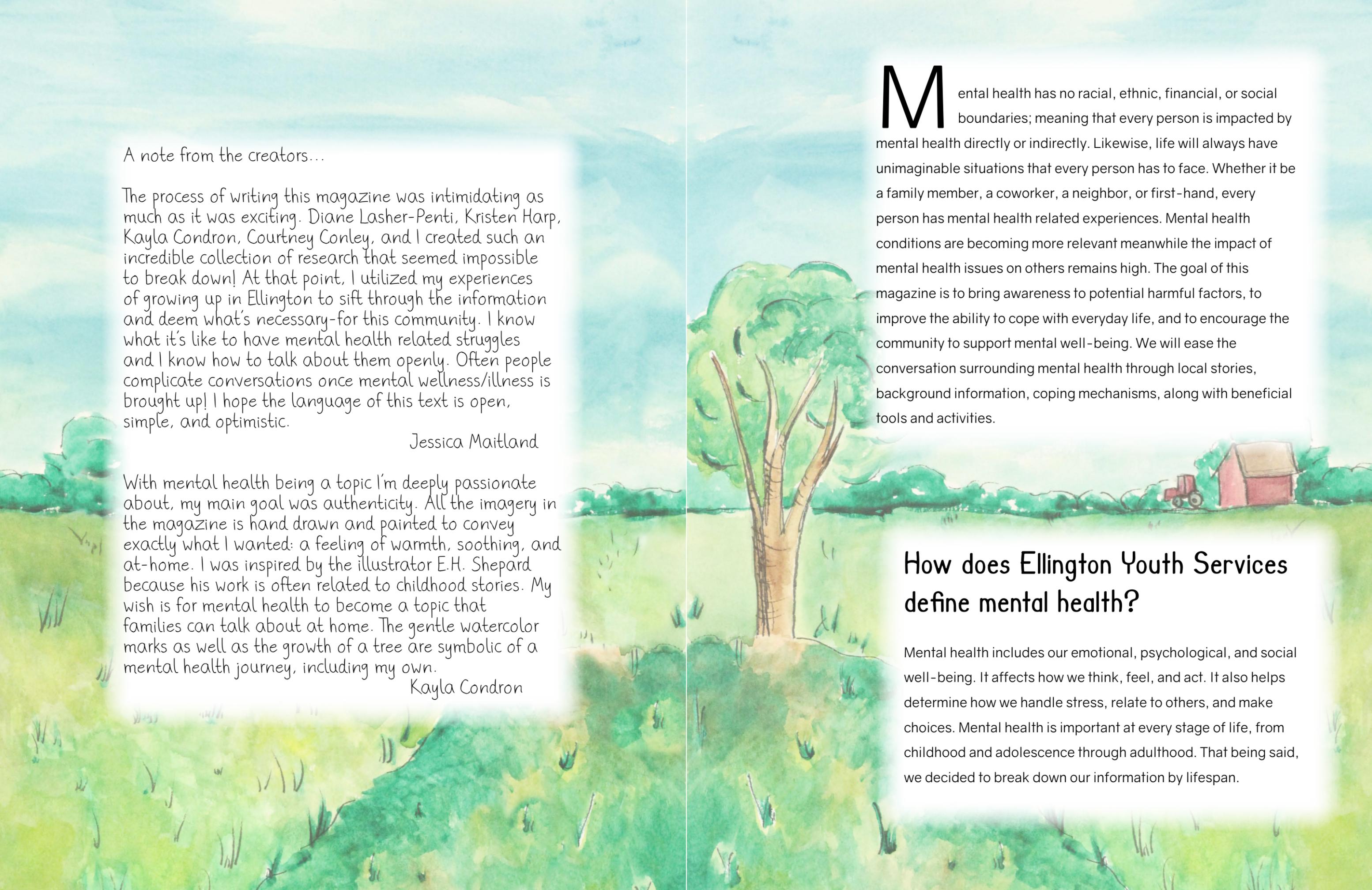


A Town of Ellington Youth Services Mental Wellness Magazine

# *Together We Care*



Understood. Acknowledged. Accepted.



A note from the creators...

The process of writing this magazine was intimidating as much as it was exciting. Diane Lasher-Penti, Kristen Harp, Kayla Condron, Courtney Conley, and I created such an incredible collection of research that seemed impossible to break down! At that point, I utilized my experiences of growing up in Ellington to sift through the information and deem what's necessary-for this community. I know what it's like to have mental health related struggles and I know how to talk about them openly. Often people complicate conversations once mental wellness/illness is brought up! I hope the language of this text is open, simple, and optimistic.

Jessica Maitland

With mental health being a topic I'm deeply passionate about, my main goal was authenticity. All the imagery in the magazine is hand drawn and painted to convey exactly what I wanted: a feeling of warmth, soothing, and at-home. I was inspired by the illustrator E.H. Shepard because his work is often related to childhood stories. My wish is for mental health to become a topic that families can talk about at home. The gentle watercolor marks as well as the growth of a tree are symbolic of a mental health journey, including my own.

Kayla Condron

**M**ental health has no racial, ethnic, financial, or social boundaries; meaning that every person is impacted by mental health directly or indirectly. Likewise, life will always have unimaginable situations that every person has to face. Whether it be a family member, a coworker, a neighbor, or first-hand, every person has mental health related experiences. Mental health conditions are becoming more relevant meanwhile the impact of mental health issues on others remains high. The goal of this magazine is to bring awareness to potential harmful factors, to improve the ability to cope with everyday life, and to encourage the community to support mental well-being. We will ease the conversation surrounding mental health through local stories, background information, coping mechanisms, along with beneficial tools and activities.

## How does Ellington Youth Services define mental health?

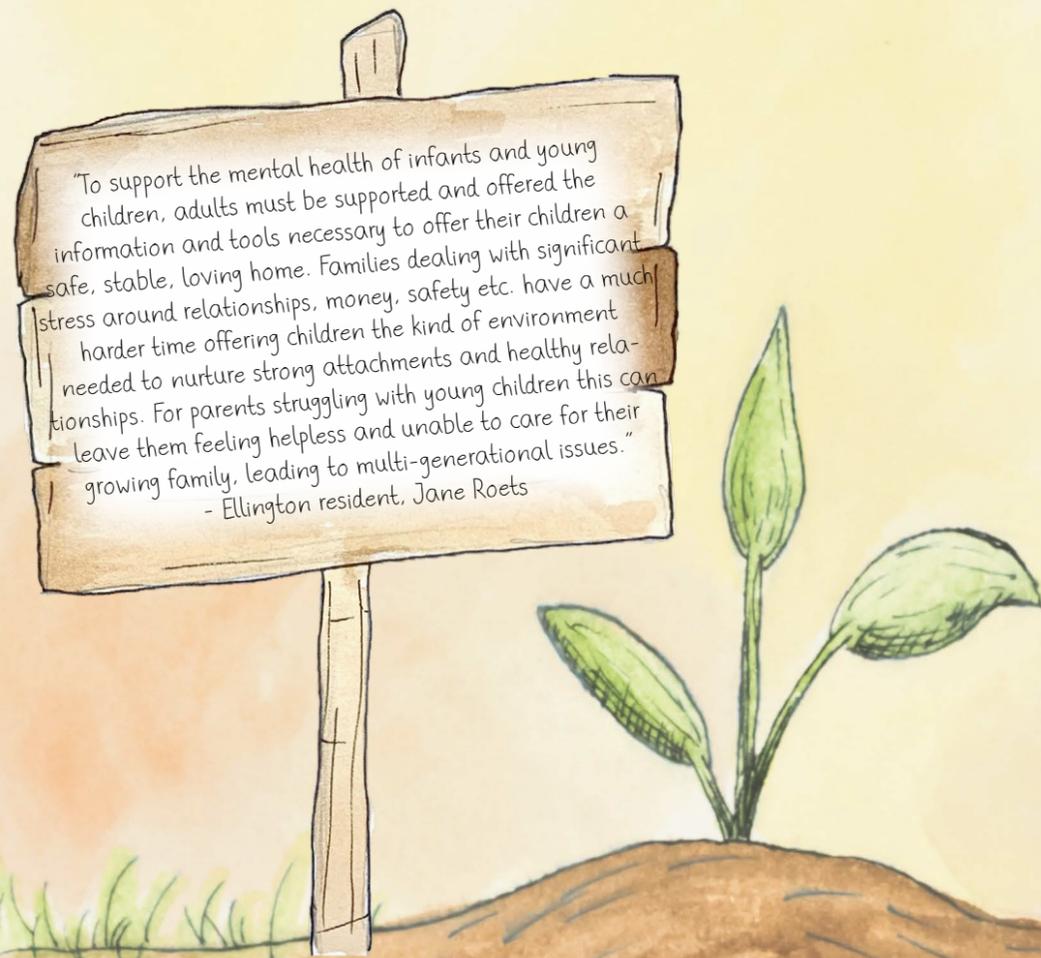
Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. That being said, we decided to break down our information by lifespan.

## What does mental health mean for infant-preschool aged children?

Mental health for this age group involves how well children develop socially and emotionally. Our understanding of mental health across this age range is key to preventing and treating mental health issues in very young children. Having awareness helps to guide them in healthy social and emotional behavioral development. In infants through preschool aged children, mental health looks like the development of secure adult relationships plus the ability to explore the environment and learn about it. It is also being able to experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions. Our understanding of these milestones is through family, community, and culture.

## How to support the mental health of infant-preschool aged children?

Adults should ensure the mental wellness of their youth like they would care for the physical wellness. Breaking down the developmental stages and being aware can prevent mental issues/illnesses. Here are some examples of what our little ones need from us:



"To support the mental health of infants and young children, adults must be supported and offered the information and tools necessary to offer their children a safe, stable, loving home. Families dealing with significant stress around relationships, money, safety etc. have a much harder time offering children the kind of environment needed to nurture strong attachments and healthy relationships. For parents struggling with young children this can leave them feeling helpless and unable to care for their growing family, leading to multi-generational issues."  
- Ellington resident, Jane Roets

### 0-6 months

How are we helping our babies learn to feel safe & secure? What are we learning from our little ones?

Talk, read, & sing to me—your voice is calming. Pay attention to my likes, dislikes, and preferences—when you respond, I build trust. Provide lots of love & comfort—it helps me feel secure & cared for.

### 6 months- 1 year

How are our babies making things happen? How do our babies communicate with us?

Let me play & explore—you're helping me discover what I can control. Respond to my sounds & actions—it nurtures my confidence. Limit my screen time—I can develop independence through free play.

### 1-2 years

What do we find most amazing in our children? What kind of questions are our toddlers asking? Are our children becoming social?

I watch you & mimic what I see because I want to learn how things work. Let me dress myself — I want to be able to solve my own problems. It's okay if I get stuck — your patience allows room for suggestions. Talk to & pretend with me — demonstrate appropriate behavior. Limit my screen time — I may not be growing as fast as it seems.

### 2-3 years

What do we find most amazing in our children? What kind of questions are our toddlers asking? Are our children becoming social?

Read & talk to me—you know how to communicate correctly. Let me tell you what I think—it encourages me to express my emotions. Listen to how I feel—noticing my emotions helps me have self-control. Promote play with other toddlers—I have to experience & practice friendships. Answer my million questions—I'm realizing my world is full of unknowns. Ask me questions—I am forming my own personality. Limit screen time—I need to release my energy through playful movements.

### 3-5 years

Who are our toddlers becoming? What interactions are our children having?

Encourage me to talk—my independence is growing. Introduce me to people & places—others help me discover how big the world really is. Let me work through my problems when I am upset— independence promotes conflict resolution. Set up play-dates—build my value of friendship.



## What does mental health mean for kindergarten - fourth-grade aged children?

For this age group, mental health is how children think, feel, make decisions, relate to others, and handle stress. It is normal for children to experience more mental issues in today's ever changing world. Our ability to recognize and understand challenging behaviors or signs of mental illness is essential in raising our children to face life – and it's challenges.

## Developmental stages for kindergarten - 4th-grade aged children:

Between ages 6 and 12, our children meet new milestones: conceptually, we can see counting & reading and hear story-telling; socially, we can observe our children yearning for meaningful friendships. It is during this stage when situations emerge in our childrens' lives that could affect their mental well-being.

## Some factors that put mental health of kindergarten - 4th-grade aged children at risk:

- having a long-term physical illness
- having a parent who has had mental health problems, problems with alcohol or has been in trouble with the law
- experiencing the death of someone close to them
- having parents separate or divorce
- having been severely bullied or physically or sexually abused
- living in poverty or being homeless
- experiencing discrimination (because of their race, sexuality or religion)

### Trauma:

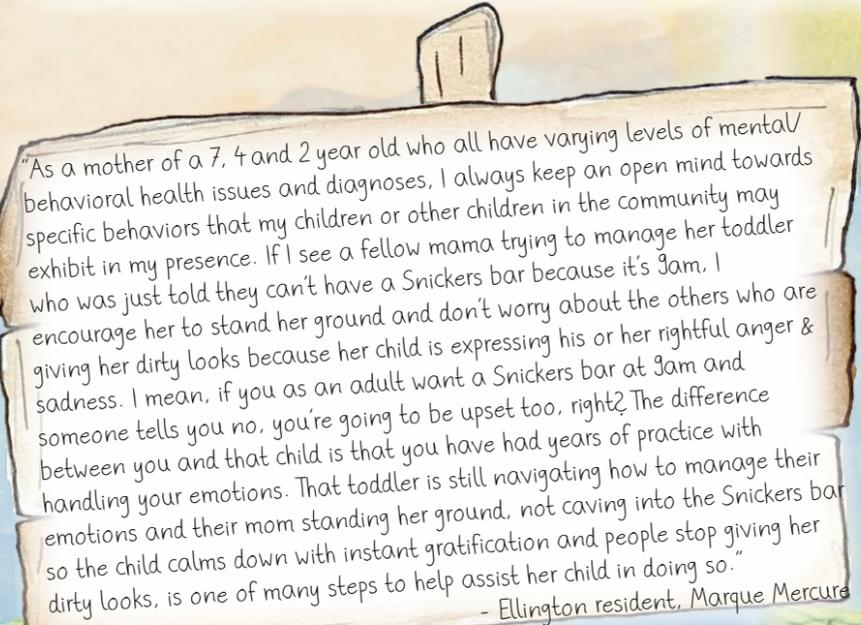
Experiencing a traumatic event has a significant impact on the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, & physical functioning of a child. What may be traumatizing to one child may not be to another. A child's reaction is based on the severity of the trauma, their developmental state, their personality, their ability to cope, & the availability of support to assist the child.

## Supporting the mental health of kindergarten - 4th-grade aged children.

We often do not realize that it takes a team—of parents, teachers, neighbors, coaches, etc. — to promote the mental well-being of children in this age group. Children go to adults with uncomfortable sensations to learn how to handle negative feelings. Essentially, adults have the power to create resilient children.

## But how?

- Set & provide limits, guidelines, and expectations—a child should be able to accept consequences.
- Model appropriate reactions in uncomfortable situations—a child should have the ability to solve problems.
- Offer compliments for our childrens' acts of cooperation—a child should feel hopeful & optimistic.
- Help our children choose activities that fit their abilities—a child should accept & recognize their strengths.
- Encourage our children to openly talk about their feelings—a child should value self-expression.
- Push for self-discipline; expect our children to follow the rules—a child should feel they have some control over their life.
- Listen to our children and take their problems seriously—a child should feel trusted, understood, & important.
- Spend uninterrupted time with our children—a child should have a sense of belonging in their family, school, & community.
- Limit screen time—a child should have opportunities to explore their interests.
- Seek professional opinions if our childrens' negative feelings are stopping them from getting on with their lives, if their distress is disrupting family life or if they are repeating inappropriate behaviors.



"As a mother of a 7, 4 and 2 year old who all have varying levels of mental/behavioral health issues and diagnoses, I always keep an open mind towards specific behaviors that my children or other children in the community may exhibit in my presence. If I see a fellow mama trying to manage her toddler who was just told they can't have a Snickers bar because it's Jam. I encourage her to stand her ground and don't worry about the others who are giving her dirty looks because her child is expressing his or her rightful anger & sadness. I mean, if you as an adult want a Snickers bar at Jam and someone tells you no, you're going to be upset too, right? The difference between you and that child is that you have had years of practice with handling your emotions. That toddler is still navigating how to manage their emotions and their mom standing her ground, not caving into the Snickers bar so the child calms down with instant gratification and people stop giving her dirty looks, is one of many steps to help assist her child in doing so."  
- Ellington resident, Marque Mercure

## What does mental health mean for 5th-grade - 8th-grade aged children?

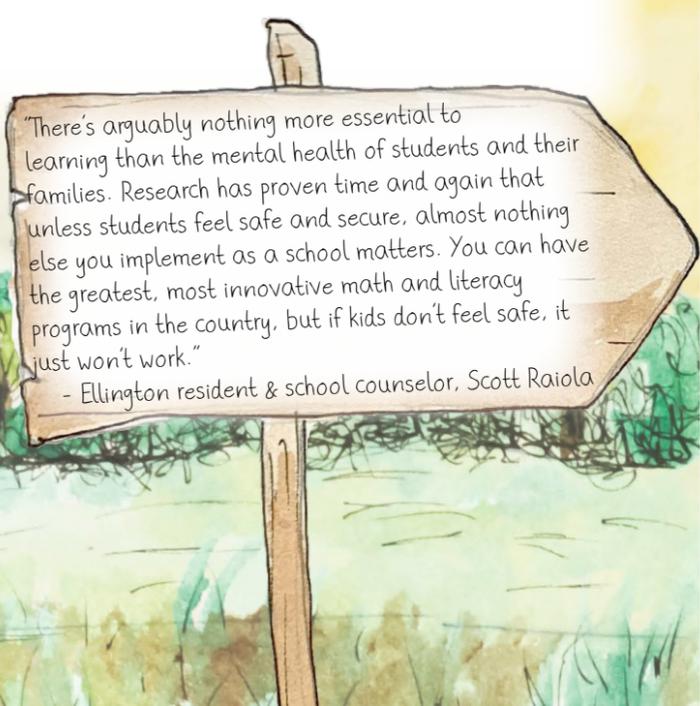
Mental health affects how children in this age group think, feel, and act. A balance in mental and physical wellness allows children the ability to succeed in school, work, and society. Mental health can be promoted by helping our children in this age range feel secure, relate to others, and by fostering their growth at home and at school. Helping them to build their confidence and competence is the foundation to a strong self-esteem.

### Developmental stages for 5th-grade - 8th-grade aged children:

During the upper elementary years/stage, our children are feeling the need to be independent, understanding different points of view, trying to spend time with & fit in with their friends, all while going through growth spurts. At the stage of entering middle school, our children are trying to figure out who they are as individuals, the issue of peer pressure rises, the opinions of adults seem to matter less, and their physical maturity starts to outweigh their emotional maturity.

### Some factors that put mental health of 5th-grade - 8th-grade aged children: at risk:

- Reaching new stages of puberty
- Apparent voice changes
- Self-conscious about bodies
- Comparing to peers
- "Awkward" stages of development
- Curiosity in sexual identity
- Beginning of romantic relationships among peers
- Noticeable physical changes
- Anxiety over first menstrual period
- Bullying & teasing over body image



"There's arguably nothing more essential to learning than the mental health of students and their families. Research has proven time and again that unless students feel safe and secure, almost nothing else you implement as a school matters. You can have the greatest, most innovative math and literacy programs in the country, but if kids don't feel safe, it just won't work."  
- Ellington resident & school counselor, Scott Raiola

## Supporting the mental health of 5th-grade - 8th grade aged children:

Through early intervention, we can avoid misconceptions involving mental health. Fortunately, this age group is meeting so many milestones which breaks down the support we can offer.

### Physical Milestones

- Uneven development skills in agility, balance, strength, & flexibility
- (clumsiness).
- Increasing fine motor and gross motor movements.
- Increased muscle mass (more strength & endurance).
- Beginning of puberty & maturing physically.
- Increased appetite.
- Need more rest.

#### How to provide support?

Set a schedule & stick to it! The essentials are sleep, meals, and physical activity. Maintaining these factors enables a child's brain to function at its best.

### Language Milestones

- Increasing use of vocabulary.
- Determining problem solving based off of "what if" scenarios.
- Writing for personal use.
- Interested in debate & discussions.
- Use of metaphors & slang to communicate.
- Increasing understanding of body language, tone of voice, & non-verbal cue.

#### How to provide support?

Encourage acts of self-expression (journaling, drawing, dancing, etc.). Children at this age tend to avoid talking about feelings even though they are experiencing [a lot] of them.

### Cognitive Milestones

- Understanding personal versus opposing thoughts.
- Realize the power of influence.
- Predict consequences of actions.
- Rely on friends, social media, & the news to get information (and form opinions).
- Start developing a worldwide view & understand how things are connected.
- Increasing need to contribute (make money).

#### How to provide support?

Treat independence as a skill that children need to learn & practice before mastering. Social media should be limited & monitored because our children's thoughts & emotions can become dependent on online experiences

### Social & Emotional Milestones

- Experiencing peer pressure & possibly a difficulty resisting it.
- Determining who they are (experiment with new clothing styles, attitudes, & mannerisms).
- Insecurities & uncertainties with their body.
- Wavering mood swings.
- Experiences with bullies AND cyberbullying.
- More sensitive to other opinions & reactions.

#### How to provide support?

Allow children to explore: a little freedom builds trust. As long as they are being safe, children deserve respect. Consistent trust & respect are needed in this uneasy stage of life.



## What does mental health mean for high-school aged children?

There's no universal definition of what mental health is for high schoolers; not because it isn't present, but because quite the opposite. Mental health issues are common in this age group because of the new transitions and tensions being faced.

## Developmental stages for high-school aged children:

This stage—the teenage years—is when the human brain goes through processes such as the following:

- developing connections between the grey matter & white matter: the building blocks developed in childhood meet the prefrontal cortex which controls the executive functions,
- myelination: fatty acids speed up the flow of information,
- pituitary gland releases hormones to the limbic system during puberty: the emotion center of the brain is charged with brand new hormones.

## Some factors that put mental health of high-school aged children at risk:

This stage is when a person pushes for adult freedoms that can be dangerous to manage. This stage is also when a person is driven by the need for immediate fulfillment and social belonging with friends.

When does a high-school aged student need professional help?

- Often feel very angry or very worried.
- Do not feel in control of their mind.
- Excessive use of drugs or alcohol.
- Obsess over diet, exercise, and self-image.
- Hurt other people or destroy property/do reckless things that could harm lives.
- Feel grief for a long period of time after a loss.
- Experience depression (feeling worthless or hopeless).

## Supporting mental health of high-school aged children:

Mental health problems are real, painful, and can be severe. Our approach to mental health can make all the difference in severity and duration of issues. Unfortunately adults feel intimidated by this responsibility. Although high schoolers can appear to reject the values of the adults around them and seem not to want much of their time and attention, they need our support.

## Here is how we help our high schoolers:

1. Be available. Listen when I have concerns. Your support can either be quietly invisible or actively engaged. I need reassurance.
2. Enforce guidelines. My ego is fragile and there is more pressure to take risks because I want to fit in. Staying firm results in keeping me safe and I'll develop self-respect.
3. Yield control. I can make decisions when I start doing grown-up activities (driving, working, dating, unsupervised gatherings). Unless you anticipate serious consequences, wait for me to ask for guidance. I lie to get away with what is not allowed.
4. Let children suffer natural consequences. This might be harder for you than it is for me at first. Being upset now will be worth it when I learn to be a responsible, competent, & confident adult. Lying does not eliminate consequences.
5. Support developing intelligences. I need help making sense of new demands. Social media lets me experience this confusing time with others.
6. Model good coping strategies. Planning for my future at school, pleasing my friends on social media, and being emotionally/sexually involved in a relationship is stressful. Help me identify such emotions and chat about how to address & manage them.
7. Schedule exercise & outdoor activities. I don't know how beneficial this is for my psychological health until I get up, get out, and experience it.
8. Support extracurricular interests. There are so many opportunities for me to explore my interests and learn new skills. Everyone needs to spend time doing something they love.
9. Help find a balance. I look up to you when establishing healthy habits. Sleep, nutrition, recreational activities, and social media should be maintained.
10. Advocate, thoughtfully. Work with me to resolve troubling situations at school, home, etc. Advocating for myself creates resiliency.

## What does mental health mean for young adults?

The expectations of 18 - 29 year olds have evolved, much like the importance of prioritizing mental health for this age group.

## Developmental stages for young adults:

There are no longer fundamental milestones for this age group. The societal perception of young adults has yet to accept there is no "norm." The only shared characteristic among young adults is overcoming expectations in order to create their own timeline.

## Some factors that put the mental health of young adults at risk:

### PRESENT:

- Paying for college
- Living at home
- Finding a job/launching a career
- Developing & embracing a sense of identity

### FUTURE:

- Learn how to self-regulate
- Saving money/being in debt
- Getting married (average age is 29)
- Have a fulfilling career

"I believe that the mental health issues in Ellington aren't addressed or acknowledged until late teens and early 20's. Especially within the walls of the high school, I hid my own mental illness until well after graduation. Despite suffering with debilitating depression and suicide attempts, many perceived me as a relatively normal and happy person as I was relatively well-achieving. I also believe that we should be offering more support to teens in high school that may have parents with mental health concerns as well. This is such an essential transitional point in our lives and that support in that area could lighten the load many may not even know you're carrying."

- Ellington resident, anonymous

## Supporting the mental health of young adults:

For youth, support is focused on engaging and modeling resiliency.

For adults, support is focused on providing a sense of security. Our young adults feel secure when they're encouraged to go away yet allowed to come back.

### Key to Security Analogy:

When a child is learning to walk, they start by taking a couple steps away. When they realize they're alone, they come rushing back to hold the knees of their guardian. The next time will be a couple steps further before turning around. In a matter of time, the child realizes their guardian won't abandon them, and they excitedly run across the entire room.

We cannot forget how stressful & overwhelming this time is for our young adults. It is crucial for them to develop self-reliance (ability to solve their own problems). We can also understand that investing time, money, etc. in oneself is a young adult figuring out who they are.

### What makes a good mentor?

- Usually not a family member
- Emphasizes strengths & helps person define personal skills
- Takes time to listen
- Balances solving their problems with supporting decision making
- Helps the person figure out life, careers, even relationships

## What does mental health mean for adults?

In comparison to the other life stages, adults cover the largest age gap with the most potential mental health issues. Mental health in adults involves resolving past experiences and encountering new stressors. Although stress is not a psychological diagnosis, it is directly linked to mental wellness. The stress response affects nerve cells and the connections between them (in the brain), functioning of organs and the strength of the immune system (in the body), and often leads to further unhealthy habits.

## Developmental stages for adults:

This stage of life revolves around a person's resiliency in facing unexpected challenges. It is human nature to have visions and goals of what is, what should, and what will be. It is also human nature to reach a mental health "crisis" when these visions are altered. Adults bear too many moments of uncertainty to list.

## Some factors that put mental health of adults at risk:

- Occupational stressors: overworked, coworker conflict, sexual harassment, job loss, career changes
- Parenting children: raising good humans
- Caring for aging parents
- Physical changes (starting to feel "old")
- Relationship problems: divorce, separation, death of loved one, new relationships
- Financial stressors
- Medical issues

## Supporting the mental health of adults:

It is a person's ability to start-over and be flexible—a person's resiliency—that allows them to experience life, fully. We all have mental health. The idea that adults must be independent is a major factor in mental health stigma. Self-care is essential. Adults deserve to give their attention to themselves; spend moments alone, explore new interests, maintain healthy habits. Help is out there. Mental health is an integral part in overall health. Adults with mental health issues are at risk for physical conditions.

## The question for many adults is HOW TO GET HELP?

### Talk!

Primary care doctors, insurance company, friends, family members, town services, etc. to create a list of available providers.

### Be honest!

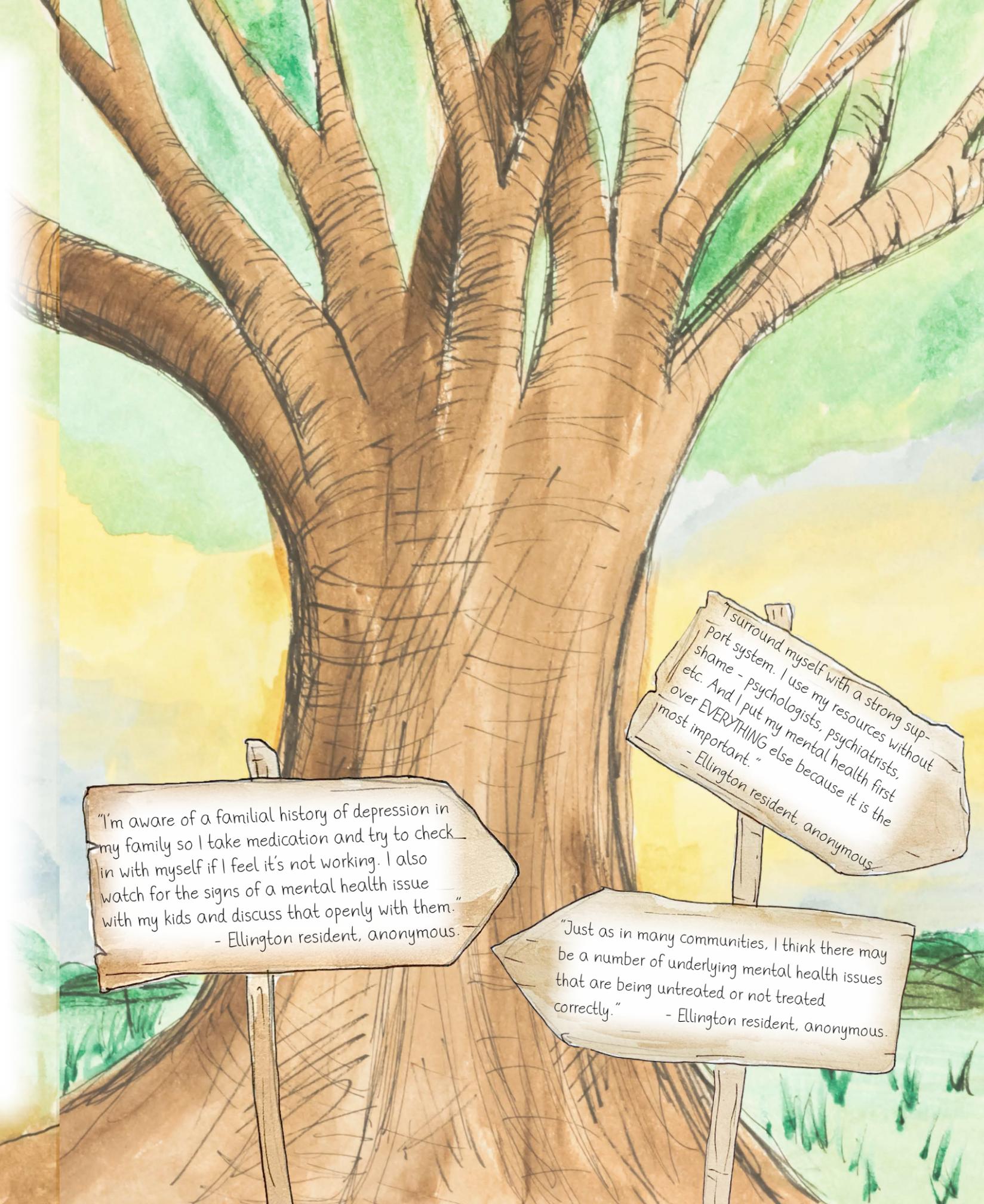
Share all symptoms & be specific with severity, timeline, occurrence, etc.  
\*Make sure to share any major stressors/ life changes.

### Prepare!

Before the visit, gather questions, concerns, family history, list of medications, etc.

### Get past the stigma!

Mental health is too important to give up the search for the right help!



"I'm aware of a familial history of depression in my family so I take medication and try to check in with myself if I feel it's not working. I also watch for the signs of a mental health issue with my kids and discuss that openly with them."  
- Ellington resident, anonymous.

"I surround myself with a strong support system. I use my resources without shame - psychologists, psychiatrists, etc. And I put my mental health first over EVERYTHING else because it is the most important."  
- Ellington resident, anonymous.

"Just as in many communities, I think there may be a number of underlying mental health issues that are being untreated or not treated correctly."  
- Ellington resident, anonymous.

## What does mental health mean for seniors?

Mental health for this age group must be recognized and treated as it is essential to their overall health and well-being. Mental health issues may be lifelong or develop later in life, just like chronic illness. Mental health in seniors requires self-evaluation of one's life as a whole and is influenced by socioeconomic, health, and environmental factors.

## Developmental stages for seniors:

As the body ages, serious illnesses arise like heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, dementia, etc., plus changes in mobility and independence. Mental illnesses are just as likely to arise-and often co-occur. Issues with mental health can interfere with our senior's ability to function, relax and find enjoyment in life. Untreated depression, for instance, can actually delay a senior's recovery or worsen the outcome of their other health conditions.

## Some factors that put mental health of seniors at risk:

Mental illness is more than just a passing mood. Rather, it can be a condition in which a senior experiences withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities, difficulty sleeping, feeling slow, and physical discomforts. The following instances put our seniors at risk for mental health issues:

- Obesity
- Poor health habits like smoking and heavy drinking
- Widowhood
- Physical illness
- Taking the same psychiatric medication for longer than a decade
- Low educational attainment
- Impaired functional ability
- Untreated trauma

Two of the most prevalent issues amongst older adults are social isolation and loneliness. According to the CDC, there is strong evidence to show that those who are socially isolated or lonely are at a greater risk for dementia, and other serious medical conditions. As a community my hope is that we can all do our part by staying connected in new and creative ways: calling our older friends, family and neighbors, visiting safely, and helping with shopping, or other chores."  
- Ellington elderly outreach worker/ social worker,  
Rebecca Stack

## Supporting the mental health of seniors:

Most seniors receive social & emotional support that are essential for healthy aging. For those who do need assistance, programs and services should be accessible. Social support is common and includes: sharing problems, venting feelings, advice, guidance, providing rides, assisting with house work.

Family and community members can offer the same level of support to ensure the mental health of our seniors. Here are some tips for helping a senior manage and access the physical and mental care they need:

- Organize a medical file.
- Prepare for doctor's appointments: develop a list of questions & role-play uncomfortable conversations about mental health.
- Research any diagnoses & conditions: misinformation surrounding mental illness is perpetuated when people refuse to seek and use factual information.
- Use only one pharmacy.
- Monitor somatic complaints & ER visits. Anxiety is underestimated in seniors because older adults are less likely to report psychiatric symptoms and more likely to emphasize physical complaints.
- Encourage social gatherings: social isolation increases the risk of depression.
- Work with their doctor: learn about our senior's condition, medications, and warning signs.
- Observe overall mood: take action if they begin experiencing serious side effects and mood changes (mania, suicidal thoughts, hallucinations).

"For example, an exercise class will help to promote balance and help lower fall-risk, which in turn increases one's confidence. At the same time, friendships are made and social isolation is reduced. This concept can be applied to most, if not all, programs that are offered."

- Sam Baer of Ellington Senior Center

## Mental Health in Diverse Communities:

Community advocates, practitioners, and policymakers are transforming mental health services to be culturally competent. This attitude towards mental health accepts the needs of every, diverse, individual. It means that a person's languages, history, traditions, beliefs, values, and identity are recognized and understood in maintaining their mental well-being.

Geert Hofstede uses the term "mental programming" to describe the patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that develop in cultural environments.

Youth belonging to the LGBT community are 2 - 3 times more likely to attempt suicide.

<b>Stigma</b>	Within specific cultures, mental health has a negative perception. Members may have more stigmatizing attitudes towards mental health. Stigma also affects members of diverse communities more. Stigma impacts coping styles, family supports, and willingness to seek treatment.
<b>Symptoms of mental health conditions</b>	Belonging to a specific community impacts how members describe, express, or manifest (present) symptoms. In fact, physical symptoms of a mental condition are commonly brought up for individuals that do not believe in illness of the mind.
<b>Power of Stereotypes</b>	Societal stereotypes are often internalized which minimize an individual's self-worth. This has an affect on their social and psychological functioning. Stereotypes influence the actions of the stereotype "holder" as well as the behaviors of the members of the stereotyped group.
<b>Institutional Discrimination</b>	Discrimination by societal institutions have resulted in lower socioeconomic status and poorer living conditions for members of diverse communities. As a result poverty, crime, and violence are persistent stressors that affect mental health.
<b>Collective Trauma</b>	The United States has a long history of prejudice and poor societal treatment of "minority" groups. Trauma that happens to specific communities can be passed down generationally and shared across locations. Past AND present events that disrupt one's physiological well-being directly lead to psychological distress.
<b>Access to Resources</b>	Members of diverse communities often rely on informal sources rather than formal mental health services. Deterring barriers range from cost (poor access to financial help), mistrust (gap in the system), location, and communication barriers.

Numerous mental health services are practicing cultural competence. This link has a phenomenal resource list for diverse communities

<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/stress-and-trauma>

Anyone could be struggling with suicide.

Everyone plays a role in suicide prevention.

Together we can learn the risk factors:

**These are characteristics that do NOT cause or predict suicide, but make it more likely for a person to consider, attempt, or die by suicide:**

Mental disorders, alcohol & substance abuse disorders, hopelessness, impulsive tendencies, history of trauma or abuse, major physical illnesses, previous suicide attempt, loss of relationship, family history of suicide, job & financial loss, easy access to lethal means, local clusters of suicide, lack of social support, sense of isolation, stigma around asking for help, lack of healthcare, cultural values, religious beliefs, exposure to others who have died by suicide (in real life, via the media, on the internet).

Together we can know the warning signs:

**These behaviors can help determine if a person is at risk for suicide and signal others to seek help:**

Talking about wanting to die or kill themselves, looking for a way to kill themselves (online searches or buying a gun), talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live, talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain, talking about being a burden to others, increasing the use of alcohol & drugs, acting anxious or agitated, behaving recklessly, sleeping too much or too little, withdrawing or isolating themselves, showing rage, talking about seeking revenge, extreme mood swings

"You don't give someone suicidal ideas by talking about suicide. Rather, the opposite is true. Talking openly and honestly about suicidal thoughts and feelings can help save a life."

Together we can take action:

Understanding suicide-related concerns is the first step. Evidence shows that providing support services, talking about suicide, reducing access to means of self-harm, directing help, and following up can save lives. Local workshops and online training are held for all types of people to attend.

Nearly 20% of Ellington students seriously considered attempting suicide in 2017. Together we can talk about the "why" and we can change the conversation around suicide. Expressing that we care will not make a person suicidal. We can help a suicidal person overcome their pain together. Together we care

**Infoline and Suicide Hotline: 211 [www.preventsuicide.org](http://www.preventsuicide.org)  
Emergency: 911**

**Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services: 1-888-999-5545  
Domestic Violence Crisis Services: 1-888-774-2900**

# Why do we have to be mentally healthy?

We know the well-worn phrase: "mental health is as important as physical health" and admit to preaching the corresponding: "treat mental health like physical health." But it's time we unscramble the saying and interpret its significance.

## ASPECTS OF PHYSICAL-WELLNESS

Influences our ability to overcome challenges

Taken care of to prevent sickness

Not defined as the absence of physical illness

Affects many areas of our life (work, sleep, energy levels, relationships, life satisfaction, life longevity)

## ASPECTS OF MENTAL-WELLNESS

Influences our ability to overcome challenges

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Affects many areas of our life (work, sleep, energy levels, relationships, life satisfaction, life longevity)

## How do we achieve mental wellness?

Our wellness levels - physical and mental - must be maintained to enjoy life. The actions we take to better ourselves are often hidden in our daily routines. Life will always have unimaginable situations, of course, that every person has to face. The following pages will introduce suggestions (skills, tools, activities) and may expose the mentally beneficial habits we already have. With the understanding of mental-wellness-topics comes 1. The ability to cope with everyday life as an individual and 2. The confidence to support the mental health of others and 3. An overall improvement of quality of life.

# Mental wellness = mental fitness

Exercise has profound effects on the brain and the body. Specifically, exercise is essential in regulating the chemicals released in the brain. Mental wellness is possible when the chemicals in our brains are at optimal levels.

## Benefits of exercise:

- Increased self-efficacy.
- Improves mood.
- More cognitive control.
- Promotes positive relationships.
- Strengthens the heart.
- Improves self-esteem.
- Manages levels of stress.

## Where do we start?

- Make a schedule - weekly or daily - that tracks progress. Incorporating a few goals into a schedule serves as motivation. Achieving goals is a way we all hold ourselves accountable.
- Start small & slow.
- Overcommitment often leads to soreness, inconsistency, and feeling discouraged.
- A weekly workout should include resistance training, aerobic training, and flexibility training.

## What do we suggest?

1. Break the workout schedule down into training type.
  - Flexibility: focus is on increasing the range of motion of major muscle groups.
  - Aerobic: focus is on rhythmic patterns of muscle groups.
  - Resistance: focus is on moving the body against a controlled source and increasing muscle endurance.
2. Apply F.I.T.T. model.
  - F: frequency - how often.
  - I: intensity - level of effort.
  - T: time - how long.
  - T: type - what kind of training (see above).
3. Include a warm-up & cool-down.
  - Warm-up: increase flow of blood & oxygen.
  - Cool-down: bring heart-rate down & prevent tightness.
4. Explore different activities!
  - New location, new person, new exercise, etc.
5. Be accepting.
  - 3 ten-minute walks is as effective as 1 thirty-minute walk.

*"Exercise alone can improve your mood, boost your immune system, and lower your future risk of illness. It may seem too good to be true, but thousands of studies prove that exercise can help you feel better overall & live longer."*

*- Courtney Conley, resident with a kinesiology degree.*

# Healthy food for a healthy mind.

Recent studies have linked nutritional deficiencies to the onset, severity, and duration of mental health issues. Our bodies may have an obvious response to how food impacts our health. It's more difficult to sense what foods will benefit our minds, which is why we gathered the following information.

## How it works!

Our brains are made up cells that communicate signals - some good, some bad - to the rest of our body. These cells, called neurotransmitters, must be healthy to perform their best. Serotonin is the name of a specific neurotransmitter that is responsible for mood regulation, sleep, memory, and overall well being! Over 90% of serotonin is produced in our guts! The environments where neurotransmitters are produced must be "healthy" to ensure the optimal condition of our signal-sending-cells. The condition of neurotransmitters is reflected through our emotions.

*"We have control over what we eat, which may seem like an obvious statement, but it's important to keep in mind. With so much happening around the world which may feel beyond our control & keeping up with our personal responsibilities & dealing with our life's stressors - choosing what to eat, choosing to eat well is an empowering feeling. When I make the conscious choice to avoid processed junk food, I've done something good for myself & I recognize that. The result is a feeling of greater control of self-empowerment. And my body and brain function better as a result of these higher-quality foods."*

- EHS teacher, Mike Stiles

## What does this mean for our diets?

Science has proven that having production of good bacteria in the gut results in the production of good neurotransmitters in the brain. Antioxidants strengthen neuron cells, for instance. The other nutrients in healthy food that further maintain brain function are called "essential." Other essential nutrients are omega-3's, vitamin-D, magnesium, folate, probiotics, vitamin-B12, etc.

SHOPPING TIP: *Find food that is minimally processed; look for a short list of ingredients. Avoid large amounts of sugar that will cause inflammation & unnatural rushes of energy. Go for the whole grains (smart carbs), fruits, vegetables, & leafy greens.*

# Practice Creativity On Purpose

The average person has ~60,000 thoughts in a day. These thoughts are the foundation to psychological stress, anxiety, depression, pain, and mental illness. Acts of creativity help the mind organize and process thoughts.

## How it works!

A creative act can help focus the mind and improve concentration. Furthermore, creative acts work in pulling negative thoughts and memories out of our mind. Studies have found that writing helps people manage their negative emotions in a productive way, and painting or drawing helps people express trauma or experiences that they find too difficult to put into words.

## Examples of creative acts:

- Theatre
- Doodling, calligraphy, & coloring books
- Dancing
- Painting
- Cooking, baking & creating recipes
- Crafting
- Singing & song writing
- Gardening & flower arranging
- Puzzles
- Story & poem writing
- Photography & photo editing
- Scrapbooking
- Journaling
- Playing an instrument
- Decorating, organizing & cleaning
- Pottery
- Filming & video editing
- Sewing & knitting

*"My favorite thing about getting creative is that it is so unlike everything else in today's world. I get creative in photography, painting, doodling, organizing - whatever feels right or needed! Sometimes I play music, other times I'm outside: you'll know it's working once you experience it."*

- EHS Graduate, Kayla Condon

## The benefits of creative time:

The benefits of practicing creativity are compared to the benefits of meditation. This is because being creative allows us to experience stressors in a controlled way. Examples are improved mood, coping with trauma, and reduction in stress.

## Where do we start?

The best thing practicing creativity is that there is absolutely no right or wrong!

1. Incorporate creative time into a weekly schedule.
2. Try new & different practices.
3. Be gentle: we are not going to produce works of art.
4. Be flexible: start with something simple and do it in an approachable manner.

## We need a good relationship with ourselves.

We must put a consistent effort into having physically and mentally healthy habits. Self-care is the phrase used to describe any activity we do with the intent of it benefiting our well-being. Although simple, this concept cannot be overlooked or misinterpreted. Self-care creates resilience.

### What is self-care?

Self-care is not selfish, not expensive, not labor-intensive. Self-care is not for times of weakness, sadness, or hopelessness. Self-care is being aware of what times and methods help us feel our best.

### Where do we start?

Self-care is something to actively plan. Commitment and consciousness is essential. Use this template as a guide!

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: stressed.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: self-conscious.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: balanced.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: happy.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: exhausted.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: motivated.	I breathed & scanned my body. My mental survey results: proud.
I will meal prep my lunches for the week.	I will walk the dog to the lake and back.	I have a therapy appointment with Laura @ 1:30pm.	I will not check my emails after 6:00pm.	I will light a candle and read for 20 minutes.	I will go to yoga with the girls @ 9:00am.	I will spend an hour organizing the coat closet & fill a donation box.

Establishing a self-care routine like this is ideal in forming—or breaking—habits. Prioritizing these habits increase self-esteem, self-awareness, and overall self-improvement.

*"My experience with self-care is like a cycle of "treat myself" and "I'm tired, I don't need it." In those times of low motivation, I say that I have to take the time for myself if I want to be the best for my family... pretty much telling myself that I can't be guilty about doing something that will make me better at helping my loved ones (even if it's getting my nails or hair done-haha)!"*

*-Ellington resident, anonymous.*

## Connection of Disconnection

Social behavior is important for the health and survival of many species--including us humans! Neuroscience supports the benefits of human connection on mental health.

### Our brain's social instinct:

Oxytocin is the neuro-hormone that controls empathy, compassion, and the crave for physical affection. The pituitary gland sends out oxytocin in response to triggers, or signals. These triggers are 1. Social bonding and 2. Stress.

### What does this mean?

The human biological stress-response releases this hormone to motivate interaction with others. The benefits of the hormone are further enhanced during social connection.

*"So when you reach out to others under stress, either to seek support or to help someone else, you release more of this hormone, your stress response becomes healthier, and you actually recover faster from stress. I find this amazing, that your stress response has a built-in mechanism for stress resilience, and that mechanism is human connection."*

Described by Kelly McGonigal in her TedTalk about stress.

According to a recent study by sociologists at Duke University and the University of Arizona, published by American Sociological Review, American's circle of close friends and confidants has shrunk dramatically over the past two decades, and the number who say they have no one outside of their immediate family to discuss important matters with has more than doubled, reaching a shocking 53.4% - up 17% since the dawn of the Internet and social media.

### How do we interact with others in a 'mentally healthy' way?

1. Be a GOOD listener.
2. Be respectful, present & mindful with others.
3. Choose to be worthy to be listened to & heard.
4. Be empathetic to others with boundaries.
5. Be deserving of being loved by others on our own terms.
6. Choose & practice self-love with how we show up in our lives.



## A glossary of important terms:

**Diverse community** refers to the acknowledgment and appreciation of differences shared within a group. These differences can include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies (Queensborough n.d.).

**Feelings** are the clues on how the body responds to its surroundings often through experiencing physical **sensations** (Garcia, 2017).

**Mental health** includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act at every stage of life.

**Mental illness** covers a wide range of mental health conditions - disorders that affect an individual's mood, thinking, and behavior for an ongoing period of time. Causes of mental health disorders are genetic and environmental. Examples include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, sleep disorders, and addictive behaviors (Mayo 2019).

**Mental wellness** is the presence of positive emotions, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, and positive functioning (Centers 2018).

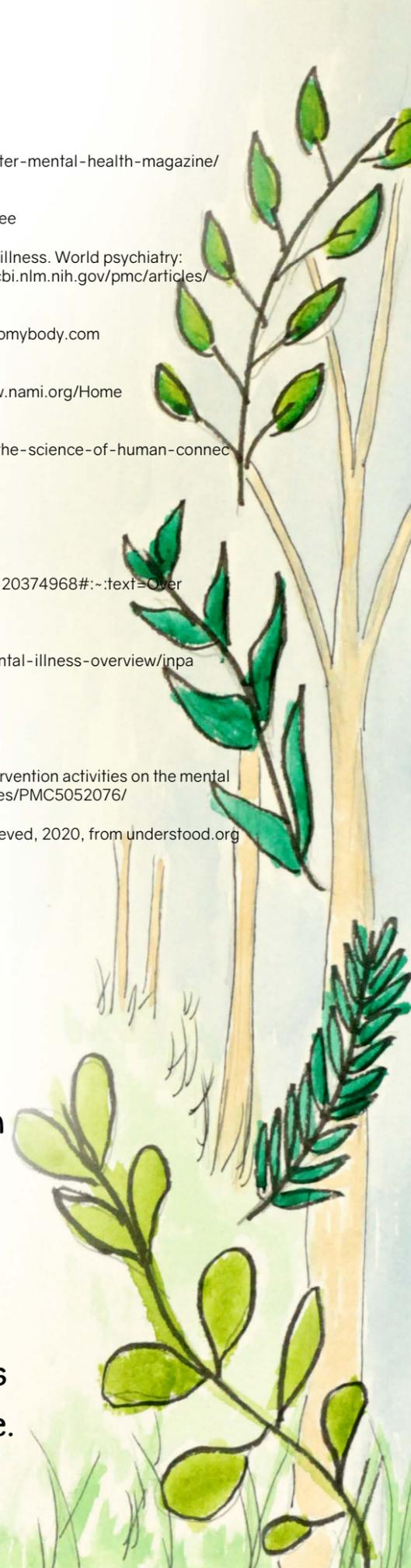
**Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI)** is the first step in promoting mental wellness. Early identification of symptoms prevents mental health issues from becoming disabling. PEI can reduce suicide, incarceration, school failure, unemployment, housing displacement, and prolonged suffering (Rand 2013).

**Resiliency** is the skill needed to face and overcome challenges, the ability to recover from hard times, and a key characteristic in mental wellness.

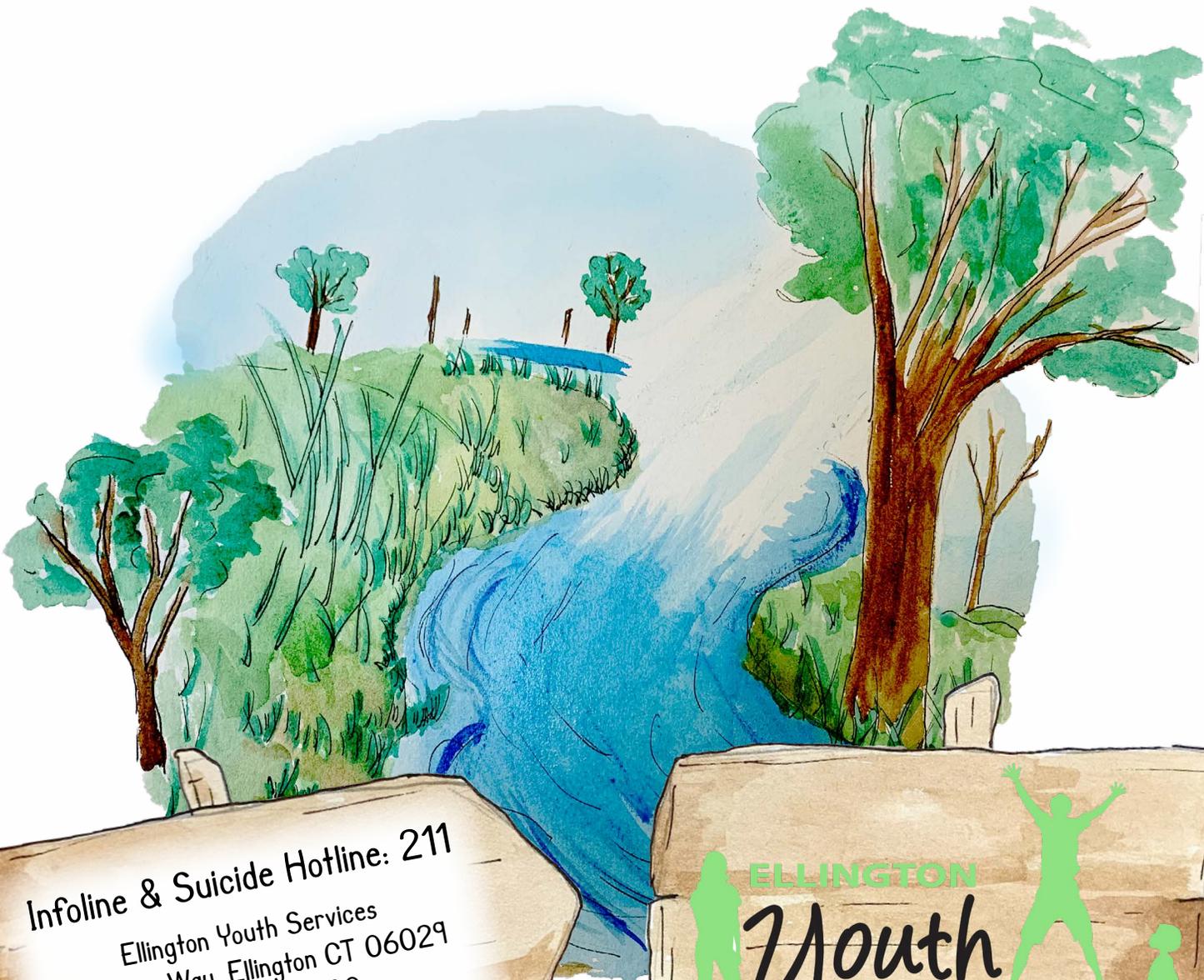
**Stigma** is the broad term that refers to every kind of stereotype and prejudice that stem from misconceptions about mental illness (Corrigan & Watson, 2002).

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**N**ow that mental health information has been broken down and tools to achieve mental wellness have been introduced, a conversation can be had. Life will always have unimaginable situations that impact mental health directly or indirectly. We hope that bringing this awareness to our community inspires a commitment to care.



Infoline & Suicide Hotline: 211

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