

Peace of MIND

Supporting your child with mental health issues

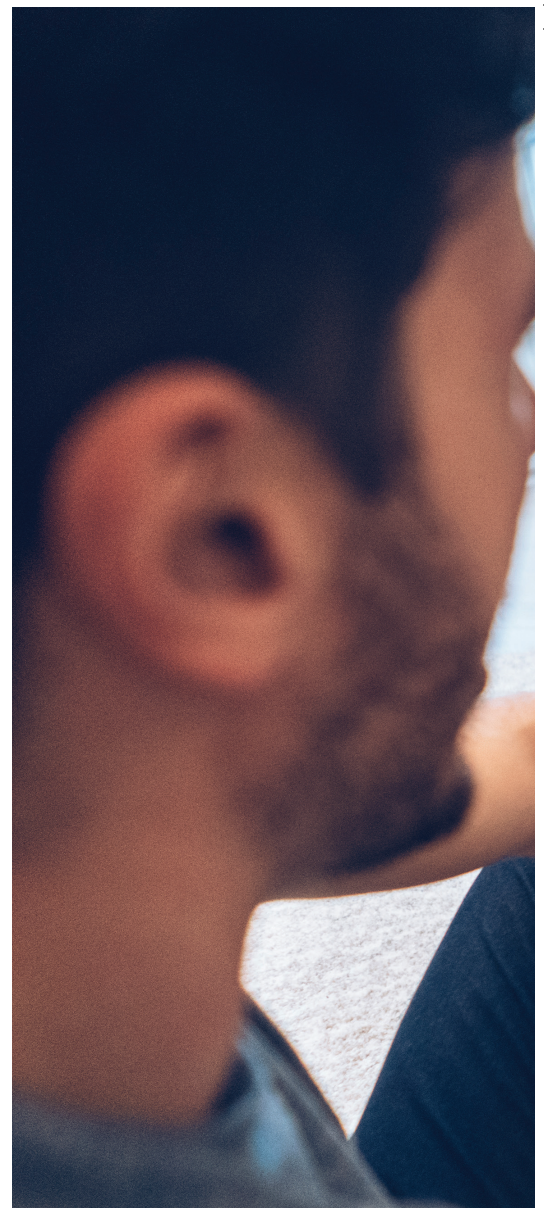
If your child's been diagnosed with a mental health issue, you may not be sure what's next—but you can be sure you're not alone. According to the National Mental Health Association, mental health challenges such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression or autism affect one in every five kids at some point in their lives. That's about 12 million kids under age 18.

Now that you have a diagnosis, here's how to navigate the road ahead:

- **Take a deep breath.** “Many times, a diagnosis gives a label to something the parent already knows about his or her child. But it's a useful label that gives us a path forward,” says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, PhD, a psychologist in private practice in Princeton and author of *Kid Confidence*. “Getting a diagnosis early on is a positive thing. Intervention now can save your child years of struggling.”
- **Educate yourself.** “Learn everything you can about your child's condition from reputable, medically-based websites,” says Cheryl Kennedy, MD, professor of psychiatry at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. “Focus on those that have real credibility such as Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic and Harvard.” The National Alliance on Mental Illness

(nami.org) is another resource.

- **Talk to your child.** “Focus on how a condition impacts your child's life,” says Kennedy-Moore. “Point out what's easier and what's more challenging for your child with a non-blaming approach.” For example, to a child diagnosed with ADHD, say something like, “You have a lot of energy and are a lot of fun to be around, but it's sometimes hard for you to concentrate. We have to figure ways out to help you manage that.”
- **Talk to the siblings.** The other kids in the family have experienced the same things you have when it comes to your child's behaviors, so have a conversation with them, too, suggests Kennedy-Moore. Again, keep it non-blaming and explain the condition as you did to the other child. Let them ask questions and express their concerns; kids need to know their thoughts and feelings matter. It also may be helpful to approach them with empathy if they feel resentful toward the sibling, by saying things such as, “It's hard for you when I have to spend time at his doctor's appointments,” or “You wish she wouldn't do that,” suggests Kennedy-Moore.
- **Tell people about the diagnosis on a need-to-know basis.** Who you tell is your choice, but it can be helpful to inform other caregivers or family members who are likely to





By Arricca Elin SanSone

encounter behavior associated with the diagnosis. It's especially important to work with your child's school, which is required by law to provide additional support services, such as a classroom aide, for kids with mental health issues, says Kennedy.

■ **Pay attention to new or worsening symptoms.** Watch for changes in your child's behavior. "If a few weeks pass on a new medication and it doesn't seem to be helping or it's making things worse, contact your child's doctor immediately to review the condition, especially if a child becomes more impulsive or if this wasn't an issue before," says Kennedy.

■ **Take care of you.** It may be cliché, but you can't take care of anyone else if you're not being kind to yourself. Establish your own support network, whether it's a formal support group or close friends who get it. Connecting with parent groups may be useful, too, as you may feel reassured that if others have handled this, you can, too. If you have a partner, pay attention to that relationship. "Spend time apart from the kids and remember why you wanted to be together in the first place," says Kennedy-Moore.

You may experience many different emotions as you learn to support your child, but avoid blaming yourself or chalking

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it all up to bad parenting skills. It's not helpful (or true), and it's important to move forward, rather than fretting about the what-ifs. You also may be surprised if you experience a sense of loss, but grieving is a normal reaction for many parents. "We probably had an image of how we imagined our kids being, and this wasn't what you envisioned," says Kennedy-Moore. "But that's true for all parents in some ways."

Finally, get enough sleep, exercise and eat a nutritious diet, which all contribute to better mental health for yourself. And make sure to see a therapist if you're dealing with your own anxiety or depression, says Kennedy.

—Arricca Elin SanSone is a New York-based health and lifestyle writer.