

# Present Over Perfect:

## Wellness Toolkit for Middle and High School Students



**This Toolkit Belongs to:**

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## A Letter to Every CPS Student Recognizing Mental Health Awareness Month

**In case no one has told you today...you belong HERE. You are APPRECIATED. You are VALUED. Thank you for doing hard things every single day, even when life gets difficult. Thank you for simply being YOU! We are so proud of you.**

The CPS Mental Health Team is always striving to find ways to support the emotional well-being of our CPS community. We understand having good mental health can require tools and coping skills to take on the many challenges that come our way. Sometimes doing our best simply means showing up, and we are grateful every single time our students do that.

The District's commitment to healing is rooted in equity through a combination of resources that are available to all schools and targeted support for those who need it most.

In this toolkit, we have outlined the resources and support that CPS is providing to meet your mental health needs, as well as tips and activities to break the mental health stigma and create safe and supportive school environments. We strongly encourage you to talk to your friends, families, and school staff about this toolkit. We hope this will be a fun and educational way to start some of these conversations.

During Mental Health Awareness Month, we want to simply remind you to focus on being present, not perfect. Our team will strive to center student voices as we work to provide more mental health resources and opportunities to best serve our school communities.

Sincerely,

Office of Student Health and Wellness  
Mental Health Team



STUDENT HEALTH  
AND WELLNESS

“ **Present** is living with your feet firmly grounded in reality, pale and uncertain as it may seem. **Present** is choosing to believe that your own life is worth investing deeply in, instead of waiting for some rare miracle or fairy tale. ”

- *Shauna Niequist*

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

**Mental health consists of your emotional, social, and psychological well-being, which can impact your thoughts, behavior, and emotions.** There are many factors that impact one's mental well-being, and many of these causes are often out of our control. Depending on your circumstances, it can be difficult to meet basic needs like sleeping, eating healthy foods, or exercising, which can impact your mental health as well. While these factors may be outside our control, we can still try our best to do what we can to prioritize our wellness. With this toolkit, we hope to equip you with resources and strategies that can help you take care of your mental health!

### QUICK MENTAL HEALTH REMINDERS AND TIPS:



**It is normal to experience many feelings, and it is okay to not feel okay.** Everyone experiences ups and downs.



**Going outside and soaking up the sun** gives you the Vitamin D you need to help produce serotonin, which can help improve how you feel. Remember to wear sunscreen!



**Exercise can help more than just your physical health.** Exercising regularly can help reduce stress and boost your mood!



**Stay hydrated!** Drinking plenty of water helps reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.



**Getting plenty of sleep is very important!** Making sure to get a lot of rest can help improve your mood and mental health, so try to get 8-10 hours of sleep every night!



**Share how you feel.** Talking about your feelings can help you process your emotions and help others offer you the help you need to feel better.

Depending on your circumstances, it may be more difficult to meet some basic needs than others, so try your best to take care of yourself in the ways that work for you. Think about your own unique environment and resources to answer the following questions.

**What are some ways you already take care of your mental health through your normal routine?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**How can you develop healthier habits to support your mental well-being?** \_\_\_\_\_

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## WHAT FACTORS PLAY A ROLE IN DEVELOPING MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS?

We tend to forget that there are factors outside of our control, like trauma and genetics. These two examples are known as risk factors. They not only affect the likelihood of developing mental health challenges, but they also impact the severity of symptoms and when those symptoms surface. **This includes:**

- **Social Determinants of Health:** SDOH are the conditions in which people live, learn, work, and play that impact their health and quality of life. There are five main categories: financial stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, neighborhood and living environment, and social and community life.
- **Neurobiology and Genetics:** Our brains are wired differently and have varying levels of certain neurotransmitters. Abnormalities or injuries in certain parts of the brain can affect your chances of developing a mental health condition. The genes that you inherit from your ancestors can influence how your body and brain develop and function, which can make you more or less likely to develop a mental health challenge.
- **Trauma:** Any experience that was highly stressful, shocking, or dangerous to you can be traumatic. Trauma is different for everyone—what feels normal to someone else might be traumatic to you, and vice versa. A traumatic event can threaten both your physical and emotional safety. Traumatic experiences can be one-time events (e.g. getting into a fight) or ongoing (e.g. bullying or childhood neglect). Situations like loneliness, seeing an accident, natural disasters, poverty, and racism can all cause trauma.
- **Habits and Lifestyle:** It's important to take care of your body and mind. Things like not getting enough high-quality sleep, eating unhealthy foods regularly, lack of exercise, and poor stress management can all play a role in developing a mental health condition.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- **Among Chicago students,** 43 percent reported experiencing feelings of sadness and hopelessness for at least two weeks or more in the past 12 months.
- **According to CPS Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)** data, approximately 16 percent of students seriously considered suicide.

Think about how many students there are at your school. **What is 43 percent of your student population?** It's important to remember that you are not alone, and you can always reach out for support if you need it!

## AFFIRMATIONS

Affirmations are positive messages about who we are, and they can be used to remind ourselves that we are worthy, capable, unique, and loved! It can be helpful to slow down and take some time to reflect on the thoughts or words we say about ourselves, how they make us feel, and how we can create room for some more self-compassionate messages. Some examples of affirmations we can tell ourselves are:

- I deserve to be loved
- I am worthy of a wonderful life
- I can learn from my successes and failures
- My needs are important
- I can get support and guidance from trustworthy people
- I am confident in who I am

**What are some affirmations that resonate with you?** Think about how you encourage your friends and loved ones. What are some messages you can tell yourself, too?

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**Pick one affirmation to say out loud or in the mirror to yourself.**

Write out why it might be hard to believe sometimes.

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## PRACTICE CHALLENGE

**Write one or two of your favorite affirmations on a sticky note and place it somewhere in your home that you look at every day – it can be your bathroom mirror, on your bedside table, or next to the door of your room!** Practice reading the affirmation out loud to yourself every day for a week, two weeks, or even a month! **How does it make you feel?**

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## JOURNALING ACTIVITY



**Take a moment to reflect on your mental health. What are some aspects of your life that affect how you feel?** What are some aspects of your life that make you feel comfortable and secure? Use this page to write, draw, scribble, color, or process however you'd like!

## EMOTIONS WHEEL

Emotions can be difficult to describe sometimes, and it is not always easy to find the right words to express how we feel. A helpful tool you can use is an emotions wheel! This tool gives you a range of emotions to choose from. They start off as broad emotions in the middle of the circle and as you expand outwards they start to become more specific. With your emotions wheel you can learn to better understand your emotions and communicate them more effectively with others.



## BUILDING YOUR EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY!

OVERWHELMED  
 VULNERABLE  
 AGITATED  
 OPTIMISTIC  
 JEALOUS  
 HOPEFUL  
 IMAGINATIVE  
 GROUNDED

E	D	O	P	O	W	E	R	L	E	S	S	C	E
U	D	D	D	E	Z	I	G	R	E	N	E	O	S
N	O	E	S	V	W	E	E	T	A	U	A	N	E
O	P	D	J	I	H	L	I	T	D	V	E	F	S
V	T	N	E	T	L	P	L	L	A	U	V	I	S
E	I	U	A	A	V	S	N	A	N	L	I	D	D
R	M	O	L	N	N	E	G	I	X	N	S	E	E
W	I	R	O	I	U	I	H	O	I	E	N	N	T
H	S	G	U	G	T	S	D	S	O	R	E	T	C
E	T	N	S	A	H	U	R	T	U	A	F	I	E
L	I	E	T	M	U	N	P	E	S	B	E	F	N
M	C	E	O	I	Z	C	T	N	R	L	D	D	N
E	D	W	H	O	P	E	F	U	L	E	E	I	O
D	E	E	M	P	O	W	E	R	E	D	O	O	C

CONFIDENT  
 CONNECTED  
 ANXIOUS  
 HURT  
 DEFENSIVE  
 EMPOWERED  
 ENERGIZED  
 POWERLESS

“Feelings are something you have; **not** something you are.”

-Shannon L. Alder

## LEARNING ABOUT SELF-CARE

### What is self-care?

Self-care means taking care of yourself and your well-being. This can include activities that make you happy, make you feel relaxed, or keep you healthy.

### Why is self-care important?

Self-care is important because it can help keep your mind and body healthy. After dealing with stressors or challenging situations, it can be very beneficial to take time for yourself and focus on feeling better. Introducing self-care activities into your daily routine can help reduce stress, minimize symptoms of anxiety and depression, and even improve your mood!

### What if I don't have time for self-care?

Self-care activities can be simple and easy to do! Even if you don't think you'll have enough time, you can still spend 5-10 minutes of your day doing something to help you feel calm. This can be as simple as breathing exercises or enjoying some time alone.

**Some examples of self-care activities include:** Going out for a walk, spending time with friends, reading a book, listening to music, playing video games, playing sports, or even taking some time to relax by yourself.



Go Outside for a Walk



Call a Friend



Listen to Music



Dancing



Read a Book



Drawing or Coloring



Watch a Movie



Take Time Alone and Relax

## MAKING SELF-CARE A PRIORITY

What are some self-care activities that you enjoy? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are some factors that are preventing you from investing time in your self-care? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are some ways that you can practice self-care more often? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## RECOGNIZING WHEN YOU NEED HELP!

It is normal to have a bad day every so often, but if you notice behaviors or thoughts that are becoming more concerning or occurring more frequently, you may want to talk to someone about what you are going through. It isn't always easy to talk about what you are feeling, and it's normal to feel nervous about reaching out to someone for help. You should always remember that you are not alone. There are plenty of people and resources available to you to get you the help you need.

### Signs and Symptoms to Look Out For:

- Displaying excessive worry or anxiety
- Social withdrawal from loved ones
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Talking about or participating in self-harming, risky, or impulsive behaviors
- Displaying significant changes in eating habits or decreased appetite
- Changes in appearance or hygiene
- Expressing hopelessness or talking about suicide for prolonged periods of time

### Starting the Conversation

- **You can start by figuring out the trusted people in your life.** Think of the people who are understanding and have offered to help you or others before. This can be a parent, guardian, friend, teacher, or your school counselor.
- **Starting a conversation about your mental health can be challenging, and it's normal to feel nervous.** It may help to write these feelings down in a journal first or write a letter to the person you want to talk to.
- **If you are still nervous about reaching out, try talking to a friend first.** This friend can accompany you as you approach your trusted adult and offer support. You can also practice talking in front of a mirror or record yourself as you practice what you want to say.

### Talking to a Professional

- **There tends to be a lot of stigma around asking for help from a mental health professional, but everyone needs support from time to time.** It's normal to feel nervous when approaching someone for help. To start, try scheduling an appointment with your school counselor or social worker. They can help you with stress management, school-related concerns, substance use treatment, relationship issues, and even help connect you to a long-term therapist.



## JOURNALING ACTIVITY

Try practicing talking about your mental health! Some prompts you can use are:



- There's been something important I've been wanting to talk about...
- I've been facing some challenges, like...
- Lately, I have been feeling...

## HOW TO HELP A FRIEND

Your friends may reach out to you for mental health support, and in these situations, it is normal to feel nervous and unsure of how to respond. Here are some ways you can get more involved or have productive conversations about mental health.

### Tips on How to Help:



**Practice active listening.** Turn off distractions, such as the TV, radio, or your phone. Give your friend your attention and listen to them fully. Try not to focus on fixing the problem. Sometimes, simply being a listening ear is enough to make someone feel better.



**Start by asking them how they are feeling.** Allow them time to think and give them space to express themselves. Encourage them by asking questions to show that you are interested in understanding their situation. Reassure them that they are not alone and that you are there to hear them out.



**Try to be understanding.** Even if you have cultural differences or differing opinions with your friend, it is very important to be kind, understanding, and respectful of their concerns.



**Don't compare.** It is okay to try and relate to your friend in order to reassure them that you have gone through something similar, but try not to overshadow their experience. Avoid making comparisons that could risk offending or invalidating your friend.



**Be respectful of their privacy.** Your friend chose you to talk to about a concern of theirs, so you should respect their privacy by not spreading rumors or telling their concerns to your peers.



**Help connect them to a mental health professional.** Sometimes, someone may be experiencing challenging mental health concerns. You can offer support by going to your school social worker or counselor's office with your friend to help them schedule an appointment.

**It is okay to want to help your friend as much as you can, but remember that sometimes they'll need more support.** If your friend is dealing with a challenging mental health concern, encourage them to speak with a mental health professional who can offer additional help.

## MAPPING YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

**People I trust who I can talk to:**  
(Name and Contact Information)

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**Places where I feel safe:**

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**What is an affirmation that resonates with me?**

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**What are some things that calm me down?**  
(e.g., a blanket, headphones, fidget toys)

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**What challenges have I overcome?**

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**What do I like best about myself?**

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## DISTRICT RESOURCES FOR CPS STUDENTS

This is not a comprehensive list of resources, so please visit the [CPS Health and Wellness Main Web Page](#) to view the available resources at your school. Below we have included some resources from the [CPS Mental Health Page](#) and a few other health-related CPS pages:

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**The Children and Families Benefits Unit (CFBU):** Visit the CFBU Page to learn more about how you can be connected to social services, such as Medicaid and SNAP enrollment. They can also help connect you with free or low-cost food options, healthcare, and other resources.

**LGBTQ+ Supportive Environments:** Did you know that LGBTQ+-identifying CPS students were four times more likely to report feelings of sadness and hopelessness compared to non-LGBTQ+ students? It's important to remember that this is not due to their identities themselves, but due to social stigma and prejudice. Visit the LGBTQ+ Supportive Environments Page to learn and review our OUT for Safe Schools campaign, our guidelines for the support of Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Students, and the health and experiences of LGBTQ+ high school students at CPS compiled from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

**CPS School Gardens:** Visit the CPS School Gardens Page to learn more about the mental health benefits of gardening. It can reduce stress, improve self-confidence, and foster a sense of belonging when gardening with a team. Gardening can be a bonding activity for a student and their family; if your school has a gardening team, find out how you can get involved!

**Students in Temporary Living Situations (STLS):** Visit the STLS Page to learn about how CPS protects the educational rights of homeless students and connects them to services, resources, and programs that could aid students and their families who do not have permanent housing.

**School-Based Health Centers:** Visit this Student Health Services Page to learn more about the high-quality, accessible, and age-appropriate health care services that the District's 33 School-Based Health Centers provide to students. Some services include immunizations, physicals, chronic condition management, and sexual and reproductive health care.

**CPS Health Data:** Visit the CPS Health Data Page to learn more about student and school health-related data. Data was collected through the Healthy CPS Survey, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), School Health Profiles, and the Illinois Youth Survey. These data are used by CPS and external partners for research, policy, and advocacy work.

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

There are non-CPS affiliated non-profits and mutual aids in Chicago that can help meet your mental health and other health-based needs.

- The [CDPH Community Resource Directory](#) is a useful tool that can help identify a mental healthcare provider to fit a student's specific needs.
- **Here are a few examples of non-profits that are directly related to mental health and other health-related services:**
  - **Community Health** provides mental health services, primary and specialty care, and medications at no charge to low-income, uninsured, and underinsured adults in Chicago.
  - **Erie Neighborhood House** provides mental health care, adult education, and other services to low-income and immigrant families; and
  - **Pilsen Wellness Center** provides mental health services, substance use prevention and treatment services, teen mom support, and food pantries.
- **Mutual aid** is a type of solidarity-based support where communities unite against a common struggle and care for one another. Please [click this link](#) to see existing mutual aids and the type of free health-related services they provide.

**Note:** It is recommended to research the non-profit organizations and mutual aids you are seeking services from to see which options work best for you.

If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidality or a traumatic event, we encourage you to talk to a trusted source and/or your school Behavioral Health Team (BHT), which can include a nurse, psychologist, social worker, and counselor. You can connect to a CPS Crisis Counselor 24/7. To reach the **Crisis Hotline**, text HOME to 741741 or call the **National Youth Crisis Hotline** at 1-800-448-3000.

**Here are additional hotlines offering targeted support:**

- **The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:** 988
- **The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chicago:** 1-833-626-4244
- **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:** 1-800-662-4357
- **The National Eating Disorder Association:** 1-800-931-2237
- **The Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ Support):** 1-866-488-7386
- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-7233

**Note:** While hotlines are helpful starting points, we still recommend reaching out to your school's counselor or family doctor, for more personalized support.

# 31 Ways to Take Care of Your Mental Health



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	<p><b>1</b> Get at least 15 minutes of natural sunlight a day. Daylight lamps are also great for cloudy days.</p>	<p><b>2</b> Create a "favorite things" collection of people and things that bring you joy. Keep it on hand for tough days or moments.</p>	<p><b>3</b> Honor your mind-body connection. Take time to move, stretch, and exercise throughout the day.</p>	<p><b>4</b> Surround yourself with a community of loved ones either in person or online.</p>	<p><b>5</b> Write notes and affirmations. Place them in locations you'll see as you go about your day.</p>	<p><b>6</b> Play music instead of watching TV when you have downtime at home.</p>
<p><b>7</b> Do some mental health spring cleaning. Remove any objects that might encourage negative thoughts or habits.</p>	<p><b>8</b> Place photos of loved ones throughout your space to stir positive thoughts and emotions.</p>	<p><b>9</b> Break unpleasant tasks into 10-minute intervals. Set a timer and see how much you can accomplish.</p>	<p><b>10</b> Stop and smell the roses...literally. Time in nature is a mood booster and improves cognitive functioning.</p>	<p><b>11</b> Curl up with a good book. Reading relieves stress by serving as a temporary distraction.</p>	<p><b>12</b> Pay it forward. Random acts of kindness can release oxytocin – the "feel good" hormone.</p>	<p><b>13</b> Small steps add up. Take the stairs or park your car farther away. All forms of exercise can decrease tension and improve sleep.</p>
<p><b>14</b> Add your favorite color into your living space in creative ways – use art, pillows, blankets, or curtains.</p>	<p><b>15</b> Working from home? Set up a designated workspace that is set apart from your living and sleeping.</p>	<p><b>16</b> Breathe easy – changing the filter in your furnace regularly, dusting often, using an air purifier, and houseplants can improve air quality.</p>	<p><b>17</b> Prep lunches and pick out your outfit the night before. You'll save time and reduce your stress in the morning.</p>	<p><b>18</b> Keep it cool and sleep tight. Between 60 and 67 degrees Fahrenheit is optimal for a good night's sleep.</p>	<p><b>19</b> Stay crafty. Keep hobby supplies on hand for when stress sets in and you need a creative outlet.</p>	<p><b>20</b> Shake it off. Dance around while you do housework. You'll get chores done and reduce stress levels.</p>
<p><b>21</b> Use your good scents. Comforting scents from candles to baked goods can help create calm.</p>	<p><b>22</b> Block out the background noise. Use headphones or earplugs to create a sound sanctuary.</p>	<p><b>23</b> Keep it dark. Use blackout curtains or a mask to ensure your sleep environment is as dark as possible.</p>	<p><b>24</b> Keep primary need nourishment on hand always – snacks, water, blankets, etc.</p>	<p><b>25</b> Fun and focused. Create a stim box to occupy your hands when you feel anxious and need help focusing.</p>	<p><b>26</b> Nod off to white noise if you have trouble falling asleep. You can use a sound machine, phone app, or fan.</p>	<p><b>27</b> Take a break. Just a 10-minute walk each day can improve your ability to deal with stress.</p>
<p><b>28</b> Disconnect by changing the settings on your phone to "do not disturb" when possible.</p>	<p><b>29</b> Cut the clutter. Finished with an object? Put it away. A clean and clear space helps reduce stress.</p>	<p><b>30</b> Keep a journal by your bedside. Write out your thoughts at the end of the day to clear your mind and find rest.</p>	<p><b>31</b> Make a gratitude list of things you are thankful for, that bring you joy, or positively impact your mental health.</p>			