

Mayo Clinic Q and A: Back-to-school mental health tips

August 19 2022, by Craig Sawchuk



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: Our daughter has attended school virtually for the past five years and enjoyed the experience. Now that she is heading into ninth grade, she wants a more traditional high school experience.

However, she has become more nervous as school gets closer and complains about stomachaches. How can I ease the transition for her and help her be less anxious?

ANSWER: School is one of the most important places where children learn and grow intellectually, socially and emotionally. And while the desire is strong for children to return to a healthy [school](#) environment, change can be challenging.

It is important to remember that not every person reacts to change in the same way. Your child clearly recognizes that this coming school year will look different than past years.

The first step to helping your daughter transition is to keep a healthy mindset and focus on the positive. High school students may find their emotions vary between excitement and anxiety. Although your daughter supports this change, the closer the change becomes, the more likely she feels nervous.

I would recommend that you sit down with your daughter and try to get a sense of what it is about school that makes her nervous. Is she concerned about making new friends? Worried about being overwhelmed by homework? Is there something new that may be causing anxiety, like dealing with a locker combination or switching classes?

Sometimes just being able to talk about those details and put the nervousness into words can help a teen who's feeling anxious. Try to help her think about other ways this might turn out. In general, the anticipation of things tends to be worse than the actual experience.

I also recommend that you talk with your daughter about your own experiences moving into high school and any anxiety you had and how you overcame it. Doing this will let your daughter know that she's not

alone in the situation, that it's OK to be nervous, and there are ways to get through it.

Also, look at opportunities to ease your daughter into a back-to-school routine. Talk to the school administration about her concerns. If you can, arrange for a tour of the school or a meeting with teachers in advance of orientation. Talk with your daughter about changes in daily routines, which can be a challenge for everyone—even adults.

Most importantly, remind your daughter to stay flexible and be open to the possibility that her feelings may change over the course of the year. And let her know that it is OK not to feel OK. Teens may still need to hear that affirmed by the adults in their lives.

For anyone feeling anxious, it's common to be irritable, or feel a sense of loss or sadness. Problems with sleep, physical tension and worry can result.

Consider these tips to help manage your daughter's mental health and ease the transition to this school year:

- Be aware and supportive. As you have already done, be alert to recognize any ongoing concerns or anxiety, and continue to talk with your daughter about her fears.
- Be optimistic. Maintain a positive attitude about the transition and encourage her to do the same.
- Practice relaxation and learn new skills to manage stress. Explore how relaxation, mindfulness or other stress management techniques, such as yoga, can calm the mind. Several free classes and mental health apps are online. Many of these skills are portable and can be used anytime, anywhere.
- Set and maintain a normal daily routine. Help your daughter aim to wake up and go to bed as close as possible to the same times

each day. Remind her to stay hydrated, try to keep up with a [healthy diet](#) and focus on getting physical activity. A healthy body helps maintain a healthy mood and mindset.

- Find support through friends. Help your daughter identify some friends who also might be transitioning into high school, either from virtual school or simply moving up from middle school. Encourage them to connect before school begins to help them all feel more confident.

Some people may struggle with more significant mental health difficulties, so if you believe your child needs additional resources, I recommend talking with her pediatrician or another [health care](#) professional to locate local mental health resources.

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