

# mental health and wellness

## coping with IBD

Being diagnosed with IBD may make you feel afraid, sad, nervous or just “different.” These feelings are completely normal. If any of the below behaviors start happening and getting in the way of your life, you may be having trouble coping:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Poor eating habits
- Ongoing sadness, irritability, and/or frequent crying
- Worry that’s very hard to control
- New problems with concentration
- Lack of interest in usual activities and hobbies
- Body image struggles due to changes in your appearance

If you are having trouble, it is so important to know that it is normal to have some difficulty adapting to life with a chronic illness. Learning to cope with IBD often gets easier with time, but it is very reasonable to need some help adjusting. Often parents can be a great source of comfort and help. Other times kids find that talking to close friends is just what they need. Speaking with a psychologist who works with kids dealing with chronic illness and can help you learn specific tools for coping with stress like this might also be helpful. You can also speak with your religious leader, if that feels helpful to you.

Please know that whatever path(s) you choose, you deserve to feel like you can share about your IBD and feel supported. Staying silent about your struggles can cause social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Talking about your condition can help break down barriers and give people an opportunity to help support you!

### ImproveCareNow toolkits

These toolkits share real experiences from IBD patients. Sharing stories can help make IBD patients feel supported and not alone. Teens and young adults that have IBD share everything from how their friends reacted to sharing about IBD, how to take care of your mental health, boosting your energy, and dealing with body image issues. Below are links to a couple of the toolkits, but there are many more:

- Talking about IBD: [improvecarenow.org/talking\\_about\\_IBD](https://improvecarenow.org/talking_about_IBD)
- Body image toolkit: [improvecarenow.org/pac\\_body\\_image\\_toolkit](https://improvecarenow.org/pac_body_image_toolkit)
- Accommodations toolkit: [improvecarenow.org/new\\_resource\\_pac\\_accommodations\\_toolkit](https://improvecarenow.org/new_resource_pac_accommodations_toolkit)

## the mind and body connection

Although we diagnose IBD based on the physical symptoms in a person's body, there are many other factors that can affect how bad symptoms get and how much they get in the way of your life. The good news is that kids and teens can take control of some of these other factors and make a difference in their experience with IBD.

### what is the stress response?

One way the body and the mind are connected is through the body's **stress response**. The stress response is designed to protect people. When in stressful situations, your body reacts in many ways, such as:

- Making your heart pump faster to move blood quickly to your organs and muscles
- Your short-term memory changes so you can pay attention to danger (which makes it hard to concentrate on things)
- Digestion stops, and your body tries to quickly rid itself of anything left in the stomach so it doesn't waste energy

When the body is focused on dealing with the stress response, it can't devote as much effort and resources to maintaining a healthy immune system or healing up after a flare. This is significant for kids and teens with IBD since we really want to clear the way for our body to stay healthy and recover when it gets sidelined by a flare.

### imagine this: the stress response at work

Imagine for a moment that you're a cave-person hanging out by a fire when you notice a sabretooth tiger walking toward you, licking its lips and looking hungry. Bodies are made to protect us in situations like this. When our eyes catch a glimpse of a hungry sabretooth tiger, that visual will trigger a host of physical responses (like the ones described above) to help us survive! These physical responses help us take big action quickly, which makes them helpful in sabretooth tiger-like situations, but are usually not as useful for modern-day stressors.

## ways to manage your body's stress response

It's important to know the kinds of things we have control over that tend to trigger the body's stress response. A lot of times we talk about stress like it's only about how we're thinking and feeling emotionally, but the body makes sense of stress more broadly. A stress response can be triggered as much by worried thoughts about IBD symptoms acting up while you're in class as it can by a lack of healthy habits that the brain expects the body to be performing to keep it healthy and in good shape. So when we think about controlling the stress response in the body, we want to think about healthy habits the body knows it needs in order to function well, as well as management of emotional and social stress. Here are some things kids and teens can do to keep the body's stress response in check:

1. Sleep:
  - a. Aim to keep a consistent sleep schedule, including similar bedtimes and wake times, even on the weekends!
  - b. Limit caffeine intake, especially later in the day.
  - c. Create a restful environment 20-30 minutes prior to bed time. Darken the room, shut the doors, and cover the windows.
  - d. Turn off all devices at least 20-30 minutes before bedtime, including smartphones, tablets, computer monitors and televisions.

- e. Make sure the bed is reserved for sleeping and sleeping alone and the bedroom isn't filled with lots of devices and other distractions. This helps the brain start to use your bed and bedroom as a cue for sleep!
2. Nutrition/Hydration:
- a. Eat a well-rounded diet that includes fruits, vegetables, and lean protein.
  - b. Avoid processed junk food.
  - c. Ask your GI doctor and/or dietitian about the possibility of trigger foods. Trigger foods are generally high in fiber or fat. They may contain lactose, caffeine, alcohol, sugar alcohols or spicy flavors. For some people, getting to know trigger foods and avoiding them can help their bodies function better.
3. Exercise:
- a. Aim for at least 60 minutes or more of heart-pumping activity per day.
4. Social/Emotional Health:
- a. Try to keep a daily routine that includes pleasant activities, especially when you're going through adjustment to a new diagnosis or having a rough patch.
  - b. Talk to someone if you're starting to feel overwhelmed, like a parent, friend, coach, or therapist.
  - c. Make a point of creating space for relaxation in your day, regardless of whether stress is high. Relaxation means different things for different people, so start exploring a variety of activities and get to know what feels relaxing for you.

