Davis-Smith Mental Health Provider

A FREE GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Teen Anxiety

What to look for, what to say and how to help

Inside: a signs checklist, a stress or anxiety chart, what to say and what to skip, a fear ladder worksheet, a thought check, a calm-down plan your teen can fill in, and where to turn for help.

FROM THE THERAPISTS AT DAVIS-SMITH MENTAL HEALTH

Clinically reviewed by Jessica Davis, LCPC, Founder and Clinical Director

New Lenox, Illinois · davis-smithmentalhealth.com/teen-anxiety

You are welcome to print, copy and share this guide with family, teachers and other caregivers.

START HERE

About this guide

If you're holding this guide, you've probably noticed something in your teenager: a stomachache before school, more worry, more avoiding, or a teen who seems fine but is quietly running on stress. You're not imagining it, and you're not alone.

This guide brings together what our therapists most want parents to know about teen anxiety, plus simple tools you can use at home. Read it front to back or jump to the page you need. The worksheets work best when you fill them in with your teen.

WHO WROTE IT

Written by the therapists at Davis-Smith Mental Health in New Lenox, IL, and clinically reviewed by Jessica Davis, LCPC, who has counseled teens since 2013. Reviewed October 2026. The full online version, with links to deeper articles, is at **davis-smithmentalhealth.com/teen-anxiety**.

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This guide is for general education. It isn't a diagnosis or a substitute for care from a licensed professional. If your teen is ever in danger, call or text 988, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

PART 1 · UNDERSTANDING

What teen anxiety is (and isn't)

Anxiety is the body's built-in alarm system. When the brain senses danger, it speeds up the heart, tightens the muscles and fills the mind with "what ifs" so we can protect ourselves.

That alarm is useful when the danger is real. Teen anxiety becomes a problem when the alarm goes off too often, too loudly or over things that aren't truly dangerous, like a quiz, a group chat or walking into a crowded cafeteria.

Normal worry vs. teen anxiety

Every teen worries sometimes, and a little nervousness can even help them prepare. Teen anxiety is different in three ways:

It's bigger
The worry is much larger than the situation calls for.

It sticks around
It lasts for weeks or months, not just until the test is over.

It shrinks their world
Your teen starts avoiding more and more of what feels scary.

THE ONE QUESTION TO ASK

Is the worry getting in the way?

When anxiety keeps your teen from school, sleep, friends or activities they care about, it's time to take it seriously. You don't need a diagnosis to start helping.

You're not alone

In a national survey of teens ages 13 to 18 (2001 to 2004), the National Institute of Mental Health found that **31.9% of adolescents** had experienced an anxiety disorder at some point, and it was more common in girls (38.0%) than boys (26.1%). In more recent CDC data, **20% of teens ages 12 to 17** reported symptoms of anxiety in the past two weeks.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends anxiety screening for ages 8 to 18, so your teen's pediatrician is a good person to ask. The good news: teen anxiety is very treatable.

WHEN YOUR TEEN LOOKS FINE

Some of the most anxious teens get good grades and say "I'm fine." Underneath, they may stay up late making everything perfect or panic quietly before tests. If your teen seems exhausted from holding it all together, pay attention.

PART 1 · SIGNS

Signs checklist

Teen anxiety rarely announces itself. Check anything you've noticed **more than once in the past few weeks**. One sign on its own doesn't mean your teen has an anxiety disorder. What matters is the pattern.

In their body

- [ ] Stomachaches or headaches, especially on school days
- [ ] Nausea, a racing heart or shaky hands
- [ ] Trouble falling or staying asleep
- [ ] Feeling tired all the time

In their feelings

- [ ] Constant worry or dread
- [ ] Irritability, anger or short temper
- [ ] Crying more easily
- [ ] Feeling on edge or unable to relax

In their thinking

- [ ] Lots of "what ifs" and expecting the worst
- [ ] Replaying small mistakes for hours
- [ ] Trouble concentrating

In their behavior

- [ ] Avoiding people, places or activities
- [ ] Asking the same worried questions again and again
- [ ] Procrastinating or needing everything perfect
- [ ] Big reactions to small changes in plans

At school

- [ ] Morning stomachaches or asking to stay home
- [ ] Calling to come home or visiting the nurse
- [ ] Panic before tests or falling behind

With friends

- [ ] Turning down plans or pulling away
- [ ] Worrying a lot about what others think
- [ ] Spending more time alone

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS LIST

If you checked several boxes and it has been going on for a few weeks, it's worth a conversation with your teen, their pediatrician or a counselor. Bring this page with you. If you're seeing signs of sadness or hopelessness too, mention that as well, since anxiety and depression often show up together.

Stress or anxiety?

Stress is a response to something specific, like a big game or a test on Friday, and it fades once that thing is over. Anxiety tends to hang on and show up even when life looks calm.

What you notice	Everyday stress	Possible anxiety
What sets it off	A clear event	Sometimes nothing obvious
How long it lasts	Days, until the event passes	Weeks or months
Reassurance	Helps them settle down	Helps for a minute, then the worry comes back
Daily life	They keep doing their usual things	They start avoiding school, activities or friends
Their body	Some tension or butterflies	Ongoing stomachaches, headaches or trouble sleeping

What anxiety can look like by age

Ages 11 to 13

Stomachaches, clinginess before school, tears over friendship drama, meltdowns after a long day. Younger teens may say "sick" or "tired" when they mean "scared."

Ages 14 to 15

Worry about grades counting, finding their people and keeping up. Watch for dropped activities, avoiding the lunchroom or endless homework.

Ages 16 to 18

Pressure from tests, college, jobs and driving. Often looks like perfectionism, sleepless nights, panic before exams or shutting down.

Girls and boys can show it differently

Girls often talk about worry, cry or feel overwhelmed, and many turn it inward through self-criticism and comparison. Boys are often more likely to show irritability, anger or physical complaints, or avoid things while insisting they don't care. Since those signs can look like attitude, anxiety in boys is easy to miss.

Types of teen anxiety at a glance

Many teens experience more than one of these. Only a licensed professional can diagnose an anxiety disorder, but knowing the types can help you put words to what you're seeing.

Constant, everyday worry

Worrying about almost everything: grades, health, family, the future. Hard to turn off, especially at night.

Social anxiety

Intense fear of being judged or embarrassed. Avoiding raising a hand, the cafeteria, ordering food or texting first.

Panic attacks

A sudden rush of fear with a pounding heart, shaking or trouble breathing. Frightening but not dangerous, and it peaks within minutes.

Test anxiety

Studying for hours, then freezing when the test starts. Stomachaches on test days or avoiding studying.

Performance and sports anxiety

Freezing in big games, recitals, speeches or tryouts, even when well prepared.

Separation anxiety

Struggling to be away from home or a parent, often after a move, loss, divorce or hard year, or before college.

School avoidance

Late arrivals, nurse visits and calls home that grow until going at all feels impossible.

Perfectionism

Ambition with fear underneath: redoing work, avoiding new things, falling apart over small mistakes.

Specific fears

Intense fear of things like driving, needles, storms, throwing up or flying that leads to a lot of avoidance.

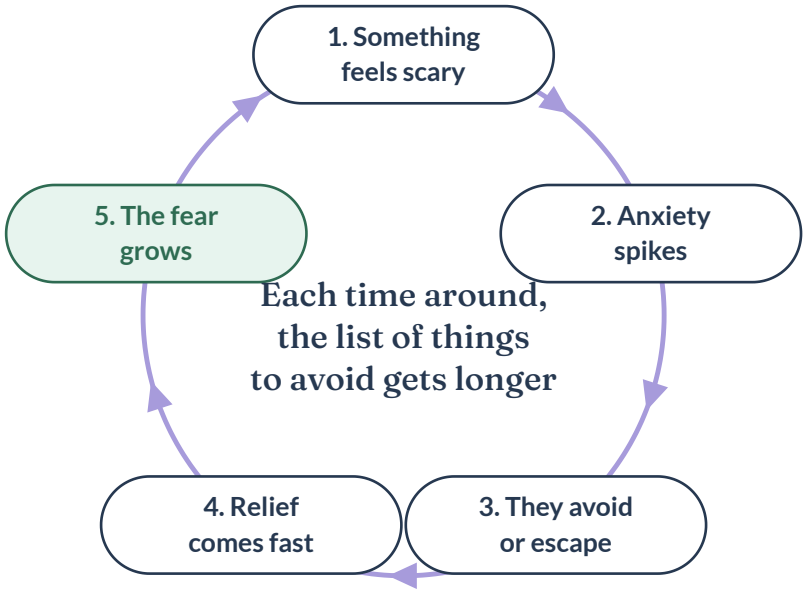
Overthinking and nighttime worry

A brain that won't slow down, replaying conversations and planning for every outcome, often worst at bedtime.

Want to go deeper? Each of these has its own section, with links to longer articles, at davis-smithmentalhealth.com/teen-anxiety.

The anxiety cycle

Understanding this cycle is one of the most helpful things a parent can do. It explains why anxiety can grow even when everyone is trying so hard to help.



The way out is the opposite of avoidance: facing fears in small, manageable steps until the brain learns those situations are safe enough.

How parents get pulled in

When you love your teen, it's natural to try to make the anxiety stop. Clinicians call these changes accommodation, and almost every parent of an anxious teen does it.

What it can look like	What to try instead
Answering the same worried question again and again	"We've talked about this. What do you think the answer is?"
Ordering food or making calls for your teen	Practice together first, then let them try with you nearby
Letting them stay home whenever they're anxious	Work with the school on a plan to keep them going, even part of the day
Changing family plans to avoid their triggers	Keep most plans, with support and a way to take a break

How to help at home

You can't make your teen's anxiety disappear, and that isn't your job. What you can do is help them feel understood and gently help them face hard things instead of avoiding them.

1. **Listen first, fix later.** Ask questions, reflect back what you hear and let them know their feelings make sense. Car rides, walks and late-night snacks are often when the real talks happen.
2. **Validate the feeling, not the avoidance.** "I know this feels really scary, and I know you can handle it" honors both.
3. **Ease off reassurance little by little.** Gently turn repeated questions back to them, or save them for a short daily worry time.
4. **Praise brave behavior.** Name every brave step, even small ones. Effort matters more than looking calm.
5. **Keep expectations, add support.** Anxious teens still need routines and responsibilities, with extra help when things are hard.
6. **Face fears one step at a time.** Break scary things into small steps and let your teen help choose the pace. The fear ladder on page 10 shows how.
7. **Protect sleep, movement and downtime.** Anxious brains do better with routine, time outside and unscheduled time.
8. **Stay as calm as you can.** Teens borrow calm from the adults around them. When you stay steady, you show them big feelings can be ridden out.

> **"Being still means taking the time to walk through it yourself and notice things yourself instead of relying on others to fix it."**
>
> Jessica Davis, Practice Owner of Davis-Smith Mental Health

PART 2 · WORDS THAT HELP

What to say and what to skip

TRY SAYING THIS

- "I've noticed you seem really stressed lately. I'm here whenever you want to talk."
- "That sounds really hard. Tell me more about it."
- "It makes sense that you're nervous. What's one small step you could take?"
- "You don't have to figure this out alone. We can work on it together."
- "What would you tell a friend who felt this way?"
- "I'm proud of you for trying, even though it was scary."

TRY TO SKIP

- "Just calm down."
- "There's nothing to worry about."
- "You're being dramatic."
- "Fine, you don't have to go," every single time
- "I'll handle it for you," when it's something they can try

Said one of these? Every parent has. A simple "I'm sorry, let me try that again" models exactly what you want your teen to learn.

Our plan for hard mornings

Mornings are often the hardest part of the day for anxious teens. Fill this in together on a calm evening and keep it on the fridge.

The night before	What we'll do
Clothes, bag and lunch ready	
Wake-up time (so nobody has to rush)	
Simple breakfast idea	
One coping skill to use when worry hits	
Who to check in with at school	
Our short, confident goodbye	

Example goodbye: "I love you. I know you can do this. I'll see you at 3."

WORKSHEET

Our fear ladder

Feel free to copy this page.

The most effective way to shrink anxiety is to face it gradually. Pick one fear that's getting in the way. List small steps from easiest (bottom) to hardest (top), and have your teen rate each one from 0 (no fear) to 10 (the most fear). Start around a 3 or 4 and repeat each step until it feels easier.

EXAMPLE: ORDERING FOOD AND TALKING TO PEOPLE

Look at the menu online (2) → Order at a drive-through with a parent (3) → Call to ask about hours (5) → Order at a counter with a parent nearby (6) → Order alone while a parent waits outside (7) → Ask a store employee for help (8) → Order for a friend at lunch (9)

The fear we're working on: _____

Step	What I'll do	Fear 0 to 10	Tried it
8 hardest			☐ ☐ ☐
7			☐ ☐ ☐
6			☐ ☐ ☐
5			☐ ☐ ☐
4			☐ ☐ ☐
3			☐ ☐ ☐
2			☐ ☐ ☐
1 easiest			☐ ☐ ☐

How we'll celebrate effort: _____

Hard days are normal. Go back a step if you need to, then keep going. If the fear feels too big to tackle at home, a therapist can build and guide a ladder with your teen.

Coping skills toolbox

Coping skills work best when teens practice them on calm days, not just in the middle of a hard moment. Try a few together and circle the ones that fit.

Slow breathing

Breathe in for 4 counts and out for 6. The longer exhale tells the body it's safe. Practice 2 minutes a few times a day.

5-4-3-2-1 grounding

Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell and 1 you can taste.

Check the thought

Ask: What's the evidence? What else could explain it? What would I tell a friend? Use the worksheet on page 12.

Worry time

Write worries down and save them for a set 15 minutes each day. When one pops up, say "Not now. Later."

Name the worry

"That's my anxiety talking" creates a little distance. Some teens even give their anxiety a name.

Move

A walk, a run, a bike ride or shooting hoops burns off the extra energy anxiety creates. Even 10 minutes helps.

Mindful minute

Notice your breath, your feet on the floor and the sounds around you, without trying to change anything.

Hold something calming

A smooth stone, a stress ball or something cold in your hand can pull attention back to the present.

> **"They are capable. They just have to communicate, engage, and take a minute and push through a really tough time."**
>
> Jessica Davis, Practice Owner of Davis-Smith Mental Health

WORKSHEET · FOR TEENS

Thought check

Feel free to copy this page.

Anxiety tells convincing stories. Write down an anxious thought, ask yourself the questions, then write a thought that's more balanced. It doesn't have to be positive, just more realistic.

Anxious thought	Questions to ask	A more helpful thought
"If I fail this test, my future is ruined."	Is one test really my whole future? What would I tell a friend?	"This test matters, but it's one grade. I can handle it either way."

Questions you can use: What's the evidence? Has this happened before? What else could explain it? What's most likely to happen? Could I handle it if it did?

1. My anxious thought

What would I tell a friend? What's the evidence?

A more helpful thought

2. My anxious thought

What would I tell a friend? What's the evidence?

A more helpful thought

WORKSHEET · FOR TEENS

My calm-down plan

Feel free to copy this page. Keep a photo of it on your phone.

Everyone's anxiety looks a little different. Fill this in on a calm day so you know exactly what to do when worry shows up.

How I know my anxiety is showing up (in my body, thoughts or actions)

Things that usually set it off

My go-to coping skills (pick 2 or 3)

- ☐ Slow breathing (in 4, out 6)
- ☐ 5-4-3-2-1 grounding
- ☐ Check the thought
- ☐ Go for a walk or move
- ☐ Music or a playlist
- ☐ Write it down
- ☐ Hold something calming
- ☐ Other: _____

People I can talk to

A place I can go to reset at school or at home

Something I can tell myself

Example: "This feeling is uncomfortable, but it will pass. I've gotten through this before."

If you ever feel unsafe or think about hurting yourself, call or text **988** any time, talk to a trusted adult right away, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

During a panic attack

Watching your teen have a panic attack can be scary for both of you. Remember: panic attacks feel dangerous but aren't, and the worst of it usually passes within minutes.

WHAT TO DO

1. Stay close and keep your voice calm and low.
2. Remind them it's a panic attack and that it will pass.
3. Breathe slowly with them, focusing on long exhales.
4. Help them ground themselves with what they can see, touch and hear.
5. Skip the questions for now. Short, kind words work best.
6. Once it passes, let them rest and talk about it later when they feel steady.

Words that help in the moment

- "You're safe. This is a panic attack, and it will pass."
- "Breathe with me. In for 4, out for 6."
- "I'm right here. You don't have to say anything."

Afterward

When your teen feels steady, talk about what happened before the attack and what helped. Some teens start avoiding places where they had a panic attack, which can make their world smaller. Gently getting back to those places, one step at a time, keeps panic from taking over.

WHEN TO CALL A DOCTOR

If there's chest pain, fainting or symptoms that feel different from usual, call your doctor or 911 to rule out a medical problem.

PART 4 · SCHOOL

Anxiety at school

School is where teen anxiety often shows up first. If your teen is avoiding school, try not to wait it out. The longer avoidance goes on, the harder it usually is to go back.

When your teen won't go

1. **Get a medical check** to rule out physical causes for stomachaches or headaches.
2. **Talk with the school right away** so you can work as a team.
3. **Keep the routine.** Wake up, get dressed and head toward school at the usual time.
4. **Make a partial plan if needed,** like a shorter day or a quiet place to reset.
5. **Keep home low-key during school hours,** without screens or treats.
6. **Get support.** A therapist can help your teen face school step by step.

Questions to ask the school

- [ ] Who can my teen check in with when they're overwhelmed?
- [ ] Is there a quiet place they can go to reset, and for how long?
- [ ] Could a 504 plan help, with supports like extra test time or breaks?
- [ ] How will you let me know if my teen is struggling during the day?
- [ ] How can missed work be made up without piling on?

GOOD TO KNOW IN ILLINOIS

Illinois students can take up to five excused mental or behavioral health days a school year, without a doctor's note. Used well, they can help your teen reset. Watch that they don't turn into a pattern of avoidance.

Our school contact: _____ **Phone or email:** _____

WORKSHEET · FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

Our family plan for phones and sleep

Feel free to copy this page.

Phones and sleep are two of the biggest things parents can shape at home, and both affect anxiety. In a 2024 Pew Research Center survey, 45% of teens said social media hurts the amount of sleep they get. Teens ages 13 to 18 need 8 to 10 hours a night, yet the CDC reports only about 1 in 4 high school students get at least 8 hours on school nights.

Instead of banning phones, make a plan together. Check what you'll try.

Phones

- ☐ Phones charge outside bedrooms overnight
- ☐ Phone-free meals
- ☐ No phones for the first hour after school
- ☐ Parents follow the same rules
- ☐ We talk about what we see online and how it makes us feel
- ☐ Screen-free family time: _____

Sleep

- ☐ Steady wake-up time, even on weekends, as much as possible
- ☐ Screens off 30 to 60 minutes before bed
- ☐ A worry notebook by the bed
- ☐ No caffeine or energy drinks after lunch
- ☐ Worry talks happen earlier in the evening, not at lights out

Our plan	School nights	Weekends
Phones go to the charging spot at		
Lights out by		
Wake up at		

We agreed on this plan: _____ **Date:** _____

When to get help

Trust your instincts. Parents usually notice something is off before anyone else does. Consider reaching out to a counselor if your teen:

- [ ] Has been worried, on edge or avoiding things for several weeks
- [ ] Is missing school, dropping activities or pulling away from friends
- [ ] Has frequent stomachaches, headaches or sleep problems with no medical cause
- [ ] Is having panic attacks
- [ ] Seems sad, hopeless or not like themselves
- [ ] Is turning to risky ways to cope, like vaping or drinking
- [ ] Tells you they want to talk to someone

If your teen is in crisis, don't wait.

If your teen is hurting themselves, talks about hurting themselves or you believe they're in danger, call or text **988** (the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline), call **911** or go to the nearest emergency room.

Davis-Smith Mental Health doesn't provide 24/7 crisis care, so please use these resources in an emergency.

How to talk to your teen about therapy

Many teens push back at first, and that's completely normal.

- Pick a calm moment, like a car ride or a walk, instead of right after an argument.
- Share what you've noticed with care, not criticism.
- Frame it as support, not punishment. Everyone deserves someone in their corner.
- Give them a say, like in person or telehealth, or what they want to work on.
- Agree to try a few sessions before deciding. If they still say no, keep the door open.

> **"Reaching out for help is saying, I love my kid enough to recognize that what is going on with them is more than what I can help with right now. That is not failure. That is courage."**
>
> Jessica Davis, Practice Owner of Davis-Smith Mental Health

PART 5 · TREATMENT

How therapy helps

Teen anxiety is very treatable. With the right support, many teens learn to manage it well, and the skills they build can last a lifetime.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

CBT is one of the most researched treatments for anxiety in kids and teens. It helps teens notice the thoughts that feed their anxiety, test whether those thoughts are true and practice brave steps, like the fear ladder, both in session and at home.

Parents as partners

Your teen's therapist can share general updates and ideas for supporting them at home, while still protecting the trust your teen needs to open up.

EMDR

When anxiety is tied to past experiences, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) can help the brain process those memories so they lose some of their charge.

Other approaches

Motivational interviewing and strength-based approaches help teens find their own reasons to change and build on what's already working.

What about medication?

Some teens benefit from medication alongside therapy, but it usually isn't the first step. That's a decision to make with your teen's doctor and therapist.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A FIRST SESSION

The first session is a conversation, not a test. The therapist explains confidentiality, answers questions and gets to know your teen, their background and their goals. Most families start with weekly sessions, then adjust together as things improve.

A note on privacy: at Davis-Smith Mental Health, what teens 12 and older share stays private, and parents are always told if there's a safety concern. Wherever you go, ask the therapist how they handle updates for parents.

PART 5 · FOR YOU

Taking care of yourself

Loving an anxious teen can be exhausting. It's easy to put your own needs last, but your teen needs a steady adult far more than a perfect one.

- Talk with your partner, a friend or another parent you trust.
- Notice your own worry and how it shows up in front of your teen.
- Get on the same page with your co-parent so your teen hears one consistent message.
- Make room for your other kids, who may be feeling the strain too.
- Keep doing small things that recharge you.
- Get support for yourself if you need it. Counseling for parents can help you find your footing too.

A FEW MINUTES FOR YOU

What's been hardest for me lately?

One thing that helps me feel steady

Who I can lean on

One small thing I'll do for myself this week

You don't need to have all the answers. Showing up, staying curious and asking for help when you need it already makes a difference.

PART 5 · RESOURCES

Where to get help

In a crisis: call or text 988

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is free, confidential and available 24 hours a day. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. Our practice doesn't provide 24/7 crisis care.

Trusted information

- **National Institute of Mental Health:** nimh.nih.gov (search "child and adolescent mental health")
- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:** aacap.org, Anxiety Disorders Resource Center
- **Child Mind Institute:** childmind.org, articles on anxiety in teens
- **Your teen's pediatrician and school counselor,** who can screen for anxiety and help with next steps

NEAR NEW LENOX?

Davis-Smith Mental Health is a small counseling practice in New Lenox, IL. Every therapist on our team works with anxiety. We see teens in person and through telehealth anywhere in Illinois, we don't keep a waiting list, and we work with most major insurance plans and offer self-pay options.

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Ages 5 to 17. Anxiety, school stress and big feelings. English and Urdu.

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NOTES

Notes and questions

Use this page for questions to ask your teen's doctor, school or counselor, or anything you want to remember.

Sources

- National Institute of Mental Health, Any Anxiety Disorder statistics (National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement, 2001 to 2004). nimh.nih.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health. cdc.gov
- U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, Screening for Anxiety in Children and Adolescents (2022). uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org
- Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Mental Health (April 2025). pewresearch.org
- CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Sleep. cdc.gov/yrbs (includes the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommendation)
- Illinois State Board of Education, mental or behavioral health days for students. isbe.net

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