



Natural Supports Toolkit:

# Understanding the Links Between Physical and Behavioral Health

Adult Guide

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, SW

Room 509F, HHH Building

Washington, DC 20201

**1-800-368-1019, 1-800-537-7697 (TDD)**

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**Pennsylvanian Dutch: Wann du Deitsch schwetzsch, kannsch du mitaus Koschte ebber gricke, ass dihr helft mit die englisch Schprooch. Ruf selli Nummer uff.**

**Korean: 주의: 한국어를 사용하시는 경우, 언어 지원 서비스를 무료로 이용하실 수 있습니다. 귀하 카운티의 회원 서비스로 연락하십시오.**

**Italian: ATTENZIONE: nel caso la lingua parlata sia l'italiano, sono disponibili servizi di assistenza linguistica gratuiti. Chiamare il numero dei Servizi per i soci relativo alla propria contea.**

**Arabic:**

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**Gujarati: સુચના: જો તમે ગુજરાતી બોલતા હો, તો તમારા માટે ભાષા સહાયતા સેવાઓ નિ:શુલ્ક ઉપલબ્ધ છે. તમારી કાઉન્ટીના મેમ્બર સર્વિસીસ નંબર પર ફોન કરો.**

**Polish: UWAGA: Jeżeli mówisz po polsku, możesz skorzystać z bezpłatnej pomocy językowej. Zadzwoń pod numer obsługi członkowskiej odpowiedni dla Twojego kraju.**

**Haitian Creole: ATANSYON: Si w pale Kreyòl Ayisyen, gen sèvis èd pou lang ki disponib gratis pou ou. Rele nimewo Sèvis manm pou konte w.**

**Mon-Khmer Cambodian: ប្រយ័ត្ន: បើសិនជាអ្នកនិយាយ ភាសាខ្មែរ, អ្នកអាចប្រើប្រាស់សេវាជំនួយផ្នែកភាសាដោយមិនគិតថ្លៃ។ ចូរ ទូរស័ព្ទទៅកាន់លេខសេវាបម្រើសមាជិកសម្រាប់ប្រទេសរបស់លោកអ្នក។**

**Portuguese: ATENÇÃO: Se fala português, encontra-se disponível serviços de assistência linguística gratuitos. Ligue para o número de Serviços aos Membros do seu país.**

# PerformCARE<sup>®</sup>

## **Natural Supports Toolkit: Understanding the Links Between Physical and Behavioral Adult Guide**

### **Capital area**

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**1-888-722-8646**

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**1-866-773-7917**

**Deaf or hard of hearing: contact PA Relay at**

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Need a translation? Call the PerformCare Member Services phone number for your county.





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## Overview and background

This toolkit is to help natural supports of people with a behavioral health illness understand the link between physical and behavioral health.

### Who are natural supports?

Natural supports can be family members, such as spouses, parents or guardians, friends, partners, neighbors, and paid helpers. Natural supports play a key role in the support of people with a behavioral health illness. Natural supports provide emotional support and guidance and can provide hands-on support, like helping with medicines and making sure medical and behavioral health visits are made. That's why natural supports need to know about the ongoing problem of poor health among those with a behavioral health illness.

### What is behavioral health?

Behavioral health is a term often used to link a person's behaviors with their health. Behaviors like eating habits, smoking, or activity level can effect a person's physical well-being. More recently, the term behavioral health also included a person's mental health and misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Mental health is the well-being of a person's mind and how they think, feel, or act. Many mental health disorders occur because of genetics, brain chemistry, or how a person manages their environment and life experiences. Adults can develop mental health conditions such as major depression disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, or schizophrenia.

Drug and alcohol abuse is also a serious behavioral health disorder. Drug and alcohol use can lead to a biological need for using drugs and/or alcohol because the body and brain craves them. Unfortunately, drug and alcohol abuse has been identified in every age category, including the elderly.

### What is the link between physical and behavioral health?

Studies have shown that people with a behavioral health illness, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder, are likely to have many physical health problems. Gaps in health care are often due to problems with access to care or problems following health care treatment plans correctly. This causes poor overall physical health. As a result, diseases like diabetes, heart disease, respiratory illnesses, tuberculosis, obesity, osteoporosis, hepatitis B and C, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are more likely to occur in people with a behavioral health illness.<sup>1</sup> Many physical health issues are preventable in adults with proper care and routine medical care.

Personal habits can also affect overall health. For example, lack of exercise, poor diet, sleeping too much or too little, drug and alcohol use, smoking, and not taking medicines as prescribed can harm health. When people take control of their health, they are more likely to work together with their doctors, therapists, and natural supports. It is important for natural supports to encourage a person with a behavioral health illness take a more active role in personal health. But first, the natural support will need to know what motivates the person. This is a key factor in helping the person on the journey to better health.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that culture can affect how a person reacts to both physical and mental illness. How a person with a physical or mental illness expresses their symptoms or copes with the symptoms may vary; some cultures may be stoic and quiet, and others may be more open and seek treatment frequently. Some people may have been taught that mental illness is not real and will seek medical treatment for symptoms that are really related to a mental illness. Culture can even influence coping skills and treatment choices. As a support giver, keeping the person's culture in mind may help you understand their motivation and choices. No matter what culture a person is, everyone experiences stress.

Let's take a closer look at stress and how it affects a person's overall health and well-being.

**SHORTNESS OF BREATH**

**ABDOMINAL PAIN**

**NUMBNESS**

**HEADACHE**

**INSOMNIA**

**CHEST PAIN**

**FATIGUE**

**BACK PAIN**

**DIZZINESS**

**SWELLING**

**STRESS**

## Stress and anger

Everyone feels stress at times. There is clear evidence that stress can affect overall health. Knowing how to deal with stress can help a person take the first step toward feeling better.

### What causes stress?

Stress is a natural body reaction to both good and bad situations. The body responds to stress by letting go of hormones. Stress can make the heart and breath rate go higher. Everyday tasks, grief, or some type of injury or bad experience can cause a stress reaction. Sometimes even simple things like running late for a doctor's visit can make people feel stressed and uneasy. However, long-lasting stress can harm overall health. Long-term stress can make people feel angry, nervous, or sad.

### How does stress affect health?

Stress affects the body in many ways. In 1989, a study on stress was done by two doctors. The study looked at more than 1,000 patients and the physical symptoms they reported to their family doctors. The cause of the physical symptoms could not be found in most cases. The doctors were able to find a real physical reason for the symptoms in only a small number of patients. The doctors believed the patients' symptoms were being caused by stress. After this study, the medical term "stress illness" was created. It's a term for real symptoms that are caused by stress.<sup>3</sup>

Long-term stress is hard on the body. It can lead to eating too much or not enough, alcohol or drug use, and not wanting to be around other people. Stress can cause the heart to pump faster, which can lead to high blood pressure. This puts people at risk for stroke or heart attack. Under stress, muscles tense and tighten, which can lead to headaches and chronic pain. Chronic pain can cause some people to stop being active. Long-term stress can also weaken the immune system. The immune system helps people fight colds, flus, viruses, and other infections. Not only does a weakened immune system make it easier for a person to get sick, it can make the illness last longer.

### How can natural supports help manage stress?

Here are some ways you can help someone with a behavioral health illness deal with stress:

- Ask them what is causing the stress and talk about ways to make things better.
- Encourage them to talk to their therapists or doctors about their feelings of stress.



- Suggest positive “self-talk.” Saying positive things out loud about dealing with a situation can make a person feel less worried and more encouraged. For example, saying things like “I can do this,” “I can get help with this,” or “I won’t let this bother me.”
- Help them find things that make them happy and support them in doing those things. Some good ideas include going for a walk or doing other physical activities, doing crafts, watching a funny TV show, calling a friend, or singing along with a favorite song.
- Suggest they get a notebook to write down their feelings and problems. Seeing their thoughts in writing can make them seem like less of an issue and help people handle them better. Some people write every day and some only a few times a week.
- Offer tips to help them relax. For example, have them sit still for 10 minutes and do deep breathing with their eyes closed. They can also listen to peaceful music for 10 minutes.

Lowering stress is needed for overall wellness. Wellness is a state of good physical and behavioral health. This is not just being free of illness, but also taking control of diet and exercise, and avoiding unhealthy habits like using tobacco, street drugs, and alcohol. No one can force a person to make changes. A person has to want to make changes in his or her life.

As a natural support, you can encourage healthy living. You can discuss some positive reasons the person may want to exercise or stop smoking.

### **How does anger affect health?**

Anger also needs to be managed. Anger can cause a person’s heart rate and blood pressure go up. Expressing anger in a healthy way will help a person vent the rage and feel more in control. There is less wear and tear on the body. But anger turned inward can cause the person to feel ill until their blood pressure returns to normal. As a support giver, helping the person manage their anger is the best support you can give.

How can natural supports help manage anger?

- Encourage the same relaxation tools noted above for stress.
- Encourage them to talk about what is making them angry, but make sure to avoid criticizing or fighting back.
- Allow them space if they need to cool down.
- Help them problem solve how they can avoid the trigger causing the anger.
- Encourage them to talk to their therapist about what causes the anger.



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**Wellness is a state  
of good physical and  
behavioral health.**

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**There is a strong connection between the mind and body.**

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## Pain and emotions

Pain can limit every physical activity and cause stress, anxiety, and depression. The mind and body work together and cannot be separated. Pain can make a person avoid social activities and friends and family members, because the pain is either unbearable or because they are feeling sad. Pain can even affect memory.

Sometimes it is difficult to talk about pain with a friend or family member because you may feel helpless. You can't fix their pain, but here are a few things you can do.

- Attend medical appointments so you can learn more about what is causing the pain.
- Find activities you both can do together, but know their limitations.
- Encourage the person to practice pain management plans recommended by their doctor.

There is a strong connection between the mind and body. What we do to our physical bodies often affects our minds. The following sections of the toolkit look at a few issues concerning lifestyle choices that need to be addressed on the path to wellness.

## Lifestyle choices

### Smoking

Cigarette smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States, causing more than 480,000 deaths each year. This is nearly one in five deaths.<sup>4</sup>

- Smoking causes about 90 percent (or 9 out of 10) of all lung cancer deaths in men and women, and about 80 percent of all deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Smoking causes stroke and coronary heart disease, which are among the leading causes of death in the United States.<sup>4</sup>
- There is a link between smoking and behavioral health illness. The nicotine in cigarettes is a powerful drug. That's why it is difficult for most people to quit smoking. A person can physically and emotionally feel a need for the nicotine.<sup>5</sup>
- Nicotine can improve a person's ability to focus, but it only lasts a few minutes. People may use tobacco to help deal with behavioral health symptoms or side effects of medicines. But after the nicotine wears off, the symptoms will come back.<sup>5</sup>
- Some people with anxiety say smoking calms their nerves. However, nicotine withdrawal can cause a panic attack. No matter the reason, a person has to find better ways to cope with stress.<sup>5</sup>

### **How can natural supports help?**

Finding a reason to quit smoking is the first step. People have to decide for themselves if they are ready to quit, but natural supports can help. Here's how:

- Offer clear messages about the risks of smoking and how it can affect moods and health. Long-term smokers may have a hard time quitting since they are addicted to the nicotine. But many of them have been able to quit.
- Help make a plan by choosing a stop date.
- Talk about the benefits of quitting.
- Suggest talking to a health care provider or a therapist who specializes in helping people stop smoking.

PerformCare offers free counseling for cigarette addiction. Nicotine replacement medicine is also available. For more information about smoking and how to get help, go to PerformCare's website at <http://pa.performcare.org/self-management-wellness/smoking-cessation/index.aspx> or call the Pennsylvania Tobacco Quitline toll free at **1-800-784-8669**.

### **Exercise**

The benefits of exercise are many, including stronger bodies and muscles, weight control, fewer colds and flus, better mood, and less stress. Regular exercise also lowers the risk of heart disease and diabetes.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes a person on behavioral health medicine feels tired and has no interest in exercising. Some behavioral health medicines can cause weight gain. Depression can make a person not want to be active.

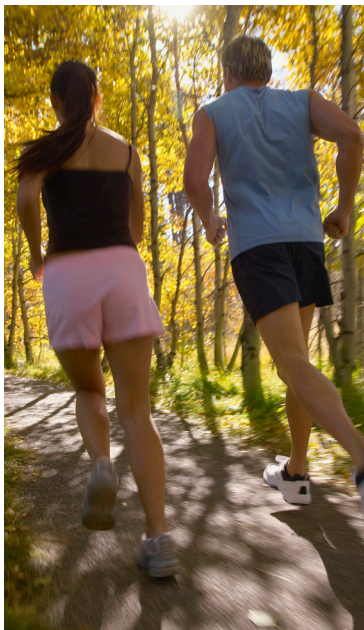
Getting started can be the hardest part of an exercise plan.

### **How can natural supports help?**

A natural support can encourage a person to take small steps to get more active. For example:

- Offer to join in the exercise.
- Find out what is stopping the person from moving and try to find solutions.
- Have the person talk to his or her health care provider to find out if there are physical limits and ways to work around those limits.
- Start with one or two goals and help the person reach those goals.
- Keep track of progress. Writing it down makes a person more likely to do the exercise. Encourage the person to walk just 10 minutes a day. Walking is a great physical activity. It does not require any equipment or going to a gym. On rainy or cold days, a person can walk at a mall. Slowly build up to 30 minutes a day.





- Once the walking goal is met, start adding 10 minutes of muscle firming. It can be done right in the person’s living room. Start out doing bicep curls without using weights in the hands. Then slowly add a light weight like a can of peas or even a purse. Chores around the house and yard, like vacuuming, dusting, and raking leaves, also count as exercise.

Natural supports can talk to people about why this is important and how they can meet at least one goal. Don’t forget to praise them when they achieve their goals.

For more information about exercises and helpful tips, visit [www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise](http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise).

### **Eating habits**

Healthy eating is about finding a balance. Oftentimes, people can still eat their favorite foods as long as they add some healthier foods and exercise. Healthy foods include:

- Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.
- Lean meats, poultry (e.g., chicken and turkey), fish, beans, eggs, and nuts.
- Foods low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, and salt (sodium).
- Foods with no added sugar.

Eating healthier isn’t always easy to do, especially if a person is feeling sad or anxious. Some people use food as a way to feel better. Studies show that some people don’t think about how much they are actually eating or drinking. They don’t realize how many calories they take in each day. Eating healthier means thinking about where most of our calories come from.

### **How can natural supports help?**

Here are a few helpful hints for natural supports:

- Start by having the person talk to a health care provider about diet choices. Sometimes a person doesn’t know what is best to eat, or if he or she should be on a special diet.
- Share examples of healthy menus.
- Show them how to fill smaller portions on the plate.
- Encourage them to drink low-calorie drinks.

Review these tips with the person at home when they are more relaxed and have time to ask questions. After you talk about the information, ask them to tell you the information back so you will know if he or she understands.



Here is a good website that helps a person make small steps:  
**[www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate)**.

This website has a page that looks at healthy eating on a budget:  
**[www.choosemyplate.gov/budget](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/budget)**.

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**Healthy eating is about  
finding a balance.**

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### **Drug and alcohol use**

Drug use has a direct effect on a person's body. In the short term, it can affect blood pressure, heart rate, appetite, and mood. In the long term it can lead to cancer, hepatitis, lung disease, and, of course, addiction. There can be negative outcomes on employment, housing, and relationships. Pregnant women who use drugs can interfere with the growth and development of their baby. Addiction is a complex disease, but people can recover with help. When someone has both a behavioral health issue and a drug or alcohol addiction, it is called a co-occurring disorder. When a behavioral health problem is not treated, alcohol or drug issues can worsen. Sadly, about half of the people living with severe behavioral health illness are also challenged by substance abuse.

### **How can natural supports help?**

As a natural support, you should know the signs of a co-occurring diagnosis, such as very high mood to very low mood, confused thinking, avoiding friends and social activities, or even thoughts of suicide.<sup>7</sup> If there is a problem, you can't force a person to change. But you can encourage them to go for help. Offer your support if he or she wants to see a counselor.



It helps if the support giver understands addiction so there is a general understanding of what the person is going through. There are support groups for friends and families who are caring for people who are addicted. The National Institute on Drug Abuse has many topics related to drug abuse and addiction that may be helpful: [www.drugabuse.gov/](http://www.drugabuse.gov/).

If a member of PerformCare would like to get treatment but is not sure where to go, call the PerformCare Member Services department at these toll-free numbers:

- Capital area (Cumberland-Perry, Dauphin, Lancaster, and Lebanon counties) at **1-888-722-8646**.
- Bedford-Somerset counties at **1-866-773-7891**.
- Franklin-Fulton counties at **1-866-773-7917**.

## Medicines

Medicines play an important role in treating behavioral health illness. Health care Providers know which medicines to prescribe to help with behavioral health illnesses. It is important to follow the prescriber's directions and tell the prescriber about side effects that cause problems. Medicines are meant to improve the quality of the person's life, not harm it. Side effects are not unusual for most medicines prescribed, and many side effects will go away once the body adjusts to the medicine. As a natural support, it is important to know when a person should get help for harmful side effects. Call the prescriber right away or go to the nearest emergency room if the person has any of these symptoms:

- Thoughts of wanting to die.
- Suicide attempts.
- Depression getting worse.
- Anxiety getting worse.
- Feeling very angry.
- Not being able to sit still.
- Feeling very nervous.
- Wanting to hurt or actually hurting someone.
- Wanting to do unusual things that put the person at risk.
- Any strange behavior or mood, like not talking or acting unusual.
- Physical issues, including:
  - Swelling of the eyes, face, or lips.
  - Blood pressure changes.
  - Difficulty urinating or frequent urination.
  - Feeling thirsty and taking in lots of fluids.

- Seizures.
- Change in vision.
- Difficulty walking

People taking certain psychiatric medicines need some blood tests. This is to make sure the person is getting the right amount of medicine. The doctor will write an order when a blood test needs to be taken.

A group of medicines called antipsychotics that treat psychotic disorders and schizophrenia can cause weight gain, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and high cholesterol. These medicines can help lessen behavioral health symptoms, so the doctor may think the benefit outweighs the risk. However, the doctor should check blood pressure and weight and order blood tests to monitor blood sugar and cholesterol levels regularly. Talk to the doctor if there are any concerns about medicines.

Here are some things to remember as a natural support:

- A person should never stop taking medicines on their own.
- Some people may need to stay on their medicines for years.
- Sometimes a person may want to stop taking medicines because they feel better, but the reason they feel better is because the medicines are working. Stopping the medicines without the advice of a doctor can make the symptoms worse.
- Some medicines need to be lowered slowly to avoid bad side effects. Encourage the person to always talk to his or her doctor before making any changes to medicines.
- Older adults also need to be watched carefully. Sometimes medicines can change memory. Some medicines can affect walking ability and put people at risk for falling.

Studies on women who are pregnant and need behavioral health medicine are limited. Studies do show that there may be risks to the baby depending on the medicine and the term of the pregnancy when the medicine is taken. Each woman's needs are different and the health care provider should talk about the benefits and risks of all medicines. For additional information about medicines, go to the National Institute of Mental Health website at **[www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/mental-health-medications/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/mental-health-medications/index.shtml)**.

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**It is important to follow the prescriber's directions and tell the prescriber about side effects that cause problems.**

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## Dental care

There are different reasons why some people don't get regular dental care. Some people are afraid of the dentist. Others forget their appointments or don't have transportation. But everyone needs to have regular dental care. In adults it is not uncommon to see tooth loss, bleeding gums, and abscesses due to poor dental hygiene and lack of routine dental visits. Besides the pain connected to these diseases, they can also affect appetite and cause weight loss. Dental care is typically covered by the physical health plan. Anyone can call the Member Services departments of their physical health plans to get information about dental care benefits.

As a natural support, you could encourage the person to call the physical health plan for help in understanding dental benefits and to find a dentist close to home. Here are a few suggestions to help a person with a behavioral health illness who is not getting regular dental care:

- Explain that going to the dentist is no different than going to a physical health care provider. Medical Assistance will pay for transportation if the person is set up through his or her county. Call PerformCare Member Services if you need help with this.
- Encourage the person to talk to the dentist about fears of getting dental care. Talking to the dentist on the phone before the visit may lessen the fear.
- Make the dentist visit on the same day as other activities. Set up reminders on the calendar or refrigerator to avoid missing the visit.
- Remind the person that routine mouth care is needed at least two times a day. This includes flossing daily.
- Encourage them to avoid sugary snacks, since they lead to tooth decay and gum problems.
- Remind them that smoking and substance abuse can lead to cavities, stained teeth, and even oral cancer.

Psychiatric medicines can cause dry mouth. Dry mouth is uncomfortable and can lead to gum disease. Here are a few tips to help with dry mouth:

- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candies.
- Avoid alcohol, soda, caffeine, and citrus drinks.
- Drink plenty of water to help the mouth stay moist.
- Use lip moisturizers as needed.
- Use over-the-counter artificial saliva as needed.





## General physical health

A number of studies have shown that people with a behavioral health illness are likely to have many physical health problems. They are at higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Gaps in health care and unhealthy lifestyle choices often lead to poor health. It is important that individuals with a behavioral health illness get the right preventive and routine care they need. Encouraging them to contact their physical health plan to learn about their covered services is the first step. Routine care — such as yearly medical check-ups, tests, eye exams, and immunizations (shots) — are important in preventing illness.

Both physical and behavioral health plans have Case Managers who work with people with chronic medical and behavioral issues. They can even work together with approval to create a care plan that will meet the person's needs and work toward removing barriers to care. Contact either plan and ask for a Case Manager to add more support and resources to getting healthy.



## Your role

Natural supports play a key role in helping people with a behavioral health illness go through the health care system. Natural supports help educate, assist, transport, and speak up for people with behavioral illness. Many studies show that natural supports can reduce stress, improve coping skills, and provide hope to people with behavioral health issues.

It is stressful being a support giver. Caring for someone with a mental health or substance use disorder can be exhausting and you will need time to recharge. Take a time-out for yourself and follow the same stress management techniques noted earlier.

It is important to remember that natural supports have their own needs. Support and education for natural supports are available to anyone through the local National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). To find your local NAMI chapter, visit <https://www.nami.org/Local-NAMI?state=PA>.

For more help, PerformCare has a Family and Consumer Affairs Manager. Contact Member Services for assistance.

## Bibliography

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- <sup>6</sup>. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website.  
**[www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity](http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity)**.
- <sup>7</sup>. National Association of Mental Illness website.  
**[www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions-Related-Conditions/Dual-Diagnosis](http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions-Related-Conditions/Dual-Diagnosis)**.

## Resources

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism website.  
**[www.niaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaa.nih.gov)**.

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence website.  
**[www.ncadd.org](http://www.ncadd.org)**.





Call Member Services at the toll-free number listed below for your county or area, and someone will answer your questions and help you with behavioral health services.

**Capital area**

Cumberland, Dauphin, Lancaster, Lebanon, and Perry counties

**1-888-722-8646**

**North Central region**

Bedford and Somerset counties

**1-866-773-7891**

Franklin and Fulton counties

**1-866-773-7917**

**Deaf or hard of hearing**

**1-800-654-5984 TTY or 711 PA Relay**

This handbook may be updated with additional text provided by the Department of Human Services or other information we feel is important for you to know.

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