

# Building Lifestyle Wellness Strategies for Individuals with Down Syndrome

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**February 11, 2026**



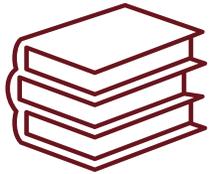
# NDSS Mission

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*NDSS is creating a world where individuals with  
Down syndrome thrive.*

# NDSS Core Pillars

NDSS supports and advocates for the Down syndrome community by focusing on four key pillars:



**Resources  
& Support**



**Research**



**Advocacy  
& Policy**



**Community  
Engagement**

# NDSS Events



[NDSS Gala & Auction](#)  
March 12, 2026  
New York City, NY



[Brighter Futures Conference](#)  
March 27 - 28, 2026  
Worcester, MA



[Racing For 3.21](#)  
March 21, 2026  
Virtual



[Down Syndrome Advocacy Conference](#)  
May 11-13, 2026  
Washington D.C.



[Run For 3.21](#)  
March 21, 2026  
West Coast



New York City Buddy Walk  
September 12, 2026  
New York City, NY

# NDSS' 321go! Program

- NDSS designed the [321go! program](#) to empower individuals with Down syndrome to improve their quality of life.
- The program includes resources that encourage healthy lifestyle choices in physical activity, balanced nutrition, and emotional wellness.
- Program Guide, Fitness Kit, Weekly Trackers, and more.



## 321go! Weekly Goal Tracker

|           | Physical Activity<br>Complete at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity every day. | Balanced Nutrition<br>Eat every day from each of these food groups: |            |        |         |       | Emotional Wellness<br>Practice at least one of these skills every day. |
|-----------|--|---|------------|--------|---------|-------|--|
|           |  | Fruit   | Vegetables | Grains | Protein | Dairy |  |
| Sunday    | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Monday    | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Tuesday   | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Wednesday | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Thursday  | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Friday    | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |
| Saturday  | ☆  | ☆☆  | ☆☆         | ☆☆     | ☆☆      | ☆☆    | ☆☆   |

A HEALTHY ME!

ndss

## 321go! A Year of Family Health

Staying healthy is easier when the whole family is involved. Try these monthly family goals to keep you focused on physical and mental health throughout the year!

| JANUARY  | FEBRUARY   | MARCH   |
|--|--|---|
| Set a family health goal for the year. Create a way to track your goal all year long! Health is easier when the goal is shared and the whole family is committed.                        | Make your meals "healthier" this month. Look to your family's favorite comfort foods by adding vegetables, using low-fat dairy, and using whole grains.            | "Track" your way to better health. Set a daily step goal for the family. Have a competition to see who takes the most steps this month. |
| APRIL  | MAY  | JUNE  |
| Get a Physical Fitness month! Aim for two days per week of meaningful exercise. Make it fun by going on a family bike ride together or having a family dance challenge.                  | Focus on fruits and vegetables all month in season! Visit a local farmers market or grocery store and have each member choose an item for the whole family to try. | Focus on family time! Spend time together each week. Have each member choose an item for the whole family to try.                       |
| AUGUST   | SEPTEMBER  |   |
| Get ready for your local Family Week! Think, try, or make as a family at least one new recipe. Find a walk route you'd like to try at <a href="http://backroads.org">backroads.org</a> . | Time to learn something new! Have each family member commit to learning something new this month for the family.   |   |
| NOVEMBER   | DECEMBER   |   |
| Be thankful all month long! Share one thing you're grateful for at dinner every night.   | Celebrate the month of the snow! Create a playlist with five of your favorite holiday songs. Dance together as a family until the "snow" melts.                    |   |

Goal is made possible with the support of Voya Care®

# Shelly Verma, DO, MSGPH, DipABLM

Dr. Shelly Verma is a Family Medicine physician and researcher who is Board Certified in Lifestyle Medicine. She currently cares for adults with Down syndrome at the Advocate Health Care Adult Down Syndrome Clinic in Park Ridge, IL. One of her clinical focuses is to collaborate with patients on creating long-lasting lifestyle changes to help reduce the effects of chronic diseases and to improve their quality of life. She loves cooking delicious healthy meals and her favorite physical activities are gardening and walking her dog.

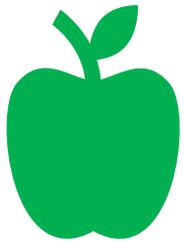




# Disclaimer:

- This presentation is intended for families, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and service providers of individuals with Down syndrome.
- The information in this presentation is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for a medical, psychiatric, mental health, or behavioral evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment plan by a qualified professional.
- I am unable to provide diagnosis or treatment recommendations specific to an individual. I recommend that you bring specific questions about an individual with Down syndrome to their medical and/or therapy professionals.

# Pillars of Lifestyle Medicine



Nutrition



Physical  
Activity



Restorative  
Sleep



Stress Management



Social  
Connection

# Goal Setting

# GOAL SETTING

## S



### SPECIFIC

Make the goal clear, detailed, and answer the questions what will you do and how will you do it?

## M



### MEASURABLE

The action in the goal needs to be something that can be measured like number of vegetables consumed, number of minutes exercised, or number of hours in bed.

## A



### ACHIEVABLE

The goal needs to be challenging enough to be inspiring and motivating but not too challenging. The goal should not feel overwhelming and out of reach.

## R



### RELEVANT

The goal needs to align with the person's priorities, values, vision of themselves in the future and their purpose or reason for being in this world.

## T



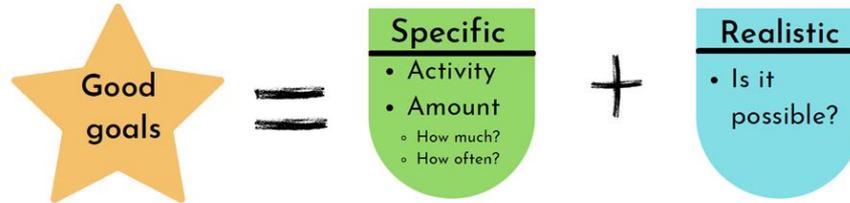
### TIME-BOUND

There needs to be a deadline or timeframe for the completion of the goal. This could be a day or a week.

# #GOALS

## Goals are....

Something you want to do. Goals take hard work.  
Goals are different for everyone.



## Meet Taylor!

Taylor is a 25 year old man with Down syndrome. He wants to be more active.



Let's help him make a GOOD goal.

## Taylor's goal is....

I will ride my bike around the park 3 times a week .  
(Say the activity you want to do) (Say the amount you will do the activity)





# Nutrition

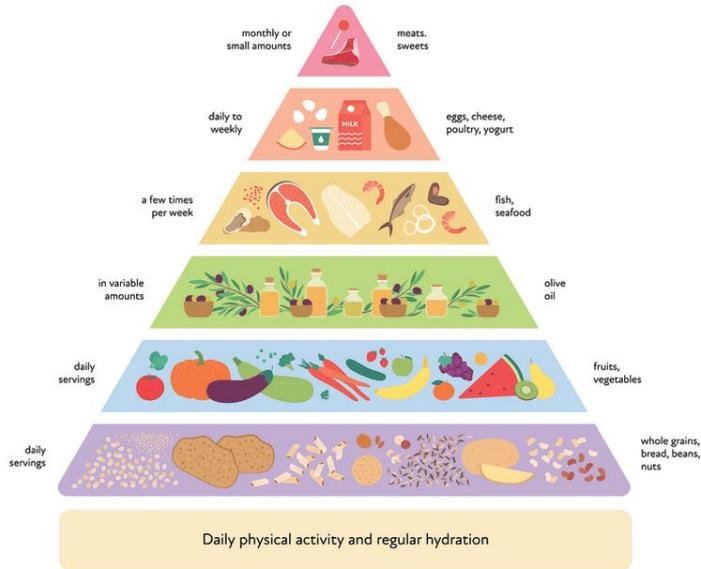
# A Healthy Diet Is Key for Good Health



## Healthy diet can:

- **Fuel our bodies** with nutrients to stay healthy and strong
- **Help our minds** by improving mood and brain function
- **Prevent chronic diseases** like diabetes and obesity
- **Protect from illness** by helping our immune systems stay strong
- **Aid in digestion** regular bowel movements

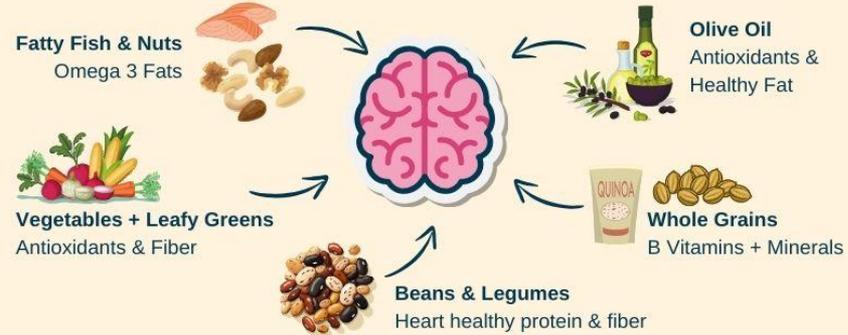
# The Mediterranean Diet



Source: Getty Images



## 5 Components of the MIND Diet



Source: <https://www.mowfs.org/mind-diet/>



Source: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/dash-diet-what-is-it-meal-plans-and-recipes>

## FOODS THAT FIGHT INFLAMMATION

Chronic inflammation has been linked to cancer, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, depression, and Alzheimer's. Fight inflammation with a healthy diet.

### ANTI-INFLAMMATION FOODS



### INFLAMMATION FOODS



Source: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/foods-that-fight-inflammation>

# Healthy Choices for Healthy Nutrition



## Guidelines for Healthy Nutrition

- 1. Whole food plant predominant diet:** vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lentils, beans, nuts & seeds
- 2. Eat fish 1-2x a week** and limit red meat
- 3. Use plant-based oils** (i.e olive, avocado, canola) instead of animal-based oils (lard, butter)
- 4. Limit ultra processed foods** like processed meats, refined carbs, junk food, fast food
- 5. Drink 64oz of water a day** limiting sugary drinks and alcohol

# MyPlate



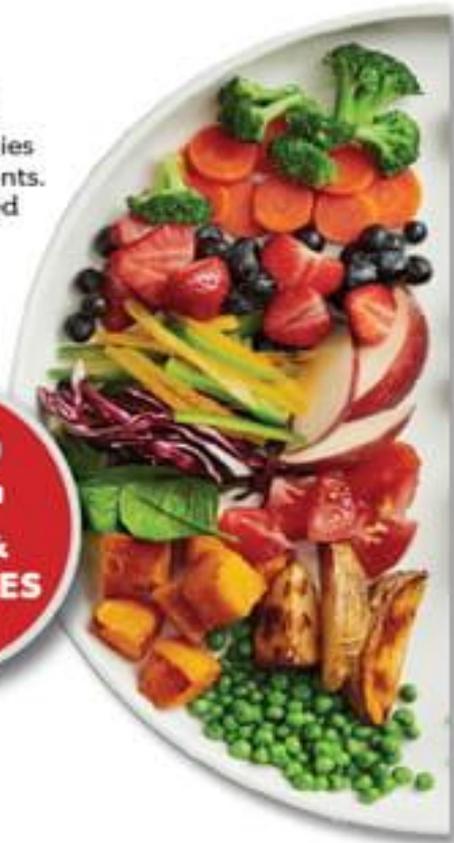
## THE DELICIOUSLY BALANCED PLATE

QUICK TIPS TO CREATE A NUTRITIOUS MEAL

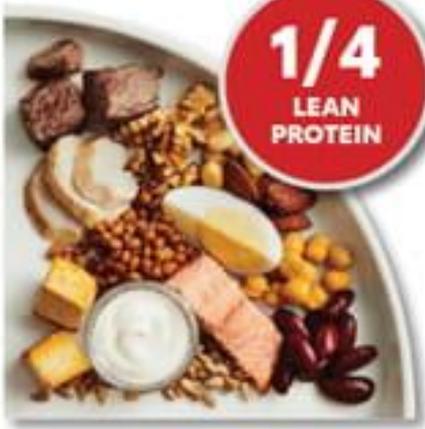
### Reach in the freezer

Frozen fruits and veggies are loaded with nutrients. They're often packaged when they're ripe and delicious.

Look for fruit or veggie blends to boost variety.



**1/2**  
FRUITS &  
VEGETABLES



**1/4**  
LEAN  
PROTEIN

### Choose power proteins

Proteins are your body's building blocks. They're in every cell of your body, not just your muscles.

Look for lean proteins you can enjoy any time of day, like eggs and beans.



**1/4**  
WHOLE  
GRAIN

### Grab ready-to-go grains

Many whole grains provide dietary fiber which can support a healthy heart and healthy digestion.

Look for grains you can enjoy in a jiffy like oats, corn tortillas and pre-cooked rice.





# Guide to Healthy Eating



## Everyday

- Lots of vitamins and nutrients
- Many are NATURALLY gluten free
- **EXAMPLES:** fruits, vegetables, grilled chicken, fish, whole grains



## Sometimes

- More sugar, salt, and fat
- Fewer vitamins and nutrients
- Decide with your family or caregiver how often is "sometimes"
- **EXAMPLES:** crackers, pretzels, oatmeal cookies, buttered popcorn, baked chips



## Special Occasions

- A lot of sugar, salt, and fat
- Very few vitamins and nutrients
- Decide with your family or caregiver how often is a "special occasion"
- **EXAMPLES:** soda/pop, donuts, candy, fried foods, fried chips





# WATER TRACKER

|                  |  |  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| <b>MONDAY</b>    |  |  |  |  |
| <b>TUESDAY</b>   |  |  |  |  |
| <b>WEDNESDAY</b> |  |  |  |  |
| <b>THURSDAY</b>  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>FRIDAY</b>    |  |  |  |  |
| <b>SATURDAY</b>  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>SUNDAY</b>    |  |  |  |  |

I will drink at least 4 bottles of water each day.

Each water bottle holds 16 ounces of water.

When I drink a bottle of water, I will put an X through the water bottle on the tracker.

### Example



I drank 1 water bottle!



# Physical Activity

# Physical Activity Helps the Mind & Body



## Physical activity can:

- **Strengthen our bodies** by keeping our heart healthy and bones strong
- **Help our minds** by reducing stress and improving brain function
- **Prevent chronic diseases** like diabetes and obesity
- **Increase energy levels** by strengthening our muscles and endurance
- **Improve restorative sleep** by falling asleep faster and deepening sleep

# American Heart Association Physical Activity Recommendations



## For Adults 18-64 years:

- At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise OR 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity spread throughout the week
- Strength training should be of moderate intensity for all major muscle groups 2 or more days a week

## For Children 6-17 years:

- At least 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity
- Include vigorous-intensity activity on at least 3 days per week
- Weight bearing activities on at least 3 days per week

**Increase Activity Gradually & Keep Moving Throughout the Day**

# Moderate vs Vigorous Intensity Aerobic Exercise



## Moderate-Intensity:

- Breathing hard
- Elevated heart rate
- **Able to talk but not able to sing**

## Vigorous-Intensity

- Breathing fast
- Elevated heart rate
- **Only say a few words without pausing for a breath**



# WAYS TO BE ACTIVE!



Play a sport.



Join Special Olympics.



Join Special Rec.



Go for a jog.



Do housework/chores.



Dance.



Do an exercise video.



Stretch



Use exercise equipment.



Walk your dog.



Take the stairs.



Lift weights.

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## Be active throughout the day!

Moving our bodies throughout the day can help us be healthy.

Be active in the morning



Go for a walk.



Do an exercise video.

Be active in the afternoon



Dance break!



Lift weights.

Be active in the evening



Stretch/do yoga.



Clean.

To be active throughout the day, I can...

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# Restorative Sleep



## Restorative sleep can:

- **Help our minds** by improving mood, memory, and the ability to learn
- **Helps our bodies** by keeping our heart healthy and regulating our metabolism
- **Protect from illness** by helping our immune systems stay strong
- **Prevent chronic diseases** like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity

# Sleep Apnea



- Sleep apnea is when someone stops and restarts breathing when they sleep
  - This can drop the amount of oxygen in the body which can impact the brain and body
- It is estimated that **78-100% of adults with Down syndrome may have sleep apnea**
- A sleep study is used to detect sleep apnea





Studies show that people without Down syndrome who have sleep apnea are at an increased risk for developing Alzheimer's disease.

Source:

Guay-Gagnon M, Vat S, Forget MF, Tremblay-Gravel M, Ducharme S, Nguyen QD, Desmarais P. Sleep apnea and the risk of dementia: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *J Sleep Res.* 2022 Oct;31(5):e13589. doi: 10.1111/jsr.13589. Epub 2022 Apr 2. PMID: 35366021.

# Tips for Better Sleep



## During the Day

- **Be physically active:** move at least every hour
- **Stay hydrated:** 64oz of water per day
- **Increase sunlight** exposure during the day
- **Limit caffeine:** no nighttime caffeine
- **No late-night snacking,** especially high-sodium foods
- **Avoid alcohol** within 3 hours of bedtime

# Tips for Better Sleep



## At Bedtime

- Bed is for sleep ONLY
- Minimize bedroom noise and lights
  - no TV, phones, or tablet in the bedroom
- Establish a bedtime routine
  - Hygiene: brushing teeth, washing face, using the bathroom, etc.
  - Relaxation: reading, stretching, praying, drinking chamomile tea, etc.
- Routine sleep schedule
  - Go to bed and wake up at the same time



## Ways to Get Good Sleep

I should wake up at the same time each day.



I should go to bed at the same time every night.



I should create a good sleep space.



TV



tablet



phone

I should have a bedtime routine.

**Hygiene**



brush teeth



wash face



go to bathroom

**Relaxation**



write in journal



pray



read



take deep  
breaths



stretch

Remembering this will help me sleep better and be healthy!





# Stress Management

# Stress Response in the Body



## Acute stress:

- A natural physiologic human response to address challenges and threats in our lives
- Everyone experiences this during their life
- Should resolve once the threat is gone

## Chronic stress:

- A consistent sense of feeling pressured and overwhelmed over a long period of time
- Can cause long-term effects to mental and physical health

# Chronic Stress Impacts the Mind and Body



Chronic stress can:

- **Worsen mental health** by increasing anxiety and depression
- **Worsen cognition** by decreasing memory and concentration
- **Disrupt sleep** by causing insomnia
- **Worsen health** by decreasing immune system and worsening chronic diseases

# Ways to improve Chronic Stress



## Care for the **BODY** while feeling stressed:

- Eat nutritious foods
- Be physically active
- Limit alcohol intake

## Care for the **MIND** while feeling stressed:

- Limit social media and news by setting time limits and taking breaks
- Spend time with others: trusted friends and family and participate in community events
- Utilize stress management techniques
- Prepare for life changes: transition of school, family changes, and moving



# Stress Management Techniques

# Stress Management Techniques



## 1. Identify Emotions

- Use even when someone does not feel stressed
- “I” Statements

**Emotions**

|                |              |             |             |               |
|----------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| sad<br>        | scared<br>   | mad<br>     | tired<br>   | surprised<br> |
| frustrated<br> | happy<br>    | excited<br> | sick<br>    | content<br>   |
| silly<br>      | laughing<br> | crying<br>  | smiling<br> | bored<br>     |

I      am     

      =     

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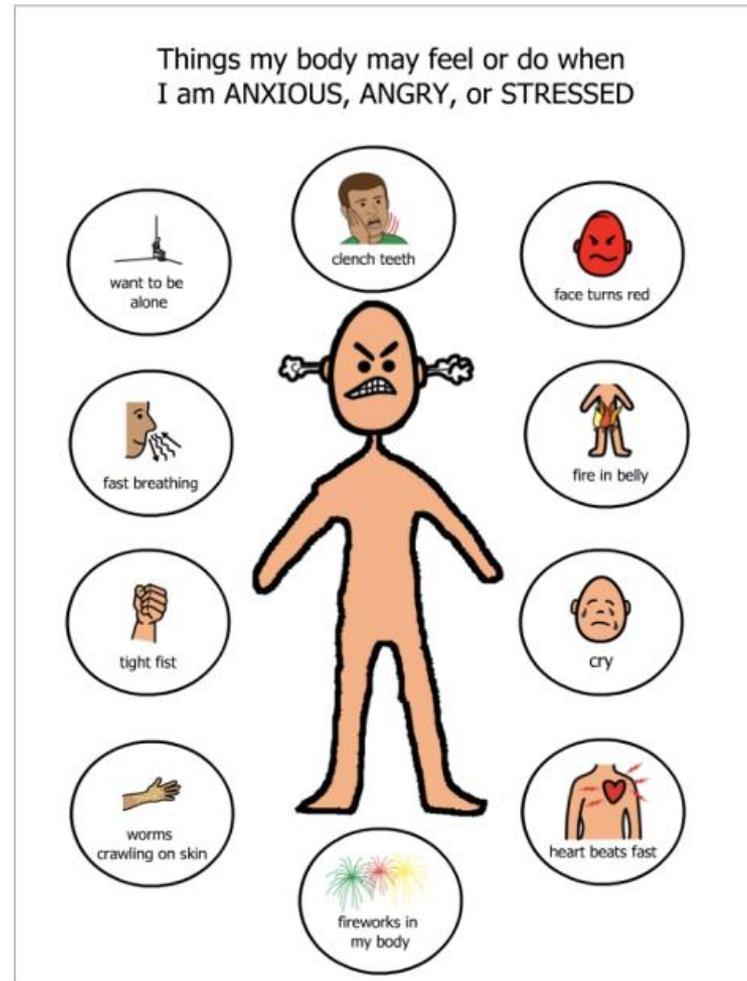
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# Stress Management



## 2. Identify what stress feels like

- How the body feels

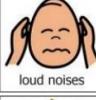
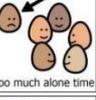
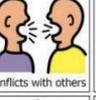
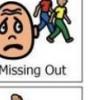
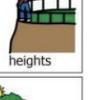
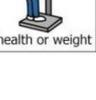


# Stress Management Techniques



## 3. Identify triggers

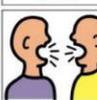
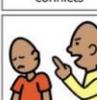
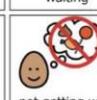
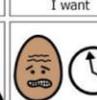
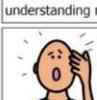
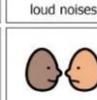
### My Stress Triggers

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <br>school               | <br>work                          | <br>meeting new people          | <br>too much to do  |
| <br>loud noises          | <br>too much alone time           | <br>conflicts with others       | <br>performing      |
| <br>trying something new | <br>being sick                    | <br>family/friend being sick    | <br>Missing Out     |
| <br>being late          | <br>watching the news            | <br>bad weather                | <br>heights        |
| <br>bathroom issues    | <br>not understanding something | <br>going to the doctor       | <br>changes       |
| <br>making choices     | <br>health or weight            | <br>thinking about the future | <br>relationships |

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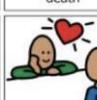
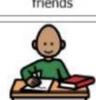
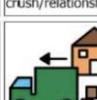
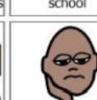
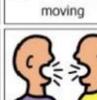
### My Anger Triggers

|   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| <br>chores                       | <br>change                       | <br>school                     | <br>work                 |
| <br>conflicts                    | <br>being told "no"              | <br>waiting                    | <br>getting hurt         |
| <br>getting in trouble           | <br>others telling me what to do | <br>not getting what I want    | <br>losing               |
| <br>others not understanding me | <br>loud noises                 | <br>being late                | <br>others being unkind |
| <br>making a mistake           | <br>others getting too close   | <br>someone taking my things | <br>not understanding  |

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### My Sadness Triggers

|   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| <br>news         | <br>sickness           | <br>being left out      | <br>change                        |
| <br>the past     | <br>growing older      | <br>death               | <br>injury                        |
| <br>friends      | <br>family             | <br>crush/relationships | <br>school                        |
| <br>work        | <br>others being mean | <br>moving             | <br>nothing to do                |
| <br>rainy days | <br>the future       | <br>conflicts         | <br>others not understanding me |

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# Stress Management Techniques



## 4. Identify calming strategies

### Tips for Dealing with Stress

If I feel stressed, I can...



Close my eyes



Color



Take deep breaths



Listen to music



Spend time outside



Play with a pet



Exercise



Talk to my family or friends



# Social Connection

# Social Connection is Essential to Health



## Social connection can:

- **Help our minds** by reducing anxiety and depression and slow cognitive decline
- **Increase emotional well-being** by improving empathy and self-confidence
- **Reduce the risk of chronic diseases** like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity
- **Increase longevity** by improving health and lowering inflammation in the body



# World Down Syndrome Day 2026



**Together Against Loneliness**



A study in Australia showed that **39% of people with intellectual disabilities** often feel lonely, compared to 14% of people without disabilities.

Source: Bishop GM, Llewellyn G, Kavanagh AM, Badland H, Bailie J, Stancliffe R, Emerson E, Fortune N, Aitken Z. Disability-related inequalities in the prevalence of loneliness across the lifespan: trends from Australia, 2003 to 2020. BMC Public Health. 2024 Feb 27;24(1):621. doi: 10.1186/s12889-024-17936-w. PMID: 38413942; PMCID: PMC10898179.



In the United States 30% of adults reporting feeling lonely in the past week.

Evidence suggests that loneliness is higher in adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, **affecting nearly 50% of this population.**

Source:

American Psychiatric Association. (2024, January 30). New APA poll: One in three Americans feels lonely every week. <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/new-apa-poll-one-in-three-americans-feels-lonely-e>

Jeffrey E Stokes, Danielle A Waldron, Elisabeth J Stam, Loneliness Among Adults Aging With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: The Importance of Living Situation, *The Gerontologist*, Volume 65, Issue 4, April 2025, gnaf031, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaf031>

# Empathy is a Superpower!



**Empathy radar** can be beneficial in developing and maintaining relationships with family, friends, classmates, co-workers, and other people that individuals with Down syndrome interact with throughout their lives.

Source: Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome: A Guide to Emotional and Behavioral Strengths and Challenges (2nd Edition)

# Belonging and Inclusion



## Building Community:

- Down syndrome organizations
- Next Chapter Book Club
- Theater program
- Art program
- Special Olympics
- Special recreation associations
- Best Buddies (Best Buddies Citizens, eBuddies)
- Religious organizations
- Jobs
- Volunteering



Adult Down Syndrome Clinic  
Art Group

# Final Thoughts

- Create SMART goals: realistic achievable goals that are best for YOU
- Being healthy is a journey and will change based on needs and age
- Be proud of yourself, any positive change will make a difference
- Working towards a healthy lifestyle is not only for an individual but includes the entire family, support one another

# Resources

## Resource Library | All Resources



**People with  
Down Syndrome**



**Families  
& Caregivers**



**Health Care  
Professionals**



**Events, Classes  
& Programs**

[See the Schedule](#)



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<https://adsresources.advocatehealth.com/>

# Videos on the ADSC Resource Library



Physical Activity



Eating at Buffets



Eating Pace



Serving Sizes



Food Groups



Using CPAP

# Mental Wellness book

SECOND EDITION

## Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome

A Guide to Emotional and Behavioral  
Strengths and Challenges

Dennis McGuire, PhD & Brian Chicoine, MD

### BIENESTAR MENTAL EN LOS ADULTOS CON SÍNDROME DE DOWN

Una guía para comprender y evaluar sus cualidades y  
problemas emocionales y conductuales

Segunda edición

Dennis McGuire, Ph.D. & Brian Chicoine, M.D.



Available as  
a free PDF in  
English and  
Spanish





**FOOD AS MEDICINE**  
**JUMPSTART**

 AMERICAN COLLEGE OF  
Lifestyle Medicine



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Thank You!

# QUESTIONS?



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