

Health Factors That Contribute to Dysregulated Behavior

Many factors can contribute to dysregulated behavior including trauma experiences, environmental changes, communication challenges, poor interoception, unpredictable schedules, and more. However, many health and medical factors can also contribute to emotional dysregulation and create behavior concerns. Supports, interventions, and treatment for health and medical conditions are important proactive supports for emotional regulation and learning.

Use this document to review health and medical factors that a youth may experience that can be associated with dysregulated behaviors. The Health Considerations and the Planning Next Steps sections in this document can assist in navigating the topic of health factors that impact dysregulation. The Resource section provides a place to begin when seeking additional information.

Consider the following steps when using the Health Factors that Contribute to Dysregulated Behavior Tool.

1. *Review the health considerations included below.*
2. *Select the health considerations that you are interested in learning more about.*
3. *Identify the health considerations that may be impacting a youth you support.*
4. *Identify resources that you wish to explore that address the health considerations selected.*

Health Considerations

Pain. Pain sensation can differ greatly from person to person. What is painful to one person may not be to another. Pain perception for [people that are neurodiverse](#) may be quite different than for others. Survey the body and consider what may be causing pain or discomfort.

[Headaches](#)/Sinus pressure

[Mouth/Tooth pain](#)

Ear Pressure/[Ear Infection](#)

[Throat](#)

[Gastroesophageal Reflux](#)

[Stomach](#)

[Joints and Muscles](#)

[Skin](#)

Illness. Most [illnesses](#) stress the body with an immune system response which can impact behavior and emotional regulation.

Gastrointestinal Issues/Constipation. [Gastrointestinal issues](#) can be very dysregulating with constipation being a frequently reported condition for youth with complex needs.

Vision Difficulties. [Poor vision](#) may be caused by a number of conditions. Poor acuity and light sensitivity are both stressors that contribute to dysregulation. Youth may be unaware of their impaired vision and therefore do not seek accommodations or vision correction.

Hearing Difficulties. Difficulty hearing and understanding as well as sensitivity to noise or types of sounds can be dysregulating. [Developmental hearing loss](#) can make it more difficult for a child to develop skills to understand the emotional behavior of others.

Allergies. [Allergic conditions](#) can cause physical discomfort as well as increased [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and difficulty managing stress.

Medication Side Effects. Some medications can cause emotional dysregulation as a side effect, including mood and behavioral changes. Some medications prescribed for [ADHD](#) can increase dysregulation. [SSRIs](#) (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) are often prescribed to treat depression, but side effects can also cause anxiety or nervousness. Withdrawal from SSRIs can cause anxiety, irritability, and agitation.

Inadequate Nutrition. A poor diet can negatively impact mood and the ability to remain emotionally regulated. [Nutrient deficiencies](#) that have been linked to dysregulation and mood disturbance include B Vitamins (B12, B6, Folate), Vitamin D, Iron, Omega-3 Fatty Acids, Zinc, and Magnesium.

Insufficient Sleep. [Sleep](#) is a factor often overlooked. Too little sleep, poor quality sleep, and disrupted sleep patterns can negatively impact emotional stability and regulation.

Lacking Physical Activity. [Exercise](#) promotes the release of endorphins which improves mood, reduces stress, and helps regulate emotions.

Menstrual Cycle. Changes in hormones and neurotransmitters during the menstrual cycle can result in changing emotions and feelings of anxiety or sadness. Physical discomfort and pain during the menstrual cycle, or [dysmenorrhea](#), may also impact emotional regulation.

Hunger/Thirst. Some people become agitated and dysregulated when they are [hungry](#) or thirsty. Many may not be aware of a growing need to eat and drink or may not connect their emotional dysregulation to hunger or thirst.

Overheating. When the heat rises, hormones and neurotransmitters can be affected and can cause difficulties in regulating mood and emotions and can increase impulsivity. [Overheating](#) should be a consideration especially during summer months.

Seizures. Seizures can disrupt emotional regulation, leading to mood changes, anxiety, depression, or even aggression. Some seizures can manifest as intense anger or fear, without other typical seizure features. People with epilepsy may experience difficulties in recognizing and processing emotional cues. The [Epilepsy Foundation](#) offers more information.

Lead Exposure. [Lead exposure](#) can lead to difficulties with emotional awareness, impulse control, and understanding how one is feeling.

Poor Interoception. [Interoception](#) is the ability to perceive and interpret internal bodily sensations, such as hunger, thirst, pain, and emotions. Poor interoception occurs when individuals have difficulty recognizing or responding to these signals.

Planning Next Steps

1. Select the health factors from the previous list that interest you most in learning about their impact on health and wellness for youth with complex needs.
2. Identify health factors that you believe could be affecting a youth you support, teach, or live with, and that may require more support. Describe the indicators that have raised your concerns.
3. Using the list below, identify resources that you wish to explore to learn more about health factors and to enhance the health and wellness of youth with complex needs.

Resources

Learn more about supporting youth with IDD and behavioral health needs with these resources and tools.

- [Navigation Essentials Toolkits](#). Videos, resources, and tools for anyone that supports the care and education of youth with complex needs. Learn about factors that contribute to dysregulation and recommended supports in *Medical: Health and Wellness*, *Considerations for Intervention and Support*, *Sensory: A Focus on Interoception* and other toolkits.
- [Healthy Body Toolkit](#). Information for boys and girls with disabilities as they approach puberty and adolescence.
- [Kid's Health](#). Information and resources on children's health, behavior, and growth through the teen years. Sections for parents/caregivers, educators, and youth. Includes information on many health practices.
- [Akron Children's Hospital Kids Health Topics](#). Information and resources for families about children and youth health and wellness. The search function and topic categories assist in locating information.
- [Ohio Minds Matter](#). Educational resources for healthcare providers, families, and other stakeholders that support a coordinated, family-centric behavioral health system of care. Includes information on [medications](#), [disorders and conditions](#), and more.
- [The New Reality - Interpreting Behavior of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities](#). Julie Gentile, MD, MBA reviews the biopsychosocial model as a lens to better understand the root cause of behavior in people with IDD. This model can be used to surface important information that impacts the development of appropriate treatment and intervention plans.
- [Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Health and Development Resources](#). This set of tools and resources is designed to assist teams to support individuals with IDD to learn about healthy practices and medical procedures. It includes resources about blood draws, medical appointments, health, puberty and sexuality, sleep, and more.