

SAFE AND STABLE HOUSING

Housing is more than just protection from the outdoor elements. Safe and stable housing is a basic need, and it can be difficult or impossible to care for your mental health if that need is not met.



STABLE HOUSING

Stable (or secure) housing means that you aren't living in uncertainty about your housing situation and generally have a choice over when to move. The opposite of this – housing instability – can mean you're facing a number of different challenges, like struggling to pay rent, overcrowding in shelters, moving frequently, or spending most of your income on housing.

If you face the possibility of homelessness or move spaces frequently, the stress and anxiety of those situations can wear on you after a while, especially if you're moving without much notice. Frequent moves also make it hard to develop routines and connections to your local community, which are beneficial for mental health. For many people, not having a true "home base" to consistently return to can leave them feeling distressed, disconnected, or isolated.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I'M EXPERIENCING UNSTABLE HOUSING?

Seek support in finding housing. Each state has information on identifying services. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has information on local homelessness assistance and help with preventing housing loss. Their portal, hud.gov, can direct you to state-specific resources. If you meet low-income guidelines, you might qualify to live in different types of public housing. You can locate your housing authority at affordablehousing.com.

Build your connection to self. It sounds cliché, but feeling at home in your mind can help you cope when your housing is uncertain. Having healthy routines that you can carry out almost anywhere (like deep breathing every morning or practicing gratitude before going to sleep) is a great way to establish that. Practices of mindfulness in challenging situations can help you handle what is causing stress and improve your emotional state.¹

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Only about 15% of adults in the U.S. live alone – meaning most people share living space with family members, roommates, or others. Small disagreements among household members are totally normal, but being scared of the people you live with might mean you're in a problematic or abusive situation. The location of your housing can also play a role if you are feeling unsafe. Living in an unsafe neighborhood not only affects physical safety but can also impact mental health. Neighborhoods are places where you should be able to build a social network – places to help mental health thrive. An unsafe neighborhood can limit your ability to connect with others and find community.

Experiencing – or even witnessing – physical, emotional, or psychological abuse is traumatic. It can have long-lasting effects on your mental health and lead to conditions like depression, anxiety, or PTSD.² New research shows that women who have experienced domestic abuse have three times the risk of developing a mental health condition compared with those who have not.³ Experiencing abuse is never your fault.

You deserve to feel safe.



WHAT CAN I DO IF I FEEL UNSAFE?

Tell someone you trust. Feeling unsafe at home is a big burden to carry alone – sharing with someone can help you feel like you have a safety net. Learn more about home safety at bit.ly/3F3vslc.

Find another place to feel like home. Get familiar with a community center, cafe, place of worship, or friend's home so that you have a place of comfort. If you are scared for your safety or experiencing abuse, it is important to remove yourself from the situation. You can call the domestic violence hotline at 800-799-7233 or visit domesticshelters.org/help to locate a shelter near you. Call 911 if you are in immediate danger and cannot remove yourself from your home to seek help.

POTENTIAL SAFETY HAZARDS

Your home doesn't need to be perfectly tidy, but some house basics are essential for your safety. Your living space shouldn't have the potential to cause health issues – exposure to things like mold, toxic chemicals, and uncleaned animal mess puts you at risk of physical and mental health challenges.⁴ A hoarding condition can create such circumstances that put everyone living within the home at risk.

It's also important to think through safe storage of potential dangers like weapons and addictive substances, especially if you or someone in the home has thoughts of suicide. Over half of the nation's deaths by suicide involve a firearm, and safe storage (and proactive policies) can help lower this rate.^{5,6} If you're struggling to control your substance use, you may want to get rid of those substances in your home altogether to avoid temptation. If they belong to someone else, you could ask them to keep drug(s) or alcohol out of sight or locked away.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT SAFETY HAZARDS?

Determine who is responsible for fixing housing-related hazards. They may be your responsibility or the responsibility of a landlord, building owner, or town/municipality.

Have a professional take care of safety hazards. Once you've identified who is responsible for fixing hazards, make sure a qualified professional is there to check it out or make repairs.

Add friction between you and dangerous objects and/or substances. This could look like removing items from your home, locking them up so they are harder to access, or putting other safeguards in place to keep you from engaging in the behavior you want to change. Making it harder to act on risky decisions is powerful harm reduction.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

Having safe, stable, and healthy home conditions set the foundation for achieving and maintaining good mental health.

If you're taking steps to improve your housing situation but are still struggling with your mental health, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition – take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.

