OCTOBER WELLNESS SERIES · PART 1 OF 3

Checking In: Why a Mental Health Screening Is a Smart First Step

For Mental Illness Awareness Week and National Depression Screening Day

By Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC | Monday, October 5, 2026

We check our blood pressure, schedule our physicals, and get our teeth cleaned. But how often do we pause to check on our mental health?

Mental Illness Awareness Week, observed October 4 through 10 is NAMI's advocacy to address mental health issues. Led Congress to establish it in 1990, during the first full week of October. October 8, we also mark **National Depression Screening Day**, created to encourage free, anonymous mental health screenings. Together, these observances carry a simple message: **checking in on your mental health is as normal and as important as checking in on your physical health.**

Why Check In at All?

Mental health conditions are common, and many people live with symptoms for a long time before seeking help. Some don't recognize what they're feeling. Others worry about stigma, or assume they should be able to handle it alone.

In more than 25 years of counseling, I've seen again and again that **earlier is easier.** When we notice changes early, small adjustments and timely support can make a real difference before struggles grow into crises. That is the heart of prevention.

What a Screening Is, and Isn't

A mental health screening is a short set of questions about how you've been feeling, sleeping, thinking, and functioning, usually over the past two weeks. It is:

- **Private and quick.** Most online screenings take five minutes or less.
- **A starting point.** Results help you understand whether it may be helpful to talk with a professional.
- **Not a diagnosis.** Only a qualified health care provider can diagnose a mental health condition.

Free, anonymous screening tools are available through Mental Health America at mhascreening.org, covering depression, anxiety, and more. You can also ask your primary care provider. Many offices now include mood questions in routine visits.

Signs It May Be Time to Check In

Consider a screening, or a conversation with a professional, if over the past few weeks you've noticed:

- *Feeling sad, empty, or hopeless most days*
- *Losing interest in things you usually enjoy*
- *Sleeping much more or much less than usual*
- *Changes in appetite or weight*
- *Feeling constantly worried, on edge, or overwhelmed*
- *Trouble concentrating or making decisions*
- *Pulling away from friends, family, or activities*
- *Using alcohol or other substances to cope*

A Simple Weekly Check-In

Not every check-in needs a formal screening. A few honest questions, asked regularly, can help you notice patterns:

1. **How has my mood been this week?**
2. **How am I sleeping and eating?**
3. **Do I feel connected to people I care about?**
4. **Am I still enjoying things I usually like?**
5. **What helped me this week, and what made things harder?**

Our free **My Mental Health Check-In** handout turns these questions into a simple weekly tracker you can keep for yourself.

What to Do With What You Learn

- **If things look steady,** keep doing what helps: sleep, movement, connection, and rest.
- **If you notice a few struggles,** choose one small change to try this week, and check in again.
- **If several areas are low for two weeks or more,** talk with your doctor, a counselor, or your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- **If you ever feel hopeless or have thoughts of harming yourself,** reach out right away: call or text 988.

Checking In on Others

Mental Illness Awareness Week is also about community. If someone you care about seems different lately, a simple check-in can open a door:

- "I've noticed you seem a little down lately. How are you really doing?"
- "You don't have to have it all figured out. I'm here to listen."
- "Would it help if I sat with you while you made a call or an appointment?"

Your Takeaway This Month

Before October 8, take five minutes for yourself: complete a free online screening or the My Mental Health Check-In handout. Then check in with one person you care about.

> **If you're in crisis or having thoughts of harming yourself:** call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or call 911.

> **Another October, 2026 Handout:** Real Voices, Real Change, about World Mental Health Day and why lived experience matters.

About the Author

Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC, is a Licensed Board Certified Professional Counselor with more than 25 years of experience and the founder of KLF-Insights. She offers online counseling, life coaching, executive coaching, and consulting for individuals, couples, and organizations, with a focus on prevention and wellness.

Need support this season? KLF-Insights offers online counseling and coaching sessions. Schedule a session at [insert contact link]. Many employers also offer free, confidential counseling through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP); check with your HR department.

In crisis? If you are thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or call 911.

This article is for educational and wellness purposes and is not a substitute for individual counseling, diagnosis, or treatment.