

Supporting teen mental health

The teenage years can be an awkward and frustrating time as young adults begin to discover who they are and who they want to be. From navigating hormones to high school to relationships, the rapid changes teenagers experience can also create turbulent emotions. Remote learning and isolation during the pandemic have increased adolescent anxiety and depression across the globe. Staying aware of your teen's wellbeing can help you recognize early signs of mental health concerns and offer ways to help them cope.

Recognize warning signs

Nearly half of all mental health conditions start by the age of 14. Each one presents its own warning signs and symptoms. For a teenager, these can look different than in adults. Some common behaviors that signal reason for concern include:

- Extreme mood swings
- Aggression or acting out
- Poor personal hygiene
- Change in eating patterns, excessive weight loss or weight gain
- Lack of energy or motivation
- Oversleeping or insomnia
- Declining academics
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Sudden loss of interest in activities and hobbies
- Chronically worried or anxious
- Self-medication
- Actions of self-harm, including cutting, picking, burning, biting or hair pulling

How you can help

While some irritability and oversleeping come as a natural part of puberty, if these behaviors begin affecting you or your teenager's everyday activities you might consider reaching out for help. As teenagers grapple with a multitude of physical and emotional changes, you can support them with some of the tips below.

- **Engage.** Engage with your teenager often and regularly. It might seem tempting to let a moody teen keep to themselves, but a teenager's silence can mask issues with their emotional health. If you notice any warning signs, be gentle but persistent in reaching out and asking how they are feeling. Building a strong relationship with the teenager in your life helps both of you feel more connected and trusting.
- **Start with understanding, even when you don't understand.** Regardless of family closeness, you and your teenager live in different realities. No matter how hard it might be, make the goal of interactions with your teen to share understanding and empathy, even if you don't fully agree or even quite comprehend what they're talking about. Seek to learn what challenges your teen is facing without minimizing or discounting their experiences.
- **If you ask, listen.** Encourage your teen to share their feelings and then listen attentively. Note which situations and opportunities make it easier for the two of you talk freely, such as in the car or late at night. If your teenager has a difficult time expressing themselves, encourage them to write or draw their emotions in their own way.
- **Set an example.** Be aware of your stress levels and take care of your own mental health. By working through your stress and emotions, your teen will find it easier to follow suit. Set an example for overall wellbeing by exercising regularly and eating healthily and encourage them to join you.
- **Develop a routine.** Adolescence is a formative time for establishing healthy habits and sleep patterns, so make sure your teen stays on a schedule. Break up the routine with fun activities in between school, homework, work and sleep.

- **Encourage.** For teens with low motivation, energy or symptoms of depression, finding enjoyable activities can help improve their quality of life. Encourage teens to make time for relaxation by reading, listening to music or trying a new hobby.
- **Share resources.** Let your teen know they can use to speak with someone else, such as a trusted adult, school personnel or a mental health professional, if they have concerns. Maintain open communication but don't pry or require that they share those discussions.

Suicidal thoughts

According to the World Health Organization, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19-year-olds. Feelings of depression, fear, isolation, anxiety or other emotional, financial or physical stressors can increase the risk of suicide. Reaching out to others or having your teenager participate in counseling through your SupportLinc program can help with suicidal thoughts and behaviors. If your loved ones or their friends are struggling with suicidal thoughts, reach out for help immediately.

Get immediate help

- Call 911
- [Disaster Distress Helpline](#): call or text 1-800-985-5990 (press 2 for Spanish)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for English, 1-888-628-9454 for Spanish, or [Lifeline Crisis Chat](#).

Source: <https://med.uth.edu/psychiatry/2020/09/04/teen-mental-health-and-covid-a-letter-for-parents/> <https://sbtreatment.com/blog/10-signs-your-teen-mental-illness/>