

Supporting Your Teen's Mental Health

A Guide for Parents



It would be great if all teens could feel happy, supported, and successful all of the time. But, of course, this isn't possible. They'll face things that get them down, or that make them feel anxious and scared. And that's ok. Adversity is a part of life—and it's what often provides opportunities for growth.

Whether your teen is generally happy and healthy or struggling with their mental health, the information in this booklet will help you better understand what mental health is, why it's important for your teen to take care of their mental health, and what you can do to help and support your child.



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Mental Health Is Important



Mental health refers to one's social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Although your child's mental health can be impacted by things neither of you can control, there are things you and your child can do to help your teen maintain their mental health and well-being.

Why is mental health important?

Mental health affects day-to-day functioning

When your teen is feeling calm, happy, and confident, they get more joy out of life. On the other hand, if your teen is feeling sad, angry, or anxious, day-to-day life can be a struggle.

Mental health affects relationships

Your teen's relationships with family, friends, and classmates are all impacted by how they feel. If they're unhappy, upset, or feeling down, building and maintaining relationships is much more difficult.

Mental health affects success

Whether it's success in school, a career, or achieving a goal, your teen is more likely to succeed when they're in a good place mentally.

Be open and aware

Encourage your child to talk about how they feel, especially if something seems to be bothering them. Remember, young people often do not come to their parents when something is wrong. This is why it's so important to regularly check in with your teen to see how things are going.

Taking Care of Mental Health

Just like with physical health, maintaining mental health every day in small ways is important for your child's well-being.

Make mental health care a priority in your home by encouraging your teen to do the following.

Get enough sleep

The amount of sleep we get impacts our mood. Make sure your teen goes to bed at a regular time each night and gets eight hours of sleep.



Exercise

The body releases mood-improving chemicals when we exercise. Look for ways to integrate physical activity into your family's daily routine.

Eat healthy

Diet has a big impact on mental health. Research shows that nutrients in foods like fish, fruits, and vegetables can improve brain function—and that a poor diet can negatively impact mood and memory.

Reflect

Encourage your teen to put their phone away, turn off the TV, and take some time every day to rest, relax, and reflect. You might suggest that your teen try writing their thoughts in a journal.

Be grateful

Encourage your teen to take note of the things they are thankful for in their everyday life, and to regularly reflect on each of them.

Talk about it

Talking about your feelings is a great way to process them. Talk to your teen about your feelings, and encourage them to do the same. Establishing open communication with your child will encourage them to come to you if they need help.

Helping Your Teen Deal with Stress



Stress is the body's reaction to change, demands, or difficult situations. Stress is a part of everyday life, but too much stress can have a negative impact on your teen's life.

How you can help

Help your teen confront their stressors

Together with your teen, make a list of the things that are stressing them out, and determine how each can be dealt with. This may mean eliminating an activity or reducing their responsibilities. Having a plan will help your teen feel more empowered and less overwhelmed.

Encourage relaxing activities

Make sure your teen has time for the things they find relaxing and fun, such as listening to music, going for a walk, playing with a pet, or spending time in nature. If you notice your teen is stressed, encourage them to take the time to do something you know they enjoy.

Be a good role model

Your life is probably pretty stressful sometimes as well. Don't hide your stress from your teen; show them how to deal with stress in healthy ways. *"I am really stressed about a big project at work right now, but I've been going for walks on my lunch break and I feel much better afterward."*

Listen

The problems of teenagers can sometimes seem like minor issues to adults, but they often don't feel like minor issues to teens. Be a good listener, don't judge, and be there if your teen needs to vent, or just talk.

Helping Your Teen Deal with Anger

Everyone gets angry from time to time. But if your teen's anger is affecting their relationships and quality of life, they may need help managing their anger.

Here's what you can do.

When your teen is angry...

Don't match anger with anger

When your teen is upset, it can escalate into a shouting match—fast. Remain calm, take several deep breaths, and remember that your teen is still learning how to regulate their emotions.

Talk about it

Bottling up anger can make things worse. If your teen is angry about something, encourage them to talk about it, but don't push.

Work through it

If your teen doesn't want to talk about what's making them angry (which is normal), encourage them to try one of the following healthy anger-management strategies:

- ▶ Do something physical, like exercising or kicking a soccer ball.
- ▶ Breathe. Encourage your teen to close their eyes, imagine a relaxing scene, and breathe deeply.
- ▶ Sometimes it can be helpful to know what makes your teen angry, as well as how often it happens. Encourage them to keep track of these triggers—this can help determine if there are underlying issues that need to be addressed.

Get support

If your teen's anger is too much for either of you to handle, talk to a counselor or your child's doctor.



Understanding Depression



We all go through times when we feel down or unhappy. For most of us, these periods are temporary and we soon feel better.

People who suffer from depression, however, have constant, overwhelming feelings of sadness and hopelessness. These feelings affect their schoolwork, relationships, and overall well-being.

Symptoms of depression

Teens are often moody and withdrawn, but consistently low moods, as well as the following symptoms, warrant a conversation with your teen about their mental well-being:

- ▶ persistent negative mood
- ▶ irritability or anger
- ▶ loss of interest in activities
- ▶ sleeping too little or too much
- ▶ lack of energy
- ▶ trouble concentrating
- ▶ problems at school
- ▶ eating too much or too little

What causes depression?

Depression is caused by a number of things, including illness, genetics, substance abuse, stressful life events, and an imbalance of brain chemicals. Individuals with depression can't just snap out of it. People suffering from depression have nothing to be embarrassed about or to feel ashamed of. If you suspect your teen is suffering from depression, assure them that it isn't their fault and that help is available.

Helping your teen cope with depression

Depression can be very difficult to live with, which means that people suffering from depression usually need help to cope with it. *If your teen is depressed or appears depressed, it's important to help and support them in any way you can.*

Listen, don't lecture

Don't criticize, pass judgment, or tell them to "snap out of it." Be there when your teen wants to talk and keep the lines of communication as open as possible. Set time aside each day to talk to your teen without distractions. This will help your teen trust that they can talk to you about anything—and that you will listen.

Encourage healthy living

Encourage your teen to get enough sleep, eat healthy, and exercise often. Studies show there is a definite link between sleep (quantity and quality), diet, and mood. Physical activity can also lift your teen's spirits and make them feel better, even if it's just going for a walk.

Encourage your teen to help someone else

Helping others can make your teen feel good about themselves and curb feelings of depression. Help them look for opportunities to volunteer at school and in your community.

Get professional help

Talk to a counselor or your teen's doctor. Therapy and/or medication may be what's needed to help your teen cope with their symptoms and feel better.

Look out for warning signs

Depression can have deadly consequences if left untreated. If your child talks about suicide or not wanting to live, even in a joking way, take it seriously. Don't overreact or do anything to make your teen more upset, but get them help as soon as possible

Understanding Anxiety



When we feel anxious, our bodies often react by releasing adrenaline, which can increase our heart and breathing rates. For most people, the feelings of anxiety go away when the stressful situation that caused it is over, or when the problem is resolved.

Occasional anxiety is a part of life—it's a natural reaction to events or situations that are frightening or stressful.

Symptoms of anxiety

Some people suffer from anxiety that's persistent and long-lasting. Their anxiety affects their well-being and interferes with their day-to-day lives. These people often experience the following:

- ▶ excessive worry and feeling fearful for no clear reason
- ▶ difficulty sleeping and concentrating
- ▶ irritability, restlessness, and feeling on edge
- ▶ stomach/digestive issues

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden, severe feeling of fear and distress. A person who is having a panic attack may experience chest pains, nausea, sweating, and/or shaking—and feel like something is physically wrong. If your teen experiences a panic attack, have them take slow, deep breaths, and help them get to a safe place until it passes.

Helping your teen cope with anxiety

Anxiety can make day-to-day living difficult. However, with the right tools, people with anxiety can and do get better. *If your teen experiences anxiety, here is what you can do to help.*

Manage your expectations

Oftentimes, parental expectations can unintentionally lead to anxiety in their children. Make sure your teen knows that your love for them is unconditional and independent of their performance in sports, school, and other activities.

Encourage connections

When teens have strong connections with others, their mental health benefits greatly. Just know that these connections may be with trusted adults other than you. And that's okay.

Get professional help

If anxiety is adversely affecting your teen's schoolwork, home life, or relationships, it may be time to get help. Talk to your child's doctor or school counselor and ask for a referral. Remind your teen that seeking treatment is a sign of strength.

Coping with social anxiety

People with social anxiety feel anxious in social situations. They find these situations very difficult, often experiencing an intense fear of being ridiculed, judged, or rejected.

If a teen has social anxiety, it's natural for them to want to avoid social situations altogether. One of the most helpful things a parent can do is to encourage their teen to face their fears. Gradual exposure to social situations that lead to positive outcomes will ease anxiety and increase confidence.



Social Media & Mental Health



While social media can add a lot to your teen's life, it can also have some negative effects on their mental health.

How social media affects mental health

Edited lives

Everyone puts their best selves on social media. Sometimes, this can make your child feel like everyone's life is more exciting and fun than theirs. It's important to remind teens that they are only seeing carefully selected snippets of a person's life.

Social media obsession

Social media can take up so much of a teenager's time that their schoolwork and relationships suffer. They may also feel angry or anxious when they're not able to use it. If you're concerned that your teen is too involved with social media, ask them to think about whether it's making their life better or worse.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is taking a huge toll on the mental health of so many young people today. If your child is being bullied online, reassure them that it is not their fault, and step in to help. If you find out that your teen is the one doing the bullying, encourage them to think about the pain they're causing—and work with them to make amends or resolve the situation immediately.

Remember that social media also has mental health benefits for teens. It can help them feel less isolated, strengthen bonds with friends, and encourage them to share their creativity and gifts with others.

Encourage smart technology use

Promote positivity and kindness

Remind your teen to be extra polite to people online. Others can't see their expression or hear their tone of voice, so what they say can easily be misunderstood. For everyone's mental health, encourage your child to use social media only for positive comments and to offer support to others.

Teach critical thinking

Encourage your child to double-check facts, especially for information found on social media sites. More importantly, teens should be taught to think for themselves—if something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. Photos are easily doctored, and facts are often manipulated. Tell your teen to use common sense and trust their instincts.

Focus on what really matters

A whole world—activities, experiences, relationships—exists outside of social media. Remind your teen that these are the things that truly define their health and happiness.



Set boundaries

When it comes to technology and social media use, your teen needs boundaries in order to protect their mental health. Define these boundaries clearly, and be diligent in enforcing them.

- ▶ **Designate technology-free times.** Teens have a hard time breaking away from their phones on their own. Set specific times each day when the whole family will be expected to unplug.
- ▶ **Have access.** Let your teen know that you will trust them until they give you a reason not to. However, you should still be able to access their devices and social media in case of an emergency, or if you suspect something is wrong.
- ▶ **Set a good example.** Limit your own screen and social media time, and show your teen that spending time doing things you like, with people you enjoy, is a better way to spend your time.

Helping Your Teen Stay Calm & Relaxed

We all feel stressed, anxious, or angry at times. When your teen feels this way, it's important that they have a toolbox of calming techniques to help them relax. Here are some quick and easy calming techniques you can share with your teen.

Calming techniques

Take deep breaths and relax your body

Take a deep breath, count to four, and slowly exhale. Repeat. Then tense and release all of the muscles in your body, from top to bottom. Doing these things sends signals to your brain to be calm.

Keep a centering object

A centering object is any object that you can turn your attention to when you want to feel calm, such as a stress ball or a smooth stone.

Challenge negative thoughts

Question a negative thought by asking, *"Is this likely to happen?"* or thinking, *"Even if it happens, I can handle it."*

Change your thoughts

To help refocus your thoughts, visualize a bright red stop sign, say *stop*, and then visualize something positive.



Guided meditations

With guided meditation, a voice helps your teen relax their body and focus their thoughts. Guided meditations are available on Spotify, and on apps like Meditation Studio and Calm.



Mental Health Resources

If your teen is struggling...

No matter what your teen is going through, they don't have to go through it alone. There are resources available for them, and for your family, too.

- ▶ **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988 for help and support. You can also call 911 if your teen is in danger and needs help immediately.
- ▶ **National Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741 to chat online with someone who can help.
- ▶ **Activeminds.org** can help you connect with a mental health professional in your area.
- ▶ **Go Ask Alice!** Supported by a team of healthcare providers and other experts from Columbia University, this site is a safe place for teens to ask questions and receive answers about mental health.
- ▶ **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (samhsa.gov):** If your teen or someone in your family is dealing with addiction and/or mental illness, this website can connect you with providers and treatment centers.

Share this short video with your teen—it shows them 10 ways they can improve their mental health.



"One small crack does not mean you are broken; it means that you were put to the test and you didn't fall apart." Linda Poindexter

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This booklet is filled with important information on understanding mental health. It also provides tips and advice to help you support your teen's mental health and well-being.

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