



Mental Health and Teens: Watch for Danger Signs

Adolescence isn't an easy time for parents, either. As children move through the various tumultuous transitions that accompany adolescence — physical, emotional, hormonal, sexual, social, intellectual — the pressures and problems they encounter can all too easily seem overwhelming. For many teenagers ([/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/default.aspx](#)), these and other pressures can lead to one or more of a variety of mental health disorders; all are matters of concern, and some are life-threatening.



Key Tips for Parents:

- **Keep communication constant, open, and honest:** Your children should not only know that they can talk to you about anything, you have to be committed to broaching topics of concern and do so openly. Talk about your own experiences and fears when you were an adolescent. Let them know that they are not alone; nor are their anxieties ([/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-and-Teens.aspx](#)) unique.
- **Understand that mental health disorders are treatable:** Arm yourself with information about the most common mental health disorders among adolescents; speak with your child's pediatrician, your local health department, your religious leader, and your child's school representatives about what sorts of information are available from them.
- **Be attentive to your teen's behavior:** Adolescence is, indeed, a time of transition and change, but severe, dramatic, or abrupt changes in behavior can be strong indicators of serious mental health issues.

Mental Health "Red Flags" Parents Should Be Alert For:

- Excessive sleeping, beyond usual teenage fatigue, which could indicate depression or substance abuse; difficulty in sleeping, insomnia, and other sleep disorders
- Loss of self-esteem ([/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Signs-of-Low-Self-Esteem.aspx](#))
- Abandonment or loss of interest in favorite pastimes
- Unexpected and dramatic decline in academic performance ([/English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/Poor-School-Performance-How-Parents-Can-Help.aspx](#))
- Weight loss and loss of appetite, which could indicate an eating disorder ([/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Is-Your-Teen-at-Risk-for-Developing-an-Eating-Disorder.aspx](#))
- Personality shifts and changes, such as aggressiveness and excess anger that are sharply out of character and could indicate psychological, drug, or sexual problems

Key Mental Health Issues:

Depression

While all of us are subject to "the blues," clinical depression is a serious medical condition requiring immediate treatment. Watch for:

- Changes in sleep patterns

- Unexpected weeping or excessive moodiness
- Eating habits that result in noticeable weight loss or gain
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Paranoia and excessive secrecy
- Self-mutilation (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Teen-Cutting.aspx>), or mention of hurting himself or herself
- Obsessive body-image concerns
- Excessive isolation
- Abandonment of friends and social groups

Eating disorders

Body image concerns can become obsessions, resulting in startling weight loss, severely affecting the adolescent's health:

- Anorexia: (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Warning-Signs-of-Anorexia.aspx>) Avoidance of food and noticeable changes in eating habits should trigger concern.
- Bulimia: (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Eating-Disorders-Bulimia.aspx>) Purging (forced vomiting) after eating — be alert for both dramatic weight loss without changes in eating habits (which could, of course, indicate other health issues that require a doctor's attention) and also for immediate trips to the bathroom or other private spot after a meal.

Drug abuse

In addition to peer pressure, mental health issues can lead adolescents not just to experiment with alcohol and drugs, but also to use substances for "self-medication." And in addition to being aware of the behavioral and physical signs of alcohol and drug abuse — drug and alcohol paraphernalia or evidence, hangovers, slurred speech, etc. — parents should also:

- Be alert for prescription drug (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Controlled-Substances-Not-Just-Street-Drugs.aspx>) misuse and abuse: According to the AAP, prescription drug misuse by adolescents is second only to marijuana and alcohol misuse. The most commonly abused prescription drugs include Vicodin and Xanax.
- Know that over-the-counter medications can be abused as well: Teenagers also frequently abuse OTC (</English/health-issues/conditions/treatments/Pages/Common-Over-the-Counter-Medications.aspx>) cough and cold medications.

Concern about your adolescent's mental health should first be addressed with your child — fostering open communication goes a long way toward fostering sound adolescent mental health habits.

If your concerns are serious, discuss them with your pediatrician. Because so many mental health issues display physical manifestations — weight loss being the most dramatic but not the only one — your pediatrician can offer both initial medical assessment and also refer you to appropriate mental health organizations and professionals for counseling and treatment (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Who%27s-Who.aspx>) if called for.

Additional Information from HealthyChildren.org:

- Inheriting Mental Disorders (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Inheriting-Mental-Disorders.aspx>)
- Is Your Child Vulnerable to Substance Abuse? (</English/ages-stages/teen/substance-abuse/Pages/Is-Your-Child-Vulnerable-to-Substance-Abuse.aspx>)
- Help Stop Teen Suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Help-Stop-Teen-Suicide.aspx>)
- Childhood Depression: What Parents Can Do To Help (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx>)

- [ADHD and Substance Abuse: The Link Parents Need to Know \(/English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/ADHD-and-Substance-Abuse-The-Link-Parents-Need-to-Know.aspx\)](#) [Back to Top](#)

Last Updated 4/26/2012

Source Adapted from Healthy Children Magazine, Winter 2007

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.