

Parenting to support Mental Health & Wellness

As a parent, you play an important role in your teen's mental health & wellness:

- Supporting your teen's general self care & wellness
- Identifying mental health issues and seeking help and support as needed
- Keeping the doors open to your teen to talk about the tough stuff- challenges, mental health concerns, and difficult feelings.

Supporting General Self Care & Wellness

11 Self-care tips for teens & young adults from the Clay Center for Young & Healthy Minds:

Minds: including creative expression, downtime, developing coping skills, helping others, connecting with friends, turning off phones and mindfulness and of course, sleep!



“Sleep isn’t a luxury. Memory and learning are thought to be consolidated during sleep, so it’s a requirement for adolescents and as vital to their health as the air they breathe and the food they eat. In fact, sleep helps teens eat better. It also allows them to manage stress.”

— **Frances E. Jensen, The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults**

Teens need sleep! For teens, getting enough quality sleep is *critical* to healthy physical, social and emotional development. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), “...melatonin (the “sleep hormone”) levels in the blood are naturally higher later at night and drop later in the morning in teens than in most children and adults. Teens should get about 9 to 10 hours of sleep a night, but most teens do not get enough sleep. A lack of sleep can make it difficult to pay attention, may increase impulsivity, and may increase the risk for irritability or depression.”

More about teens and sleep: Child Mind Institute:
How to Help Teens Get More Sleep

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Data & Good News

A mental health condition isn't the result of one event. Research suggests multiple, linking causes or influences: genetics, environment and lifestyle. None of this means that you're broken or that you, or your family, did something "wrong." **Mental illness is no one's fault.**

Poor mental health in adolescence is more than feeling blue. It can impact many areas of a teen's life. Youth with poor mental health may struggle with school, social life, family life, decision making, and physical health. Mental health problems in youth often go hand-in-hand with other health and behavioral risks like increased risk of drug use, experiencing violence, and higher risk sexual behaviors

First, The Data (note: this is pre-Covid data)

CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends Report: 2009-2019

highlights concerning trends about the mental health of U.S. high school students.

- More than 1 in 3 high school students had experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019, a 40 percent increase since 2009.
- In 2019, approximately 1 in 6 youth reported making a suicide plan in the past year, a 44% increase since 2009.

According to the CDC: (www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html)

- 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24
- ADHD, behavior problems, anxiety, and depression are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders in children

The Good News

- Early diagnosis and appropriate services for children and their families can make a difference in the lives of children with mental disorders.
- Teens are resilient, and we know what works to support their mental health: feeling connected to school and family.
- Teens are increasingly willing to be leaders in raising awareness and reducing stigma about mental health challenges: *9 Ways to Fight Mental Health Stigma*

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Identifying Mental Health Challenges in Teens

It can be hard to identify mental health disorders in kids and teens because normal childhood development is a process that involves change.

What's typical teen behavior and what's a reason to worry? Pay attention to behaviors that interfere with your teen's functioning at school, home or socially.

Typical teen?	Warning Sign?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spends more time with friends, often prefers to be with peers• Wants more privacy (Closed doors)• Interests may change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdraws from everyone, including friends• Lack of interest in any interaction outside of closed doors.• Not replacing old interests, lack of interest in anything

Life events can impact mental health and behavior:

Divorce, grief, moving, etc. can cause changes in your child's functioning as a part of a process of adjustment. This may pass with some time and extra support. The criteria for many adolescent psychiatric disorders require problem behaviors or feelings to be present for at least a period of weeks or months. Sometimes it makes sense to watch and wait. Parents can ask for guidance on this from school counselors, pediatricians, or other trusted professionals.

It's not your job as a parent to diagnose your child.

If you're concerned, ask for help AND remember, help can come in many forms:

- Ask others who care about your child- what do they notice?
- Talk to teachers or school counselors- what do they suggest?
- Reach out to a mental health professional for support or recommendations
- Help may involve parent coaching, individual therapy, family therapy, support groups and varied interventions

Finding professional mental health help!

- Ask for referrals from your pediatrician, school support staff, or local social services.
- [Chld Mind Institute: The Care Journey- What to Expect on the Road to Care](#)
- [Youth Mental health Project Types of Treatment](#)
- If your teen is resistant to counseling, this article by parenting expert Michelle Mitchell may help: [How to Talk about Counseling: Ideas that can make all the difference.](#)

Active Waiting:

If you decide to wait to get help, keep an eye on the problem and be ready to act if it doesn't improve. This is different than ignoring or denying the concern.

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Talking about mental health with your teen:

How do you invite your teen to talk to you about the hard stuff?

To be honest, no matter what you do, your teen will not tell you everything. That's developmentally normal; teens are *separating from parents and growing towards independent adulthood*. BUT what you can hope for is that your teen will see you as a safe haven—someone they can come to if they need help or extra support or they are at the end of their rope. Your teen is most likely to come to you to talk about the hard stuff if you if their experience is that you **ACCEPT** them for who they are, and you will **LISTEN** to them.

TRY THIS: Listen more, talk less, and try not to jump to fixing too quickly: "tell me more." "What's that like for you?" "Do you want help/advice or just want me to listen?"

The Power of Validation: Validation is a great first step when your teen is upset, angry, sad, etc. Validation means accepting & acknowledging that your teen's feelings are true for them.

- Thanks for letting me know how you're feeling. I'm glad you came to me
- That sounds hard (scary, frustrating, disappointing)
- You're feeling really sad and lonely. Tell me more about what's going on for you.

It can be painful to hear your teen's hard feelings. Remember, if they can't talk to you about it, they still have the feelings but they have to handle it without your support and help.

Next steps might be a call to a counselor, a long chat, or a nap. Sometimes it can be enough to simply have nonjudgmental support, and to be HEARD.

Suggested Resources

- Note: See Local & regional mental health resource page for close-to-home resources
- Dial 2-1-1 in CT for Emergency Mobile youth mental health response
- Kids in Crisis: Emergency shelter, crisis counseling, and community education programs for children of all ages. 24 hour hotline: 203-661-1911
- Youth Mental Health Project: Information, resources, support groups
- NAMI CT: Support and advocacy for people with mental illness & loved ones NAMI Warmline: 800-950-4264
- Child Mind Institute: Resources, information, strategies. (amazing resource)
- The Jed Foundation: Mental Health Resource Center for teens and young adults: I want help or I want to help a friend

Parenting to support Mental Health & Wellness Teens, Stress and Anxiety

Mental health professionals have been raising the alarm that privilege and competitive pressure can be toxic rather than protective and that a hyper focus on achievement could be hurting kids. Researcher Suniya Luthar, Ph.D. found that teens going to highly regarded schools in affluent areas were doing poorly in areas of mental health and substance use. "Many students attending high-achieving schools do well. But similarly to other at-risk situations, these students face a higher probability of experiencing stress-related problems without proper support."

What can you do as a parent to protect your teen's well-being in a competitive school environment:

- **Talk to your teen about your values around success and achievement.** What does it mean to be successful? Consider this quote from [Challenge Success](#), "...when society becomes too focused on narrow definitions of success (like grades, test scores, prestige, and performance), kids have less space to develop the skills they need to become resilient and engaged learners and to grow into healthy young adults."
- **When you talk about future plans, post high school and beyond, let your teen take the lead.** Let her envision different paths to a good future. Be curious. "Can you tell me more about that?"
- **Make it clear that you love and accept her for who she is, outside of any achievements, awards or honor roll grades.** Of course it's great to say this directly, but there are also other ways to send this message:
 - Notice the non-achievement based good stuff
 - Ask about things other than grades and goals
 - Let him overhear you talk about his kindness, sense of humor, help around the house, mad baking skills, etc.
- Maintain what [Challenge Success](#) calls PDF (Playtime, Downtime and Family time) for big and little kids.
 - [PDF for teens handout](#)
- **Help your teen understand stress; how stress is sometimes good and when it can be bad.** Lisa Damour, author of *Under Pressure*, explains this in her NY Times article, [How to Help Teenagers Embrace Stress](#): "I liken the demands of school to a strength-training program. Everyone understands that lifting weights to the point of discomfort is the only way to build muscle; the process of developing intellectual ability, including the ability to manage the stress that comes with it, works just the same way." Teens can often handle, and thrive, with heavy academic loads and intense schedules but recovery has to happen somewhere.

Suggested Resources

- [Challenge Success](#) nonprofit offers resources, trainings
- [The Price of Privilege](#), by Madeline Levine
- [The Self-Driven Child](#) and [What Do You Say?](#) by Stixrud & Johnson
- [Under Pressure](#), by Lisa Damour
- [APA podcast](#): the Mental Price of Affluence w/ Suniya Luthar, PhD