Guide to Adolescent Mental Health

Teens and Young Adults

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Guide for Teens and Young Adults

**Step 1: Understanding Mental Health**

Mental health refers to a person’s emotional wellbeing. Stress, trauma, tragedy or mental illness can affect your mental health.

In young adulthood, mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, bipolar disorder and others can begin to appear. Sometimes these illnesses run in the family or can be triggered by a stressful event, but other times we do not know the cause.

**Step 2: Recognizing Signs of Mental Illness**

It is often difficult for young people to recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness, especially if symptoms are gradual. For instance, symptoms of depression like anger, mood swings or risky behavior are sometimes passed off by adults as “typical teen behavior”.

Symptoms of mental illnesses can vary between different people. Additionally, symptoms can fluctuate and you may have a mix of “good days” and “bad days” during a mental health episode.

Symptoms can be subtle. Distressing thoughts or images that pop into your brain (intrusive thoughts), thoughts of death (suicidal ideation), excessive worry or feelings of dread can be signs of depression or anxiety.

**Step 3: Asking for Help**

Studies show that many young people do not receive mental health treatment until they are feeling very bad, which can be dangerous. It is important to see a mental health specialist, doctor or therapist even if your symptoms are mild because they may become worse with time.

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, which means you have concern that you may hurt yourself or others, then you should go to your local emergency room or call 911.

Tell a parent, teacher, school counselor, doctor or friend how you are feeling. If they do not know how to help you, try to find local mental health resources (or see list on back)

Guide For Parents

**Step 1: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Teens**

Symptoms of mental illnesses like anxiety and depression can look very different in adolescents compared to adults. It is important to pay attention to subtle changes in your teen like disinterest in activities, declining school performance, low self-esteem and fluctuations in mood.

Mental illness is still misunderstood and stigmatized in our society. Young adults receive confusing messages and misrepresentation about mental health from television, movies, music, on social media and in popular culture. This prevents many adolescents from seeking help from adults.

**Step 2: What can you do?**

1. **Support your teen!** Approach conversations without judgment. Let them know that feeling depressed or anxious is not their fault.
2. Reach out to your child’s doctor, school counselor or school nurse for help or explore local mental health resources (see list on back)
3. Have mental health “check ins” especially surrounding stressful or emotional times like applying to college, current events or tragedies like a family death or illness.
4. Initiate and normalize conversations surrounding mental health and feelings.

   “Are You Feeling Sad? Down? Hopeless?” “Would You Like to Talk?”

   “Do You Worry a lot? What Do You Think About?”

**Step 3: Learn More with Additional Resources**

- Talking with Teens ➔ mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers
- National Alliance on Mental Health ➔ nimh.nih.gov
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry ➔ aacap.org
- Database of Questions on Emotional Health ➔ goaskalice.columbia.edu
- Resources for Parents ➔ healthychildren.org