

# Identifying Teen Mental Health Difficulties: A Practical Guide for Parents

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The years of adolescence can be both interesting and stressful for many teens. It is a period when youth are exploring themselves through extracurricular activities, hobbies, new friendships and social contacts, and forming their identities independently from parents. Teens are also undergoing developmental changes, particularly brain development and maturation, which adds to the ups and downs of being an adolescent.<sup>1</sup> As teens begin to spend less time at home and more time with extracurriculars, friends and peers, parents may notice teens confiding and communicating less about their daily routines.



Separating from parents is completely normal to adolescence. However, the extent to which teens separate and withdraw from parents may be of greater concern, especially if it comes along with extreme mood shifts and sudden changes in personality and behaviors. Although many parents may think such changes are just their teen being a normal teenager, there are some warning signs that would suggest your teen is suffering from a mental health condition.

Below is a guide of the warning signs for various mental health conditions, the signs and symptoms, treatment and intervention, and resources to help parents and family members determine the best approach to helping their loved one.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

## What Are the Warning Signs of a Potential Mental Health Diagnosis?

Common warning signs:<sup>4</sup>

- Abrupt change in personality.
- Not acting or feeling like themselves.
- Extreme emotional highs and lows, such as anger, irritability or moodiness.
- Withdrawal and isolation, either from friends, parents, family or other social groups.
- Involvement in unhealthy, risk-taking behaviors, such as substance abuse or delinquent behavior.
- Diminished self-care and lacking in hygiene or concern with appearance.
- Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or being overwhelmed with stress.



## Common Mental Health Diagnosis Symptoms:<sup>3</sup>

While every teen is unique and all circumstances differ, there are four mental health diagnoses that are more commonly identified by professionals. The symptoms of these common diagnoses are outlined below. Concerning symptoms are those that last two weeks or more, disrupt the person's daily functioning, and likely occur with other symptoms. It's only through a professional evaluation that a diagnosis can be provided.<sup>3,4</sup>

### **I. Behavior or Conduct Problems**<sup>3,5</sup>

- Delinquent behavior, such as destruction of property or theft.
- Harmful, aggressive or cruel behavior towards people or animals.
- Bullying, threats or intimidation of others (including online).
- Habitual violation of rules, deceitfulness and compulsive lying.
- Forcing someone into unwanted activity (e.g., sexual, etc.).
- Truancy from school or running away from home.
- Consistent disregard for rules and consequences.

### **II. Anxiety Disorders**<sup>2,3,6</sup>

- Constant worrying, irritability and high stress.
- Difficulty concentrating and staying on track.
- Being unable to relax and easily startled.
- Obsessive concerns and behaviors.
- Physical symptoms, such as inability to sleep or stay asleep, exhaustion, headaches, muscle aches, sweating, nausea and other stomach problems, hot flashes, and trembling or shakiness.

### **III. Depression**<sup>2,3</sup>

- Irritable, moody, easily frustrated, grumpy or sudden outbursts of anger.
- Social withdrawal, especially from parents.
- Being overly sensitive to criticism, rejection and failure.
- Above average feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem.
- Complaints of physical symptoms, like stomach pains or headaches.
- Lower than normal energy levels and exhaustion.
- Lacking motivation, concentration and gradual loss of interest in favorite activities.
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits.
- Thoughts of self-harm, death, and/or suicide.

### **IV. Substance Abuse**<sup>3,7</sup>

- Poor conduct, breaking the rules or getting into trouble.
- Compulsive lying, and/or making up excuses.
- Being more aggressive than usual, having emotional highs and lows, or having an unusual temperament.
- Physical signs of being under the influence, like speaking incoherently, having bloodshot eyes, shaky hands or tremors, drowsiness, poor hygiene or sudden weight gain or loss.
- Not caring for the things (e.g., hobbies) that are usually important.
- Lacking in motivation or being "spaced out" and unable to focus.
- Social signs, like avoiding (or withdrawing from) family time and friends, being late or missing important events.



## The Four R's: How Parents and Family Members Can Help <sup>8</sup>

Helping teens cope with a mental health diagnosis is not always easy. There also isn't a "quick fix". Similar to other physical conditions, like diabetes or even poor eyesight, symptoms of a mental health diagnosis can be lifelong and get worse with age if not treated. Figuring out the type of mental health diagnosis, and best ways to treat it, **as early as possible** is the starting point to helping your teen. Better to explore the possibility of a diagnoses than to wonder "what if" later down the road, right? Here are some ways to get started:



1. **Research.** Mental health issues can be misunderstood. Some people may not believe that mental health issues are "real" as symptoms are hard to pinpoint, can easily look like other types of conditions, or be disregarded for "teenager"-like behavior. It is important to be educated about the symptoms of mental health disorders and treatment options in order to help those affected by it.
2. **Reserve judgment.** Mental health symptoms can sometimes go unnoticed and undiagnosed. There are times that those showing specific symptoms may just "bottle up" their feelings and withdraw from close family and friends. Getting the person to open up may be challenging without professional support. Try to break the ice first by asking questions, reserving judgment, being open-minded, offering encouragement, and listening to their concerns.
3. **Reach out.** Help the person exhibiting symptoms for two weeks or more reach out for help. There are many treatment options, not limited to individual or group therapy, medicine or even some simple lifestyle changes. The first step is to connect with a mental health professional for an initial assessment and then to help plan the best course of action.
4. **Reassure.** It is important to come from a supportive and caring place throughout this process. It will be easy for both parties to become frustrated and stressed throughout the process, but be patient. In some cases, finding the right treatment may take anywhere from a few months to many years. Thus, it is important to reassure with your love and support. Communicating that you are committed for the long haul to help them become their happiest and healthiest self is one of the best ways to show you care.

## Where Can I Find Resources for More Information?

- Learn more about the teenage brain and changes during development provided by the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH). [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml) <sup>1</sup>
- Educate yourself on the conditions listed above in addition to other types of mental health diagnoses from NIMH. [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/index.shtml) <sup>2</sup>
- Read frequently asked questions about treatment options for children and adolescents with mental health diagnoses from NIMH. [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/treatment-of-children-with-mental-illness-fact-sheet/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/treatment-of-children-with-mental-illness-fact-sheet/index.shtml) <sup>8</sup>
- Find a listing of education, treatment options, and other online resources related to teen mental health diagnoses at the Office of Adolescent Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). [www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/mental-health/mental-health-disorders.html](http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/mental-health/mental-health-disorders.html) <sup>9</sup>
- Locate mental health services with this online, interactive map provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov) <sup>10</sup>

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