



Identifying Mental Health Concerns in Children Ages 12-17 and How to Help Them

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many changes to our daily lives and can be an additional source of stress, anxiety, and even sadness. We may find ourselves struggling to adjust while also being worried for our loved ones. The adolescent years can seem like a rollercoaster even when things are going well, so here are some **warning signs** to look for that may indicate your teenager is struggling:

- **Changes to personality:** As a parent, you likely have a reference for how your child typically presents themselves, so take notice of any changes you may see. For example, they may not be as talkative or have their typical sense of humor.
- **Increased irritability or grouchiness:** Frequently, when adults struggle, they seem sad or worried. However, many teenagers suffering from mental illness disagree or argue more.
- **Changes to weight or appetite:** Another area to look for is weight loss or gain. They may start overeating or have decreased appetite when they are struggling.
- **Changes to sleep:** Changes to sleep are also something to be aware of, teens may experience decreases in sleep or may oversleep.
- **Decreased energy:** You might also notice that they may have low energy or appear sluggish.
- **Decline in grades:** Problems concentrating are also something to look out for. These difficulties combined with reduced motivation can often lead to a decline in grades.
- **Social withdrawal:** Try to take notice if your teenager is withdrawing from family, friends, or other social contacts with whom they typically spend time.

Approaching the Concern

If you have noticed some of these warning signs, it may be time to have a conversation with your teen. Try to find a suitable time and comfortable place to talk. Allow enough time for an extended conversation. Here are some basic steps to starting the dialogue:

- **Describe your concerns:** To start, outline your concerns and mention the changes you've noticed.
- **Avoid jumping to problem-solving:** It can be tempting to jump into problem-solving mode and offer advice right away, but it's important to first make sure that they feel heard and understood.
- **Use active listening:** Be patient, give your teen time to speak and try to actively listen to what they have to say. Try not to interject too much. Validate their feelings and ask non-judgmental questions in order to make sure they know you are listening. Above all else, *make them feel heard*. Approaching the conversation in this manner should make them more comfortable coming to you for sensitive subjects in the future.
- **Be supportive:** Ask them, "Is there anything I can do to help?". Often just talking can do wonders, but it's also good to see if there are any changes within our control that can help. Perhaps offer to do activities they find relaxing or fun.
- **Seek professional help:** This might be a good time to encourage them to get professional help through The Village EAP at no charge to you. We can work with them on a variety of issues including adjustment concerns, anxiety, depression, divorce, grief, relationships, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and many more.

Taking Care of You

In addition to watching for warning signs and support your teen, it's just as important to take care of your child's most valuable asset – you. Your mental health is just as important as your children's. The adage, "You can't pour from an empty cup," is more relevant now than ever. Modeling good self-care to your children will help them to practice it themselves, leading them to be able to cope with their emotions in a healthy way.

Paying attention to these areas will help you to be the best parent and person you can be:

- **Take care of any medical issues:** Take prescription medication consistently and consult with your primary care physician if you're not feeling well.
- **Tend to relationships:** Make time for weekly date nights at home with your spouse or partner, connect with friends electronically regularly, and do something that would be enjoyable to you and your adolescent.
- **Implement a healthy diet:** It's OK to have comfort food in moderation. However, during stressful times it can be tempting to emotionally eat and rely on unhealthy foods. Others may have a reduced appetite due to stress. Remind yourself to eat healthy, balanced meals. Drink plenty of fluids and drink water instead of alcohol.
- **Sleep:** Stick to a sleep schedule that will work for you. Do your best to go to bed wake up at a similar time each day. Make sure you get enough rest. Aim for 6 to 8 hours of sleep per night. If it is hard to get to bed, do something an hour or two before bed that will help you relax, such as journaling, reading a book, or listening to calming music.
- **Exercise regularly:** Now that it is officially spring and the weather is getting warmer, take 30 minutes each day for some sort of exercise. Going for a nice walk, run, or bike ride while soaking up some sunshine can go a long way with coping with stress. If you need to stay indoors, there are plenty of ideas on YouTube for exercising at home.
- **Unplug:** Limit your phone and TV use. Try to find the right balance between being informed and knowing when the news is causing you to feel overwhelmed.
- **Spiritual wellness:** Leaning on your faith or spirituality may help you cope effectively during these challenging times. Many church services can be viewed online during the COVID-19 crisis. Talking with your church leader if you are struggling to cope can be a valuable support during this time.
- **Professional help:** Set up mental health services for yourself. Anyone can benefit from counseling, even if it's just a check-up. If you are struggling with your mental health or would like a mental health check-up, a licensed EAP counselor at The Village would like to help support you anyway they can. Services are confidential and at no cost to you if you have The Village EAP through your employer. Please call The Village at 1-800-627-8220 to schedule your appointment today!

For More Information:

- *Helping Teens Handle Tough Experiences: Strategies to Foster Resilience* (2008) by Jill R. Nelson, Ph.D. and Sarah Kjos, M.Ed.
- [Tips for quarantined parents in the times of COVID-19](#)
- [Parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [How to Talk to Your Anxious Child or Teen About Coronavirus](#)
- [How to Talk with Children About Coronavirus](#)