

What to Do If You Suspect Your Teen Has a Mental Illness

By

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Most parents would never ignore their child's broken bone or obvious signs of physical injury. Yet, when it comes to a child's mental illness, symptoms often go untreated for months or even years.

Some parents don't recognize the warning signs of a teenage mental illness. Others worry that their child will get labeled as "crazy" if they seek help.

But early intervention and proper treatment is the key to helping your teen feel better.¹ If you suspect your teen has a mental illness, seek professional help right away.

The Danger of Not Getting Help

Sometimes, parents struggle to acknowledge their suspicion that their teen may have a mental illness. But ignoring the problem isn't likely to make it go away. In fact, without treatment, your teen's mental health is likely to get worse.

Without proper treatment, your teen may be tempted to try self-medicating. They may reach for drugs, alcohol, food, or other unhealthy habits that temporarily dull their pain. Ultimately, self-medicating only adds more problems to your teen's life.

Untreated mental health problems may also increase your teen's risk of suicide. Most teens who kill themselves have a mood disorder, like depression or bipolar.

[Suicide](#) is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 19.² The vast majority of teens who kill themselves give some type of warning sign that they're feeling helpless and hopeless first.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **1-800-273-8255** for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

For more mental health resources, see our [National Helpline Database](#).

If your teen makes comments about wanting to hurt themselves or kill themselves, take it very seriously. Don't assume they are just saying those things "to get attention," or "because they're mad." Consider such comments a serious warning sign that your teen is struggling.

Reasons Teens Develop Mental Health Issues

Adolescence is a common time for mental health issues to emerge. Researchers suspect this is due to a variety of factors.

Hormones

Hormonal changes and brain development during adolescence may put teens at a higher risk of mental health problems. Some researchers have explained this phenomenon by saying, "moving parts get broken," which means that when all the parts of the neural system don't develop at the correct rate, a teen may experience changes in thinking, mood, and behavior.³

There is a genetic link to some mental health issues. If one or both of a teen's biological parents has a mental health problem, a teen may be at an increased risk of developing one as well.

Environment

Environmental issues can also be a factor in a teen's mental health. Traumatic incidents, like a near-death experience or a history of abuse, may increase your teen's risk.

Stress

[Stress](#) can also be a factor in developing mental illness.⁴ If your teen is being bullied at school or if he puts a lot of pressure on himself to perform well academically, he may be more susceptible to mental health issues.

Prevalence of Mental Illness in Teens

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 49.5% of adolescents will experience mental illness at some point between the ages of 13 and 18.⁵

The most common mental health disorders found in teenagers are:

- ADHD
- Mood Disorders
- [Major Depression](#)
- Conduct Disorder
- Anxiety Disorders
- Panic Disorder
- [Eating Disorders](#)

Teens may also develop psychotic disorders, like [schizophrenia](#), or substance use disorders, like alcohol abuse or opioid dependence.³

Look For Warning Signs of Teenage Mental Illness

Distinguishing a mental illness from hormonal changes, teenage phases, and normal mood swings becomes a challenge. But it's important to monitor your teen's mood and behavior and if you notice changes that interfere with your teen's daily life, it likely isn't normal.

Mental illness presents differently in different people. Some warning signs of teenage mental illness include (but are not limited to) these behaviors.⁶

- **Changes in sleep habits** – Your teen may complain of insomnia or she might start taking naps after school. Wanting to stay in bed all day or stay up all night may also be signs of a problem.
- **Loss of interest in usual activities** – If your teen quits her favorite activities, or shows a lack of interest in spending time with friends, she may be experiencing a problem.
- **Major changes in academic performance** – Mental health issues often lead to dramatic changes in motivation to do school work. If your teen has lost interest in doing her homework, or she suddenly falls behind in school, it could be a sign of a problem.
- **Weight or appetite changes** – Skipping meals, hoarding food, and rapid changes in weight could be a sign of an eating disorder. Depression is often characterized by weight changes as well.

- **Extreme moodiness** – Excessive anger, unexpected weeping, and high levels of irritability can be a sign of a mental illness.
- **Increased isolation** – A strong desire to be alone or excessive secrecy may be a sign of a problem.

Stay Calm If You See Warning Signs

Mental health issues are usually very treatable. And a problem doesn't mean your teen is "crazy." Instead, it means your teen needs medical attention.

Similar to the way some teens develop physical health problems, like asthma or acne, others develop mental health problems, like obsessive-compulsive disorder or bipolar disorder.

Stay calm, but take action. Rather than spend months worrying about a potential problem, commit to finding out if your teen could benefit from treatment.

Talk to Your Teen About Your Concerns

Bringing up concerns about your teen's mental health may feel uncomfortable at first. But, it's important to talk to your teen about the red flags you're seeing.

Point out your observations and invite your teen's input. Be careful not to infer your teen is 'crazy' or that it's his fault. Here are some examples of things you might say:

- "I see you are spending more time in your room by yourself and you aren't going out with your friends. I'm concerned about that."
- "I've noticed you haven't been doing much homework lately. I'm wondering if you just haven't been in the mood to deal with school."
- "You are sleeping a lot more than usual. I wonder if there might be something bothering you or if you're not feeling like your usual self."

Don't be surprised if your teen insists nothing is wrong or he becomes irritated by your suggestion. Many teens are embarrassed, ashamed, afraid, or confused by the symptoms they're experiencing.

It's possible your teen will feel relieved when you bring up the subject as well. Sometimes, teens know they are struggling, but aren't sure how to tell anyone what they're experiencing.

Help Your Teen Identify Trusted People to Talk To

It is important for teens to have healthy adults they can talk to about issues going on in their life—and quite often they're more willing to talk to someone other than their parents. So, make sure your teen has other people in their life can talk to.

Help them identify at least three trusted adults they might be able to talk to about any problems, concerns, or issues they're having.

Ask, "If you had a problem and you couldn't talk to me about it, who could you talk to?" While many teens are happy to talk to their friends, a teen's peers may lack the wisdom to deal with serious problems. So, it's best if your teen has older people they can count on as well.

Who Can Your Teen Turn To?

Family friends, relatives, coaches, teachers, guidance counselors, and friend's parents might be among the people they can talk to. Reassure them that it's OK to bring up problems with those people whom you agree are trustworthy.

It can also be a good time to ask, "Do you ever think it might be a good idea to have a professional to talk to?" Sometimes teens aren't comfortable asking to see a therapist, but some of them may welcome the idea if you suggest it first.

Get Your Teen Evaluated

If your teen's mental illness is nearing a crisis level, go to your local emergency room.

Threats of suicide, serious self-injury, or hallucinations are just a few reasons to get your teen evaluated immediately.

For mental health concerns that aren't an immediate crisis, schedule a doctor's appointment for your teen. Talk to your teen about the appointment the same way you'd discuss an appointment for an earache or a regular check-up.

Say, "I've scheduled a doctor's appointment for you on Thursday. I know you aren't concerned about how tired you've been lately, but I want to get you checked out by the doctor just to make sure."

Explain your concerns to the doctor and give your teen an opportunity to speak with the doctor alone. Your teen may talk more openly when you're not present.

The evaluation may put your mind at ease and assure your teen is healthy. Or, the doctor may recommend you seek additional treatment from a mental health professional, like an adolescent therapist.

Determine Your Treatment Options

If a doctor recommends further assessment, your teen may be referred to a mental health professional. A mental health professional, such as a psychologist or licensed clinical social worker, may interview you and your teen to gather more information.

Some mental health professionals provide written questionnaires or other screening tools. A trained mental health professional will likely gather information from your teen's doctor as well. A mental health professional can provide you with an appropriate diagnosis (if applicable) and will present you with treatment options, such as talk therapy or medication.

Seek Support for Yourself

A teen's mental health affects the entire family, so it's important to seek support for yourself if your teen has a mental illness.

Talking to other parents can be key to staying mentally strong. Some parents find comfort in gaining emotional support from parents who understand, and others find it helpful to learn about community resources and educational options.

Look for a local support group or talk to your teen's doctor to learn about programs in your community. You might also find it helpful to research online forums or groups that could offer you help.

You might also consider meeting with a therapist on your own. A mental health professional may be able to ensure you're managing your stress well so you can be best equipped to help your child.

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Expertise

Psychotherapy, Mental Health, Psychology

Education

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Highlights

- Editor-in-Chief of Verywell Mind
- [Host of The Verywell Mind Podcast](#)
- Licensed clinical social worker, psychotherapist, and lecturer at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts
- International bestselling author of "[13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do](#)," "[13 Things Mentally Strong Parents Don't Do](#)," "[13 Things Mentally Strong Women Don't Do](#)," and "[13 Things Strong Kids Do](#)"
- Highly sought-after speaker, delivering talks about mental strength to a variety of crowds, including one of the top 15 TEDx talks of all time, [The Secret of Becoming Mentally Strong](#)
- Forbes has referred to her as "a thought leadership star," and The Guardian dubbed her "the self-help guru of the moment."

With so many tempting distractions and so much emphasis on productivity, it's tough to stay mentally strong in today's world. My goal is to help people give up the bad habits that are holding them back so they can become the strongest and best versions of themselves.

Experience

Amy Morin, LCSW is the Editor-in-Chief of Verywell Mind. She's also a member of the [Verywell Mind Review Board](#).

She began working as a psychotherapist in 2002. As a licensed clinical social worker, she helped children, teens, and adults build the mental strength they needed to reach their greatest potential.

Amy is an international bestselling author. Her books, *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, *13 Things Mentally Strong Parents Don't Do*, and *13 Things Mentally Strong Women Don't Do* are translated into more than 40 languages. Her fourth book, *13 Things Strong Kids Do*, goes on sale in 2021.

She's also the host of [The Verywell Mind Podcast](#), where she introduces listeners to mental strength building strategies that can help them think, feel, and do their best in life.

She frequently delivers keynote speeches on mental strength. Some of the organizations who have hired her to speak include Google, Microsoft, The National Nuclear Security Administration, The American Academy of Pediatrics, Under Armour, and Johnson & Johnson.

Amy has been quoted or mentioned in [many major online and print publications](#), including Time, Fast Company, Forbes, US News & World Report, Oprah.com, Men's Health, and Money. She's also appeared on-camera for interviews with Inside Edition, Good Day New York, Inc., CNBC, Fox Business, and Good Morning America.

Education

Amy received her bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Maine and her master's degree in social work from the University of New England.