

Supporting young people experiencing mental health challenges

Tips from #youthgotthis co-founder Dr Rebecca Overton

This summary is for parents and carers supporting young people experiencing mental health challenges.

Differentiating normal teen behaviour from an emerging mental illness

Teenagers can often be moody due to the physical and emotional changes of puberty.

Teenagers can be irritable, sensitive, self-conscious, feel overwhelmed and frustrated, get angry, want to be alone and spend hours in their room and it can all be regarded as “normal teenage behaviour”.

Be concerned if there is a change in behaviour which lasts for several weeks such as : irritability, not seeing their friends, spending more time in their room, changes in their sleeping patterns (sleeping less, going to bed later, waking up later, can't get out of bed for school, or sleeping more), big changes in energy levels or appetite, sadness, tearfulness / frequent crying, feelings of hopelessness / despair / shame / worthlessness / failure / guilt, lashing out verbally, aggression, reduced enjoyment / interest in activities / enthusiasm, reduced motivation, reduced academic performance, reduced functioning (eg showering, getting to school, completing schoolwork, grades slipping), increased risk taking behaviour.

The more severe the changes in behaviour, the longer the duration (more than 2 weeks is concerning), the more areas of their life that are affected (eg school + family + friends), the greater the risk this is a mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety.

Depression and anxiety are highly treatable, yet most teens never seek help.

What to do?

You are the expert of your children, listen to your gut, you'll know when they are off balance. You'll know when they are acting out of character or having difficulty.

Lean in and have the difficult conversations.

Don't ignore the issue hoping it will go away.

Provide a safe and private space with no distractions for kids to talk about their emotions - being shoulder to shoulder often helps as it is less confrontational eg going for a walk or drive together.

Acknowledge that you've noticed some changes (eg “you don't seem to be spending time with your friends anymore”, “you haven't seemed as happy lately”).

Give them time and space to think and respond.

Ask how they are going and ask them to share what they are going through.

Be ready and willing to truly listen in an **empathic, non-judgmental way**, the way you would hope to be listened to.

Don't interrupt them, wait for spaces in the conversation to speak, **don't jump in with solutions**. Often, they don't want you to fix things, they just need to feel listened to, validated and heard.

Listen, don't lecture. Don't criticise or pass judgement.

Stay calm, deal with the now, not the past, don't try to get the last word.

Be open and honest, try to build trust.

Take what they are saying seriously, don't minimise it (eg "things aren't that bad", "you've nothing to be depressed about", "cheer up", "don't stress").

Don't dismiss their feelings and concerns, even if you think their worries seem trivial.

Validate what they are saying (eg "I can understand why you are feeling upset / down")

Ask them on a scale of 1 to 10 how they are going (one is the worst day imaginable, ten is the best day). Ask them what they think they could do to improve the score and how you can help them do this.

Emphasize the importance of talking about their problems.

Allow them to vent and externalise their feelings so they don't internalise them.

Acknowledge that things are difficult for them right now, acknowledge the pain and sadness they are feeling so they feel understood and supported. Try and understand the world the way they see it. *Ask them how you can help.*

Don't give up if they shut you out at first.

If they won't open up to you, encourage them to talk to another trusted adult eg family friend, teacher, school counsellor, GP. *The important thing is to get them talking to someone.*

Let them know you're concerned, you are there to help, you'll work through the difficulties together.

Ask them specifically whether they have had thoughts of **harming themselves** or **ending their life**. Stay calm and remain non-judgmental. It is important to ask about self harm and suicidal thinking to assess whether they are safe or at risk of harm. It may be a huge relief for them to reveal they have contemplated **suicide**. Asking whether they have had thoughts of suicide does not put the idea in their mind, it may save their life.

You can then let them know that you are going to get them help and support to manage these feelings.

Keep making a connection with them - it is so important for them to talk to someone if they are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, depressed or suicidal.

Let the young person know you're human and also go through difficult times.

Let them know you don't have all the answers but you want to help and support them.

Remind them you are there for them fully and unconditionally.

Always be honest – teenagers are hyper-aware of dishonesty.

Remind young people what they are bringing to their friends and family, their strengths, what you love about them, how loved they are.

Let them know they are deeply cared for and loved and that you are there for them to help them get through this, there are things you can do together to help them feel better.

Remind them we all have bad days, bad weeks, and days and weeks where we are feeling low.

That is part of the normal human experience and part of life. It passes.

Things will get better. There is hope.

Tell them that it is a sign of strength to put your hand up and ask for some help. It can be a huge relief to say out loud "I'm not myself at the moment, I'm feeling really anxious, or depressed and I need some help to get through this".

Let them know it is **ok to admit you are not coping**, you are feeling overwhelmed, you are not sleeping, you are feeling sick in the tummy or have headaches from stress or anxiety and that you need to **learn some strategies to manage this**.

Tell them "if you are struggling, please speak up, talk to your parents, a friend, talk to a trusted adult, I'll take you to see a GP to get help to deal with the issues you are facing at the moment, **don't struggle alone. There is always hope**. No matter how bad you are feeling now, things will get better, the crisis will pass."

Keep reminding them - there is someone in their corner and they mustn't suffer in silence. They are not alone. *With support and help they will feel better again.*

Explore the key people they feel they can talk to : who are their trusted adults?

Encourage them to always seek help and let them know what their support options are – parents, other trusted adults, siblings, other relatives, friend's parents, school counsellors, school tutors, year co-ordinator, GP, psychologist, church elders

There are pathways at school to get help such as talking to their tutor or year co-ordinator, a teacher they connect with, the school counsellor or school psychologist.

If you don't have the answers or solutions, you can say "let's get someone to help that might know more about this"

Kids may feel disconnected from their parents – parents need to directly engage and not shy away from difficult conversations. Try and connect with them in an authentic and meaningful way, regularly. **Keep checking in.**

Prioritise family meals with no phones at the table to enable the family to connect and talk, prioritise spending time together, away from phones and television.

Take time each day to talk to them without multi-tasking, without distractions, when you are fully focussed on them.

Go for a walk or drive together so you can talk without the distractions of phones, TV, other family members. It can be less confrontational for them to speak shoulder to shoulder rather than face to face with eye contact.

Online questionnaires can be useful (eg Black Dog Institute website) to help screen for mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Take action if you feel your teen is not doing well, **early intervention** is key.

If you are concerned about your child and it is not a life threatening situation with regards to safety, see your **General Practitioner**. A GP can diagnose conditions such as anxiety and depression, recommend appropriate therapies (lifestyle measures, psychologists, medication), can complete a mental health care plan (MHCP) to get access to subsidised sessions with a psychologist (recently increased to 20 sessions per year), rule out medical conditions which may be contributing (eg iron deficiency, anaemia, underactive thyroid) and provide ongoing support. It may be appropriate for your child to see the GP with you and then alone.

Headspace clinics (headspace.org.au) are open nationally and can provide free or low cost face to face, online and telephone support for mental, physical and sexual health issues. The centres are often staffed by GPs, psychologists, counsellors, vocational workers.

From 15yo, youth are entitled to confidential health care and can have their own Medicare card.

If you are very concerned for their safety (eg they are self harming, talking about wanting to die, or planning to end their life) take them to the nearest emergency department or call 000 for an ambulance.

Important lifestyle measures to promote wellbeing and positive mental health

Adequate sleep – teenagers need 9-9.5 hours sleep per night, many don't get anywhere near this amount. Remove devices from their bedrooms to try and promote adequate sleep. Lack of sleep can lead to irritability, mood swings, difficulty coping, anxiety, depression, reduced motivation, poor energy levels, reduced sports and academic performance, reduced learning and memory, reduced immunity, risk taking behaviours.

Meditation apps (Smiling Mind, Calm, Headspace), a **bed time routine** and **melatonin** can all assist teens to get to sleep

Regular exercise is important for physical and mental wellbeing, sleep, stress management, connecting with friends. Think stretches, walking the dog, walking with friends or family, swimming, running, hiking, dancing, riding a bike, team sports.

Healthy diet – balanced diet of fresh, unprocessed foods from all the food groups, adequate iron intake, regular meals, minimise fast food, lots of water to drink, eating as a family

Set limits on screen time – to promote physical activity and face to face connections with friends and family. As much as parents worry about **social media use**, connecting with friends online can improve wellbeing and reduce distress. Be their parent and not their friend in setting limits. You have years to be their friend.

Achievement – help them set mini goals – achieving them boosts self-esteem, confidence and motivation and should be celebrated, and will inspire setting more goals. Start with realistic, smaller goals which play to their strengths and interests.

Connecting with others – encourage and facilitate them talking to and seeing friends and family, or spending time with their pets – this releases a hormone called oxytocin, the warm, fuzzy, love hormone that promotes feelings of bonding, love, connectedness and empathy; oxytocin promotes wellbeing and helps people build relationships. If they feel shy or awkward organising to catch up with a friend, perhaps you can facilitate it by contacting their parents. You offering them a hug or sitting with them and holding them offers them a physical closeness which releases oxytocin to promote calmness and a sense of safety and security.

Get your teen involved - Suggest activities which complement their interests and talents— such as sports, art, dance, music classes, after-school clubs, church youth groups. They may lack interest and motivation initially, however as they re-engage with the world, they will regain interest and enthusiasm.

Promote volunteerism – doing things for others boosts mood and self esteem. Find things they are interested in and encourage them to volunteer to help give them purpose, routine and structure eg working at an animal shelter, a homeless shelter, assisting an elderly neighbour or relative.

Enjoyment from activities - help them work out what makes life worth living, what brings them joy, what makes them feel relaxed / happy / peaceful. It might be things like hobbies, music, singing, watching movies, dancing, cooking, meditating, running, walking outside in nature, swimming, cycling, spending time with friends. Encourage and facilitate these activities.

Parents can model lifestyle measures that promote wellbeing and positive physical and mental health.

Young people supporting friends with mental health difficulties

If they are worried about a friend's mental health, encourage their friend to talk to their parents, a trusted adult, someone at school like a teacher or tutor, or their GP.

They can say to their friend "I'm worried about you, you don't seem yourself, you are saying things that are concerning me and I care about you, so we need to get you some help". If they can't talk to their parents, say to them – "I have a good GP, I'm going to make an appointment for you and will take you there and will wait for you". Or "I'm going to take you to our nearest Headspace clinic". It will be such a relief to them to know that someone

cares and that they are going to get some help. They may not even know how to take the first step to getting help, so you or your teen can do it for them.

If they refuse help now, remind them that you are there to listen and support them and encourage them to keep talking and how to get help. Keep checking in on them.

Remind them you care, they are not alone, things will get better and that there is hope.

Remind them they can also call Kids Helpline or Lifeline for advice and support.

Role of psychologists

Psychologists assess, diagnose and treat mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. They can develop a management plan to promote recovery which involves talking therapies such as CBT (a type of therapy which aims to challenge and change unhelpful thinking styles and behaviours and provide strategies and problem solving skills to respond to difficult situations), help to understand symptoms and triggers, lifestyle advice to promote better mental health, and advice regarding treatments and strategies to manage specific conditions. They can be a great person to chat to as they are not related to family, friends or school and can provide objective, professional advice to help the teen navigate a pathway forward.

Cost (and long wait lists) can be a barrier to seeing a psychologist.

Mental Health Care Plans from your GP can lead to a Medicare subsidy for the sessions. GPs can also apply for a Mental Health Triage through their Primary Health Network to try and arrange low cost sessions with a psychologist.

There are useful **apps** available which can deliver effective therapies for conditions such as anxiety and depression, especially when cost and accessibility around seeing a psychologist face to face are an issue. Some are free and they can be a great stepping stone to recovery or whilst waiting to see a psychologist.

Examples include Mood Gym, My Compass, HeadGear, Bite Back (suggest go to the Black Dog Institute website and look at “Digital tools and Apps”), Inroads (anxiety and alcohol program).

- Lifeline 13 11 14 (24 hour service)
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (24 hour for 5-25yo)
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- Mental Health Line 1800 011 511 (24 hour, NSW)
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 46 36
- Butterfly Foundation 1800 33 4673 – eating disorders
- eheadspace – eheadspace.org.au - online counselling
- Headspace – 1800 650 890 – 12-25yo [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)
- Inroads program to manage anxiety and drinking (17-30yo) [inroads.org.au](https://www.inroads.org.au)
- Re-train your brain (18-30yo) additional anxiety and alcohol support for those already seeing a psychologist [retrainyourbrainonline.com](https://www.retrainyourbrainonline.com)
- Positive Choices for alcohol and other drug information [positivechoices.org.au](https://www.positivechoices.org.au)
- Apps:

- Mood Gym : free, 16+, ANU
- My Compass – free, 18+, Black Dog Institute (BDI)
- Head Gear – free, 18+, BDI
- Bite Back – free, 13-16yo, BDI

For parents supporting young people, summary

- Remind them, you are not alone, we are in this together
- Promote adequate sleep, healthy diet, regular exercise
- Go for a walk or drive together – shoulder to shoulder is less confrontational
- Prioritise family meals
- Set limits on screen time
- Get your teen involved
- Promote volunteerism
- Don't struggle alone, don't suffer in silence
- There is always hope, things will get better, this crisis will pass
- You are deeply loved and cared for
- Help is available, get support and you will feel better

Tell them regularly

- You are important
- You are loved
- You are needed
- You are worthwhile
- You are enough
- It OK to have good days and bad days
- Its OK to cry about everything and nothing
- Its OK to feel frustrated, sad, anxious, scared
- Its OK to feel – learn to sit with your feeling

Keep connecting with your teen, keep encouraging them to talk. Be there for them.