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# Reopening, School, and Stress: A Guide for Parents with Teens



Few people remember their adolescence as a smooth and peaceful time in their lives—and that’s without the added weight of a global health crisis. Parenting an adolescent today comes with its own unique set of challenges, not only since teens and their parents have just spent the last year confined to close quarters, but because teens are dealing with isolation at a time in their lives when socializing is key to their development. Additionally, the now wide-spread availability of the COVID-19 vaccine means that teens are going back to group activities, including summer camps, team sports, and eventually school. For many, the anticipation of going back to “normal life” has meant worsening social anxiety.

The mental health impact for adolescents amid the pandemic is alarming: According to the Mott Poll Report, one in three teen girls and one in five teen boys has experienced worsening anxiety and depression since March of 2020. Following this trend, PBS reports that rates of health insurance claims for intentional self-harm among adolescents nearly doubled in March and April 2020, compared to the same months in 2019, and claims for teen drug overdoses increased by 95 percent in March and 120 percent in April compared to the year before. Rates of both remained elevated through November. Even more troublingly, suicide is now the second leading cause of death for adolescents in the USA.

As a parent, it can be difficult and stressful to know what to do and when to act. Whether teens are experiencing mental health issues on the milder end of the spectrum—such as stress and trouble concentrating—or more severe symptoms such as self-harm or suicidal ideation, parents can benefit from recognizing signs of distress and following up in a way that is supportive and effective in addressing their teens’ mental health needs. With that in mind, we created this adolescent mental health guidebook for parents. Featuring guidance from expert child mental health clinicians Renee Schneider, PhD, and Katherine McKenna, LCSW, this resource is designed to help the parents in your workforce understand whether their teen needs professional mental health support.

One thing to keep in mind as you read: Parents know their children best, and what is typical for one teen may not be for another. It’s essential to pay attention to changes that are causing them distress or disrupting their functioning on a consistent basis.

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## 1 in 5

teen boys has experienced worsening anxiety and depression since March of 2020

# What you should know about adolescent mental health

## 1. Adolescents may show they're struggling in different ways than young children.

When young children are in distress, they often let us know right away by having a tantrum or acting out; teens aren't always as clear about their feelings. As parents of teens may know, distressed adolescents can be prone to outbursts too, but also tend to show a lack of engagement or withdrawal from activities, interests, and relationships, as well as consistent defiance or irritability. Other signs that a teen is in distress can include:

- Low energy or extreme fatigue
- Sleeping for much longer and more often than before
- Picking at their food or eating less; losing weight
- Falling behind on tasks like schoolwork
- Saying they don't care about anything

According to Schneider, when considering adolescent mental health, it's important to remember that a common reaction to stress in teens is [avoidance](#). While avoidance can be a normal reaction, it can also become problematic. It's important to pay attention when the listed factors cause your teen to exhibit avoidant behaviors, like pulling away and wanting to be apart from friends, family, activities, and social situations.

## 2. Teens need to socialize with their peers.

Adolescence is a crucial time for emotional development and your teen's peers are a big part of that process. Teens create strong peer groups that help them mature in specific ways, mainly by developing independence from family relationships. This is a vital step in identity formation, helping them develop conflict resolution skills and emotional resiliency.

During the pandemic, adolescents may be unable to see their friends in person, but they still need to work through that development stage. Often, this manifests as more screen time than usual—whether that's via text, video chat, TikTok or other social media. According to McKenna, "That's generally okay, but if you notice your teen spending multiple hours per day mindlessly scrolling through social media feeds, you may want to support them in finding comfort elsewhere."

Now that in-person activities are becoming more safe and popular, it may be a good time to encourage your adolescent to branch out in their activities. While this can be a difficult transition to navigate—many children and teens have developed back-to-school anxiety—it may be ultimately worthwhile for your teen's social development.

See tips on healthy digital socializing for teens on page 5.

### 3. You don't need to have perfect mental health to model good self-care habits for your adolescent.

Adolescents are far from alone in their mental health struggles these days—if you are also feeling sad, anxious, stressed, or angry during the pandemic, you're in good company. In addition to COVID-19, we've been emotionally challenged and drained over the past year by the many senseless acts of racial injustice against Black and Asian Americans, numerous natural disasters, and a highly contentious election.

**Being honest about your own mental health challenges can be a valuable lesson for your teen. Your personal emphasis on self-care models for your adolescent that these kinds of struggles are not only normal, but can be addressed and managed in healthy ways. Your example of successfully managing difficult feelings can provide an invaluable example for your teen to follow.**

### 4. Your expectations for your adolescent will change as they grow up, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond.

Even though the rollout of [COVID-19 vaccines](#) brings hope that this stressful chapter of our lives may soon come to a close, the events of the last year have had a significant mental health impact on many people. Every aspect of life, from seemingly minor habits to major decisions, has been disrupted. Our expectations of ourselves and each other have to change as well as we to continue to navigate the road ahead.

Adolescence is already a time of significant transition. Who your teen was six months ago may be different from who they are now—even outside the context of a pandemic. It's worth taking a step back to examine your own perceptions and expectations. Give your teen some space to grow, while supporting their efforts to develop good mental health practices.



# How to promote good mental health habits for your teen

## 1. Have open conversations.

Communicating openly and directly can build trust, and help your teen see that they can communicate openly and directly with you.

Remember, though, that **communicating doesn't just mean talking**—it also means listening. You may be tempted to jump in with a solution, or your first reaction may be disapproval or judgment. Try to remember that letting your teen talk things through is crucial, and that listening doesn't mean agreeing, it's just a place to start.

## 2. Ask and observe.

Whether they're confiding in you or you're just having an everyday conversation, **pay attention to behavior, not just words**, especially if you notice any distinct changes that are out of the ordinary for your teen.

For example, their words may be upbeat and positive, but they're also extra-fidgety, or experiencing unexplained nausea or headaches, rapid breathing, and attempts to avoid—all signs of anxiety. Meanwhile, excessive fatigue, withdrawal, loss of interest in activities, and tearfulness may be symptoms of depression. And remember, if it feels like your teenager may be a danger to themselves, listen to your gut—it's better to overreact in this scenario than underreact. According to McKenna:

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**When adolescents are struggling with their mental health, they can become extremely overwhelmed and distressed. This can lead to thoughts about and/or urges to hurt themselves. During these times, it is important to be direct with your child about their safety, and access emergency services right away.”**

– Katherine McKenna, LCSW

## 3. Build their resilience by spending time together.

The pandemic has prompted many families to spend much more time together than they did before, but simply being around one another—such as doing independent activities in the same room— isn't always quality time. The connection that comes from intentionally participating in positive activities together, even if only for five minutes, can have incalculable benefits for your teen's mental health.

“Planning some of these activities can not only build resilience in your relationship, but also in your teen, by helping them develop other attributes like fairness, empathy, communication, problem-solving, and cooperation,” says McKenna.

## Social Media for Adolescents

What is a healthy amount of online socializing during the pandemic? What about in “normal” times? Here are some ways you can differentiate whether or not your teen is developing healthy relationships, on and offline:

- Understand the unique environment we’re in, especially in the context of your teen’s development.
- Remember that it is possible—and advisable—to set realistic social media boundaries.
- Focus on the quality of social media time, not just quantity. Teach your teen to think critically about the online content they consume, and how to accurately interpret what they see and hear.
- Look for social media alternatives that still allow for socializing, like outdoor and socially distanced activities.

For more information about social media best practices for adolescents, read [How Much Is Too Much? Adolescent Social Media Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

## 4. Manage your expectations.

“Teenagers may look like adults, but they’re not. One day you might swear your adolescent is all grown up, and the next you feel like they’re having temper tantrums,” McKenna says. “That type of inconsistency is a normal part of adolescence, since teens don’t have the tools to manage their emotions yet.” This means they are still developing in every way, and even if they’re done growing physically, they still have a ways to go with emotional development.

Also remember that **teens will be impacted by the pandemic in different ways, and these impacts can change their behavior, even day to day**. Siblings living in the same house can have very different reactions to what’s going on, so it’s helpful to temper your expectations, and know that this is OK.

## 5. Remember that it can be hard to understand the difference between normal teenage behavior and a need for professional help.

Between moodiness, rudeness, sleeping in until noon, snide remarks, eye-rolling, and constant tech usage, it can be just as challenging being around a teen as it is to be one. While these are all considered fairly normal adolescent behaviors, it's helpful to stay aware of when they happen, especially if there's a marked behavior change within a short period of time that negatively impacts your teen's functioning.

**If you're not sure what behaviors may be concerning, talk with your pediatrician or a licensed therapist. Additionally, if you notice signs of self-harm or suicidal ideation in your teen, seek immediate help.** Get professional input on what might be going on and what steps you or your teen can take to feel better.

Adolescence is a confusing and often tumultuous time, both within and outside the context of the pandemic. When parenting teens, it's important to remember that it's challenging for them to cope with seemingly basic life problems, like rejection and bad grades. They may look like adults, but they lack the mental health tools that adults develop over years of experience.

Raising an adolescent can be stressful, and that stress can affect your life both at work and at home. We offer this guide as a resource to help you determine how your teen is doing, so you and your family can progress towards a more peaceful everyday life, during the pandemic and beyond.

### Other helpful resources for parents:

- [How to Support Your Kids in the Age of Coronavirus: 7 Therapist-Approved Tips](#)
- [Navigating Back-to-School Amid COVID-19: Mental Health Tips for Parents](#)
- [What We Don't Heal, We Repeat: Creating Connection with Your Teens](#)



## About Lyra

Lyra provides care for your emotional and mental health how, when, and where you need it, at no cost to you. Whether you're feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed, support from Lyra can get you back on your feet.

## About the Experts

**Katie McKenna** is a Clinical Lead at Lyra Health and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who specializes in depression and crisis management in adolescent and adult populations. She has 15 years of experience providing community-based mental health and crisis services to underserved populations. Prior to joining Lyra, Katie was a therapist with a clinic providing evidence-based treatment to suicidal teenagers involved in the San Francisco foster care system. Katie also provided in-person mental health services for San Francisco based non-profits. In her current role at Lyra Health, Katie consults with employers and managers on crisis management strategy for employees in distress, and offers clinical support to the clinicians in the Lyra Health network.

**Renee Schneider, PhD**, is a clinical psychologist with extensive experience and skill in the areas of crisis management, psychological assessment, clinical supervision and intervention, and empirical research. Dr. Schneider also specializes in supporting children and families.

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