



Adolescent Mental Health

Adolescence is a period of transition marked by physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, bringing with it a specific set of challenges that can impact mental health. Whilst most Australian young people are happy and feel positive about the future, studies reveal a rising prevalence of mental health challenges among teenagers.

This article explores various facets of adolescent mental health and looks at how to best support the wellbeing of our youth.

Understanding Teenager Development

Most of us are aware teenagers experience substantial hormonal changes, but did you know their brain also undergoes significant restructuring?

Their prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making and impulse control, is still developing, causing teens to rely on the part of the brain called the 'amygdala' (associated with emotions, impulses, and instinctive behaviour) to make decisions and solve problems, more than adults do.

Adolescence is furthermore a time when young people become more aware of societal expectations (including peers) and work towards independence, with identity formation becoming a central focus.

Adolescence can also be a challenging time for the entire family, due to the teenager's need for independence.

This can come with risk-taking behaviour and pushing boundaries. In addition, hormonal and neurological changes cause teenagers to feel and express emotions strongly, which may increase conflict at home.

Promoting Good Teenager Mental Health

A major protective factor to a teenager's wellbeing, is the quality of their relationship with their caregivers. Despite the conflict that may arise during this phase, they need to feel love and support. How this is best conveyed depends on their preference, but a smile, kind word or gesture, or a hug – even if reluctantly received – can go a long way.

Showing interest in what they are interested in creates opportunities for meaningful conversations. Teenagers usually respond better to informal chats. This can be achieved by having smaller conversations more often and talking whilst engaging in another activity, such as during a car ride. Being aware of your timing is also helpful; you will generally have better chats when your teen is happy and relaxed, as opposed to tired or irritable.

Another factor in a young person's emotional wellbeing is physical health. Being physically healthy is no guarantee to avoid mental health challenges, but it's a significant protective factor. Exercising, eating healthy, getting enough sleep (between 9-11 hours for younger teens and 8-10 for older teens), and balancing screen time are key here.



Signs of Concerns

It is normal for teenagers to go through times of low mood, poor motivation, and sleeping troubles. This does not automatically indicate a mental health issue. However, if you notice any of the following signs, and they continue for a few weeks, it's important to speak to your child:

- Seeming down or sad a lot of the time
- Ongoing worries or fears
- Sudden changing behaviour, sometimes for no obvious reason
- Trouble eating or sleeping
- Dropping school performance
- Avoiding social contact or problems fitting in
- Ongoing physical aches and pains
- Being anxious about weight or appearance
- Acting-out behaviours (e.g., fighting, stealing, or truancy).

Talking to Your Teenager

Before starting a conversation about your concerns, reflect on how you are feeling. If you are worried or upset, this could come across to your teen, who are often hyperaware of how others might respond. To be perceived as supportive, it's important to stay calm, listen and validate their experience.

Next, consider setting the scene. Teenagers often prefer not to be eye to eye, so consider going for a drive or walk. You can start the conversation by posing an open question, such as: "How is school going?" or "How are you getting on with your friends?"

When focusing on more specific thoughts and feelings, "I" statements are important: "I feel like you haven't been yourself lately. How are things?"

Consider your teenager's level of understanding and use language that feels natural to you. If they open up, reassure them you're glad they are talking to you. Take their feelings seriously by listening carefully and being non-judgemental. Steer away from offering solutions and be aware of your nonverbal communication like tone and body language.

Additional Support

There might be times when your support is not enough. Perhaps you are worried you cannot keep them safe, or perhaps the young person denies there is an issue or refuses help.

If you ever worry about your teenager's immediate safety, ring 000 (AUS) or 111 (NZ).

If concerns are not immediate, you can let your teenager know there are other trusted adults they can talk to, such as their GP. Young people in Australia can also use the [Kids Helpline](#) (1800 55 1800) while those in New Zealand can use [0800 What's Up?](#) (0800 942 8787)

Another possibility is to access support yourself. A professional can speak with you about your concerns and guide you in supporting your teenager at home. Acacia EAP has a range of qualified and experienced mental health professionals that you can arrange to speak with 24/7.