



SPOTLIGHT ON
TEEN
MENTAL
HEALTH
FOR BACK-TO-SCHOOL

» WRITTEN BY SHAWN RADCLIFFE

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EING A TEENAGER IS CHALLENGING. WITH SO MANY CHANGES HAPPENING IN their bodies and brains—along with the pressures of school and their social lives—it is normal for teens to feel overwhelmed.

On top of this stress, 1 in 5 adolescents has a mental disorder, such as depression or anxiety, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Effective treatments are available for these conditions—including a combination of psychotherapy and medication—but less than half of affected teens were treated in the past year.

Although teens may feel like they are dealing with mental illness alone, a strong support network of friends and families can encourage them to seek out the treatment they need. Improving their mental health earlier can also help them as they enter adulthood.

“It’s the untreated mental disorders that are at higher risk,” says Dr. Eve Weber, a clinical psychologist with a practice in Williamsburg, Virginia. “So the sooner interventions or treatments are in place, then I think that the adolescent or child may develop better coping skills.”

Teens face a wide range of mental health problems, including mood and anxiety disorders, behavioral problems, eating disorders, substance abuse and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Many of these conditions are more common than parents may realize and a couple—such as “sexting” and self-injury—may not receive as much attention as they should.

SEXTING COMMON AMONG TEENS

“Sexting”—the sending of sexually-explicit text messages—has yet to be categorized as a mental illness, but it can have long-term consequences for a teens mental health and even their adult life.

“Too frequently they think that if they’re a teen and are sending it to a teen, there’s nothing wrong with that,” says Weber, “but it’s considered trafficking child porn. And there are criminal charges for that.”

While some states have laws aimed specifically at sexting, Virginia treats it as child pornography, a felony that can lead to years of prison time. A teen may even be added to the registry of sex offenders.

A 2014 survey by researchers at Drexel University found that more than 50 percent of the people surveyed had “sexted” while they were minors. More than a quarter had included naked or other sexual images of themselves in the text message.

Why are so many teens sexting? Because this behavior is so common, some may think it is no big deal, especially when they don’t realize the potential legal consequences. Others may just be going along with the crowd.

“Part of it could be personality, maybe some maladaptive characteristics that the child may have,” says Weber, “but it could be anxiety, some social anxiety—trying to fit in in a way that they’re also susceptible to some peer pressure, maybe bullying.”

Unfortunately, like most things digital, it is very easy for a text message intended for one person to be forwarded—accidentally or intentionally—to many other students in a teen’s school. This sudden exposure is embarrassing and may lead to harassment, further bullying as well as long-term emotional problems.

SELF-INJURY OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

Self-injury is another mental health problem that is more common among teens than many parents realize. One 2012 study in the journal “Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health” found that around 17 percent of adolescents had harmed themselves at some point in their lives, without intending to commit suicide.



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Mr. Mellette is an active member of the community and has a leadership role in a number of local and professional organizations including board president of Literacy for Life and Hospice House and Support Care of Williamsburg. His mother, a physician, was a pioneer in medical oncology treatment and an important influence on Mr. Mellette’s career interest in health care law. Let Peter Mellette and Mellette, PC help you with your legal needs.



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MENTAL HEALTH RED FLAGS

Mood changes are common among teenagers, so not every down day is a sign of a bigger problem. Parents should be on the lookout for more severe changes.

“Usually it becomes a disorder when someone has occupationally, educationally or socially impaired functioning—[meaning] if it starts interrupting their life on a regular basis,” says Weber.

Parents should keep an eye out for these common mental health red flags:

- + BAD MOODS THAT LAST FOR MORE THAN A FEW DAYS
- + UNEXPECTED PERSONALITY SHIFTS SUCH AS ANGER OR IRRITABILITY
- + EXCESSIVE SLEEPING, INCLUDING HAVING DIFFICULTY GETTING OUT OF BED
- + WITHDRAWAL FROM FRIENDS
- + LOSS OF INTEREST IN FAVORITE ACTIVITIES
- + SHARP AND UNEXPECTED DROP IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
- + DECREASE IN SELF-ESTEEM
- + DRAMATIC CHANGES IN APPETITE OR SUDDEN CHANGES IN WEIGHT



While females are more likely to cut themselves with a sharp object, males may engage in other behaviors to cause themselves pain.

“When males self-injure,” says Weber, “it presents differently—a lot of times they’ll initiate a fight where somebody would hit them, or they’ll dare somebody to hit them.”

For parents, it can be difficult to understand why a teen would hurt themselves. For some teens, self-injury provides a way to cope with things that are going on in their life. They sometimes describe the physical pain as providing an outlet for emotional pain—in a way that they can control.

“You get that release after that pain goes away. So teens will self-injure,

even though they’re experiencing pain and an unpleasant effect or reaction to the pain,” says Weber.

Not every teen that hurts themselves intends to commit suicide. Research, though, shows those teens who self-injure are more likely to attempt suicide later, especially when they frequently hurt themselves.

HELP FOR STRUGGLING TEENS

One of the best ways for parents to help their teens is to keep the lines of communication open. Let your teen know that they can talk to you about anything. But if you notice any red flags, (see left sidebar) it’s time to seek professional help.

“Generally the first line of defense is the pediatrician,” says Weber, “because they can begin the evaluation by ruling out any medical, developmental, physical or medication side effects that may be causing the symptoms.”


The doctor may refer a teen to an adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist. Treatment will depend upon the underlying mental health issue, but in many cases a multi-pronged approach is more effective.

“Medication may be fine. And psychotherapy may be fine,” says Weber. “But sometimes they need a combination of both. A pill just isn’t going to get to the root of the problem.”

Certain types of therapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, can help teens break free of their negative patterns of thinking and behavior. These techniques provide them with more healthy ways to cope with stress in their life, both now and later on during adulthood.

“If you teach them cognitive behavioral training earlier,” says Weber, “then they’re like: ‘Okay, what’s another way I can look at this?’ So they don’t get stuck in that maladaptive thinking.”

To make this type of therapy more effective, parents can model these coping skills in their own lives.

“It’s good for [parents] to practice using it with some effective communication,” says Weber, “making sure they have empathy as they’re teaching it.” 

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP TEENS

Adolescence can be just as challenging for parents as for teens. But parents can help their children navigate the pressures and problems they will run into along the way. Here’s how:

- + **KEEP LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN AND HONEST.** EVEN BEFORE YOUR CHILDREN BECOME TEENS, LET THEM KNOW THAT THEY CAN TALK TO YOU ABOUT ANY TOPIC. LISTEN OPENLY AND SHARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES FROM YOUR TEENAGE YEARS.
- + **STAY INFORMED.** LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS THAT AFFECT TEENS CAN HELP YOU KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE ADOLESCENT YEARS.
- + **REMEMBER THAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE.** MANY EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS ARE AVAILABLE TO TREAT MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS, INCLUDING MEDICATIONS, PSYCHOTHERAPY AND CREATIVE THERAPIES.
- + **SEEK HELP EARLY.** IF YOU NOTICE ANY MENTAL HEALTH RED FLAGS (SEE LEFT SIDEBAR ON PAGE 22), MAKE AN APPOINTMENT FOR YOUR CHILD WITH THEIR PEDIATRICIAN OR DOCTOR.

LEARN MORE

- + VIRGINIA INTERNET LAWS: [BIT.LY/VANETLAWS](http://bit.ly/vanetlaws)
- + SEXTING & CONSEQUENCES: [BIT.LY/DREXELSTUDY](http://bit.ly/drexelstudy)
- + WHO SELF-INJURES?: [BIT.LY/WHOSELFINJURES](http://bit.ly/whoselfinjures)