

# Talking about mental health: 5 tips for parents of teens and young adults



Mental health is an important topic anytime. **During the pandemic, which 58% of teens say has affected their mental health,**<sup>1</sup> it may be even more so.

For some families, talking about mental health may be an everyday occurrence. For other families, it may be a new topic, and it may feel a little awkward at first. But the more you do it, the more comfortable it will feel — for you and for them.

If you're wondering how to get started, keep these five tips in mind.

- 1. Remember what being a teen is like.** Teenagers are going through a time of change. They may be getting their first job, learning to drive, hanging out with friends more and spending less time with parents.<sup>2</sup> That's all a normal part of development. At the same time, their brain is still developing, and the parts that control impulses and help them make decisions aren't fully formed.<sup>3</sup> Social media may also have an impact on teens' lives, making them feel anxious about whether others approve of them, overwhelmed by constant notifications and worried that they're missing out.<sup>4</sup> Frequent Instagram use for young women is also correlated with body dissatisfaction as well as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.<sup>5</sup>
- 2. Watch for cues.** Teens may bring up mental health topics on their own. They might mention what a friend is going through or how they're feeling themselves. It's important to listen, so you don't miss these opportunities.
- 3. Respect differences.** There's a good chance you and the teen or young adult in your life will have different opinions about political, social or other topics. While it may be tough, try to stay calm and respect their different views. This can help you build trust and make them more open to talking with you.<sup>2</sup> Instead of lecturing, help your teen plan how to make healthy choices about alcohol and drugs, relationships and other topics they'll face.<sup>2,6</sup>
- 4. Learn about mental health.** While many people have personal experience with depression, anxiety or other mental health concerns, for some people these topics are new. If you aren't familiar with these conditions, educate yourself before you bring them up. Also, know what signs to watch for. If someone is feeling sad or withdrawn for more than a couple of weeks, having severe mood swings, worrying a lot or getting into fights with others, they may be dealing with a mental health issue and need help.<sup>7</sup>
- 5. Don't avoid tough topics.** If you think someone may be having suicidal thoughts, ask. If the answer is yes, seek professional help including contacting emergency services. Talking about suicide will not cause it.<sup>2</sup> Also, don't shy away from bringing up traumatic events that you may have experienced, together or alone. But watch to see what they're comfortable with. While some young people want to talk, others may not feel comfortable talking about traumatic situations — or at least not right away. Don't pressure them.<sup>8</sup>

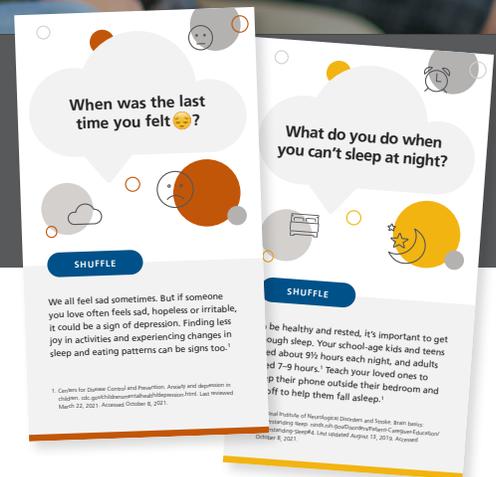
## Eating disorders

When people are dealing with overwhelming feelings, they sometimes develop eating disorders. Eating disorders often begin in the teens and early 20s and during times of change and stress, such as starting college or a new job. While they are more common in girls, boys can experience them too. Runners, wrestlers, gymnasts and dancers are more likely to have eating disorders.<sup>9</sup>

## Alcohol use

Different cultures have different norms about alcohol. While some countries permit use during the teenage years, others don't allow it until later — or ban it completely. Some teens and young adults drink because they're stressed, dealing with anxiety or depression, or feeling pressured by friends.<sup>10</sup> Drinking has been linked to lower grades, absences from school and less participation in youth activities, so be sure to watch for use.<sup>11</sup>

Wondering how to start talking about mental health? Check out these conversation starters you and your family can use together. Download at [optumconversation.com](https://optumconversation.com).



If you or someone you know has thoughts about suicide, seek help right away. To talk with a trained counselor, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline anytime at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). **If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 — or go to the closest emergency room.**

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