

Mental Health 101: Typical Versus Concerning Teen Behavior

Below, we have compiled a list of typical and concerning teen behaviors. Concerning behaviors may be indicative of a mental health issue if they are seen over a several weeks, if they impact more than one area of your child's life, and if there are multiple behaviors you are concerned about.

Typical Teen Behavior

- Staying up and sleeping in later than they did as a younger child.
- Occasional frustration, moodiness, and irritability.
- Trying out new clothing styles, interests, hobbies, and ways of speaking.
- Wanting to spend time away from parents and with their peers.
- Occasional disagreements and arguments with parents, siblings, and other family members.
- Preoccupation with cell phone or social media.
- Challenging home and school rules and social norms on occasion.
- Impulsivity and occasional experimentation with risky behaviors.
- Periods of concern or stress about school, grades, and their futures.
- Occasional lack of desire to complete school assignments.
- Feeling self-conscious about their changing bodies.

Concerning Teen Behavior

- Marked change in sleep patterns, such as sleeping through most of the day or struggling to fall or stay asleep.
- A ongoing inability to cope with everyday challenges and setbacks.
- Intense frustration and irritability.
- Persistent moodiness and sadness that interferes with their ability to participate in activities and relationships.
- Consistent complaints of upset stomachs, dizziness, chest pain, racing heart, or shortness of breath that can't be explained by physical illness.
- Sudden changes in personality, particularly new and excessive anger.
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies that were previously very important to them.
- Abrupt or prolonged withdrawal from family and friends.
- Extreme defiance that results in disciplinary action.
- Stress from school that interferes with ability to participate in activities or get sufficient sleep.
- Sudden changes in academic performance, including failure to complete assignments and not caring about grades.
- Extreme focus on their body and perceived imperfections.

Statistics

- 1 in 6, 6 to 17 year-olds experience a mental health condition each year.
- Half of all lifetime mental health conditions begin before 14.
- Around 7% of children between 3 and 17 years old experience an anxiety disorder, and most people with anxiety disorders develop symptoms by 21.

Main References: [About Mental Illness: Mental Health Conditions \(NAMI\)](#) [Is This Typical Teenage Behavior or a Warning Sign of Mental Illness \(Healthline\)](#), [Mental Health and Teens: Watch for Danger Signs \(Healthy Children\)](#), [A Parent's Guide to Surviving the Teen Years \(Kid's Health\)](#) [Parenting Tweens: Everything You Should Know \(Child Mind Institute\)](#) [How Much Should I Worry? \(Hand Hold MA\)](#)

Some of the concerning behaviors listed above may be symptoms of mental health conditions that commonly occur in teens, such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD.

- **Depression** can be attributed to many things, such as life circumstances, genetics, brain chemistry, trauma, or physical illness. Some behaviors that may indicate that your teen is struggling with depression include *feeling down or irritable, changes in sleep and eating habits, loss of energy, lack of interest in activities they used to enjoy, and withdrawing from relationships.*
- **Anxiety** can include generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and specific phobias. Concerning behaviors to look out for include *lasting and exaggerated worry about everyday life, intense fear and avoidance of social interactions, and intense irrational fears that interfere with their ability to live their lives normally.* Complaints of physical symptoms like *dizziness, headaches, stomach aches, and chest pain* without a known cause can also be indicative of anxiety disorders.
- **ADHD** can present in a variety of ways. Teens with ADHD may appear *inattentive* (easily distracted, frequent daydreaming, difficulty focusing attention on one task), *hyperactive* (overly talkative, fidgeting or squirming, difficulty working quietly), *impulsive* (frequently interrupting teachers and friends, not considering consequences, difficulty waiting), or a combination. ADHD can present differently in girls. Not all behaviors associated with ADHD are negative; many people with ADHD are creative and can engage intently in activities they are interested in.

Resources for Concerned Parents

- It's important for you to trust your intuition regarding your concern for your teen and their mental health. As another Belmont parent said, *"We, as parents, get used to unusual behaviors in our teens and it can be hard to tell the difference between normal teenage behavior and an underlying, deeper problem. If you find yourself feeling very worried or frightened for your teen, trust your intuition and immediately seek help for them and for yourself."*
- If you are still concerned about your teen's moods and behavior, consider exploring Hand Hold MA's interactive tool to assess concerning behavior. For additional articles and tip sheets, see Belmont Wellness Coalition's website for a list of Mental Health Resources.
- Belmont Wellness Coalition also has a list of Therapy Resources for parents and teens.

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