

Everything You Wanted to Know about Teenagers, but Were Afraid to Ask

August 2018 by Lisa Turner, LMFT, Counselor

Adolescence is a time of great change: life is getting busier, responsibilities at school increase, work becomes an added responsibility for many, college and work decisions loom, and above all else, puberty hits.

Typical adolescent development includes physical, mental, emotional, and social changes. Physically, hormones change and so does a teenager's body and voice. Mentally, they develop abstract reasoning skills, begin forming their own beliefs, and question authority. Emotionally, mood shifts become more apparent, as does some impulsive behavior. And socially, the peer group (and social media) take on greater importance, there can be more experimentation, and sexual identity cements itself.

Most youth pass through these stages despite challenges. They thrive, mature, build competence and resiliency. But what if they don't? How does one know if a teenager is developing normally, and how does one know if they are having problems?

Trying to tell the difference between what expected behaviors are and what might be the signs of a mental illness isn't always easy. One or two symptoms alone can't predict a mental illness. But if a person is experiencing several at one time and the symptoms are causing serious problems in the ability to study, work, or relate to others, he or she should be seen by a mental health professional. People with suicidal thoughts or intent, or thoughts of harming others, need immediate attention.

Most everyone at some time in their life will experience periods of anxiety, sadness, and despair. These are normal reactions to the pain of loss, rejection, or disappointment. In fact, according to the National Council for Behavioral Health, the prevalence of anxiety disorders among teens in the United State is 31.9 percent, with 8.3 percent experiencing a severe impact from anxiety. The

prevalence for anxiety among females is higher than for males in this age range (12 – 17), and it increases as they get older. The median age of onset for anxiety is 11 years old. Depression also impacts girls more than boys – the prevalence of mood disorders in the United States for kids ages 12 – 17 is 14.3 percent, with 11.2 percent experiencing a severe impact.

Those living with serious mental illnesses, however, often experience more extreme reactions that can leave them mired in hopelessness. Signs and symptoms of serious mental illness in teenagers can cross physical, emotional, thought, and behavioral lines. Physical and emotional signs and symptoms can include extreme paranoia, hallucinations and delusions, hyperactivity, crying, substance use, and poor sleep patterns. A person can also experience symptoms that effect their cardiovascular system (rapid heartbeat, chest pain), respiratory system (shortness of breath), neurology (dizziness, headache, sweating), gastrointestinal system (nausea, choking, vomiting), and musculoskeletal system (aches, pains, restlessness). Signs and symptoms can also be apparent in someone's appearance, and effect their hormones.

Frequent self-critical thoughts; difficulty making decisions, concentrating, and remembering; pessimism; rigid thinking; and an altered sense of self in relation to others are just some of the thought life indicators of a mental illness. Non-suicidal self-injury is a behavior that would also indicate that a teen is struggling with something outside the norm. Examples of self-injury include cutting, hair pulling, burning, or otherwise inflicting pain on oneself. Other types of behavioral changes could include missing school. Typical adolescent behavior can look like withdrawing from family to spend time with friends, wanting privacy, and moving from childhood behaviors to teen behaviors. Warning signs that an adolescent is struggling with something outside of normal teenage behaviors would include withdrawing from life in general, secrecy and hiding, and losing interest in all hobbies and activities.

Risk factors for mental illness in adolescents are wide ranging but can include experiencing stressful events, abuse, or trauma; learned behavior; chemical imbalance; substance misuse; ongoing stress and anxiety, medical conditions and hormonal changes; and side effects of medication. According to the National Council for Behavioral Health, half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14; three-quarters of all mental illness will present by age 24.

Suicide can be a real risk for anyone struggling with mental illness. For teenagers, there is an increased risk due to a number of factors: impulsivity, lack of awareness of risk and time, substance misuse, and the influence of their peer group. The best way to approach this, or any situation where there is a

mental health concern, is to have a conversation. Asking a person “What’s going on?” or “What’s happening?” is an open-ended and non-threatening way to begin a dialogue.

Resilience is the ability to thrive in spite of risk or adversity. The term comes from physics: a resilient object bends under stress but then springs back rather than breaks. A resilient person not only springs back from adversity but also can become stronger in the process. The feeling of accomplishment that comes from solving life problems is the core of resilience. Resilience is a natural trait in all humans. Human brains are specifically wired to cope with problems and some would say, crave challenge. However, humans cannot survive and thrive alone – they require support and encouragement from others.

There are protective factors that can insulate teenagers from the effects of life and mental illness, and make them more resilient. Studies have shown that community is key to resilience, and that community can come in many forms. Family support, pro-social activities, good friend and peer support, and spirituality are found to be key in the lives of all young people. In fact, the most important component in a teenager’s life to help promote resilience and good mental health is feeling close to at least one adult.

The faith community has the opportunity to play an important role in this. In the Archdiocese, the offices of Adolescent Faith Formation, Catechetical Services, and Marriage and Family Life directly touch the lives of young people and are important protective factors. Catholic Charities also provides affordable mental health services to children and families.

Mental Health First Aid training for youth is an excellent way to learn more about how to identify healthy and unhealthy behaviors in adolescents, and how you can help a teenager experiencing a mental health crisis. Mental Health First Aid “is the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate treatment and support are received or until the crisis resolves.” This training is available for individual adults and organizations. For more information, or to talk to a counselor, go to www.catholiccharitiesdubuque.org/catholic-charities-services/counseling-services, or call 800-772-2758.

A Blessing for Those in Need of Healing

May you be held in love.

May tenderness carry you.

May the pain you know too well be lifted from you.

*May your heart's heaviness be lightened by grace. May
hope abound for you.*

May you know you are not alone but always loved by God.

*And may you dwell in peace in the midst of the depth and breadth of your
being.*

Amen.