



mental health & your teenager

It may surprise some parents to learn that one in five people will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. Teenagers are no exception, with one study finding more than 20% of adolescents between 12 and 16 have mental health problems.

Kids Help Line, a confidential telephone support service, has seen a 200% increase in mental health calls since 1994. Depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorders and problems managing anger were major concerns for kids aged 10 to 14. For callers between 15 and 18, the major problems were depression, self-harming behaviours, suicidal thoughts and anxiety.

Unfortunately, some people still think of mental health in terms of ‘madness’ or ‘craziness’. This stigma can discourage parents from contacting services when their children need help. Your General Practitioner or community health centre can be a good starting point for getting help.

Depression, for example, has a big impact on a young person’s life. It can impair their ability to enjoy life, affect school performance and relationships with friends. But rather than being seen as an illness, depression is sometimes seen as a personal weakness or failure.

Similarly, eating disorders aren’t just out-of-control diets, but mental health problems which need to be addressed.

Parents of teenagers with mental health problems will often wait to see if a problem sorts itself out. However, if a problem lasts for more than a few weeks and has a significant effect on the young person’s day-to-day functioning, it is probably time to seek help. Remember the earlier the intervention, the better the results. Like most physical illnesses, mental health problems can be treated. Effective treatments including counselling and support from community-based services can make a difference and can help prevent problems recurring.

Promoting good mental health

Young people today face unprecedented levels of expectation. Even some older people spend their lives thinking, “this relationship (or these children, this job) will make me happy”. Today’s world is also intensely competitive. Teenagers are having to face these challenges much earlier. Too many end up seeing themselves as failures or ‘losers’ at an early age.

Promoting good mental health in young people is the key to preventing mental illness. Young people need to learn how to deal with life’s obstacles. A healthy self-esteem, good relationships with family members and school friends can help teenagers weather the ups and downs of adolescence and help ward off potential mental health problems.

common adolescent mental health problems

- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Eating disorders
- ◆ Anxiety disorders (such as panic attacks)
- ◆ Challenging and disruptive behaviours
- ◆ Attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (difficulty concentrating, easily distracted)
- ◆ Post-traumatic stress
- ◆ Psychoses (distorted perception, hearing voices, paranoia)
- ◆ Suicide

Extracts from the
NSW HEALTH
Family Help Kit

Sources for Mental Health, Depression and Eating Disorders: NSW Health, Kids Help Line, Reach Out website, NHS website. Additional information for Suicide and Depression pages came from ‘Leaving Early’ by Bronwyn Donaghy

eating disorders

– they're **not just** about being **thin**

case study

Alison's parents were becoming concerned that she wasn't eating as well as she used to. It had been nearly three weeks since she'd had a proper 'sit down' meal. She was also becoming increasingly moody and argumentative which was unusual for her. Each time her parents tried to talk with her, she would tell them to "leave me alone!"

Her brother Mark said a few weeks ago he heard some girls at school teasing her about being a bit chubby. She wasn't – but one of the girls was jealous because a boy they all liked asked Alison out on a date. As if this wasn't bad enough, Alison's face began to break out in pimples soon after which made her feel even more unattractive.

Alison's story shows how problems can arise from seemingly trivial events. As adults, we tend to 'shrug off' these moments, but for adolescents this is not always so easy. They're often experiencing many changes in their lives and lack an adult's self confidence or experience to deal with them.

Feeling they can control at least one part of their lives through eating is common among female teenagers (and a smaller percentage of boys) with eating disorders.

For some, not eating acts as an emotional 'pain reliever.' Nothing else matters except how much they've eaten, what they weigh, what they'll eat next and how much control they can exercise over their food intake. By limiting their feelings to only food, other problems seem to disappear or become easier to manage.

Family problems, bullying, study pressure, low self-esteem, poor self-image, and physical and sexual abuse can all be underlying problems for an eating disorder.

Fashion pressures

Many girls also experience pressure from a society that promotes thin females. The media, advertising and popular culture all glamorise a thin 'look' in women by promoting the illusion that a perfect body brings with it a perfect life.

But most women do not conform to this 'fashionable' thin look. Research shows that if women were the same size as mannequins they would not have enough body fat to be able to menstruate.

Nature did not get it wrong but the pressure to be thin makes some girls dissatisfied and unhappy about their body image.

Though disordered eating is common, serious eating disorders are not common. Eating disorders affect both sexes, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable. Surveys indicate that girls as young as 6 to 8 years-of-age can believe an 'ideal weight' is thinner than their own body.

More and more boys are also worrying about body image. For example, some young men feel they need to 'bulk up' to be accepted and successful.

Eating disorders are serious concerns. As with all mental health issues, the earlier professional help is sought the better the outcomes.

Anorexia and bulimia – the most common eating disorders

Eating disorders are preoccupations with food, weight and appearance to the point where a person's health, relationships and other aspects of their day-to-day life are affected. *Anorexia Nervosa* (anorexia) and *Bulimia Nervosa* (bulimia) are the most common. With anorexia, a person worries about becoming fat or gaining weight no matter how thin they become. With bulimia, the person has repeated bouts of binge eating and then tries to compensate in ways such as dieting or vomiting. A sufferer can have symptoms of both problems in their eating disorder.

Anorexia and bulimia – the warning signs

If the answer to many of these questions is 'yes', your teenager may have an eating disorder.

Is your teenager:

- ◆ significantly underweight for their age and height?
- ◆ binge eating then feeling guilty?
- ◆ telling you or friends that they're fat no matter how thin they become?
- ◆ saying they have a sense of control when they say 'no' to food?
- ◆ going to extreme lengths to control/reduce weight such as:
 - inducing vomiting
 - fasting or restricting food intake
 - over exercising
 - misusing laxatives, diuretics (fluid tablets), diet pills or purgatives?
- ◆ avoiding eating with the family or going straight to the bathroom after eating?
- ◆ eating large amounts of food without gaining weight (due to vomiting or laxatives)?
- ◆ eating compulsively, hiding food or eating in secret?
- ◆ wearing loose clothes to hide their body?

Have they:

- ◆ stopped having their period?
- ◆ lost their appetite for more than 2 or 3 weeks (not just temporarily from a cold, upset stomach or minor illness)?
- ◆ lost some of their hair?

Photography by Warwick Orme

mental health



The high cost of anorexia and bulimia

The physical and emotional costs of anorexia and bulimia are high. In extreme cases they can cause death.

Physical effects

- ◆ Constipation
- ◆ Growth of fine, downy hair over the face and body
- ◆ Difficulty thinking clearly
- ◆ Sensitivity to cold
- ◆ Fertility problems
- ◆ Erosion of tooth enamel and tooth decay
- ◆ Osteoporosis (weakened bones)
- ◆ Anaemia (problem with the blood)
- ◆ Kidney problems
- ◆ Abnormal heart rhythm
- ◆ Ruptured stomach
- ◆ Seizures

Psychological, social and emotional effects

- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Mood swings
- ◆ Social isolation
- ◆ Family conflict
- ◆ Guilt
- ◆ Secretive or deceptive behaviours

How to help your teenager develop a positive body image

Young people are very conscious and critical of their weight, shape and appearance. Like self-esteem, helping your teenager develop a positive body image is a 'gift for life'.

- ◆ Reassure them about body changes during puberty (see page 4 for more about puberty).
- ◆ Help your teenager discover what they like and value about themselves.
- ◆ Discourage family members from criticising each other's appearance.
- ◆ Think about how your own eating habits and attitudes to body image may affect your teenager.
- ◆ Don't single out overweight kids for special health regimes and include the whole family in the goal of health and fitness.
- ◆ Encourage your teenager to express their emotions in effective and appropriate ways.
- ◆ Keep plenty of healthy snacks such as fruit and bread in the house.
- ◆ Point out that healthy, attractive, successful people come in many shapes and sizes.
- ◆ Explain how TV and magazine images are often changed to make women look slimmer than they are.
- ◆ Start early – the best time to help your child develop a positive body image is well before their teens.

where to get help

- ◆ Your family doctor
- ◆ NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service
02 9816 5688 or 1800 674 200 (freecall outside Sydney)
Monday to Friday 12:30pm – 4:30pm
- ◆ Eating Disorders Support and Information Line on: **02 9412 4499**

Source: 'NSW Health Family Help Kit'

depression

– when the 'blues' won't go away

Everyone gets the 'blues' now and then, but people who feel down for more than a few weeks may be depressed.

Adolescence is a period of significant change and development. For some adolescents, it can be a difficult and confusing period of life and this can make them vulnerable to depression.

Recent surveys suggest up to 1 in 5 people will experience depression at some time.

It can be hard to know if your adolescent is depressed. After all, teenagers are often moody – but depression is more than this. Depression is a serious illness, and it is important your adolescent gets help, just like you would seek professional advice for a physical illness.

Sometimes it can be easy to see why your teenager is depressed. But often depression can appear from nowhere.

Teenagers don't always understand why they feel down, or even know how





to express what they feel. This makes it hard for parents to work out when the 'blues' have turned into something more serious.

Many depressed young people appear to be angry or irritable rather than sad. They may become hostile, take risks and push people away.

If left untreated, the problem can spiral into alcohol and drug use. This can lead to more problems and make their depression worse. In some people, alcohol, drugs, prescription medicine or physical illness can trigger depression. People whose close relatives have depression are also at greater risk of developing the illness.

Many people falsely believe teenagers should be able to shake off the emotional symptoms caused by depression. "If only they tried hard enough," is often the thought. This is dangerous, as it can make teenagers feel weak or ashamed and discourage them from seeking help. It also fails to recognise that depression is a mental illness.

The good news is that depression can be treated effectively with counselling and sometimes with medication. With treatment, many people start to feel better in just a few weeks.

what are the warning signs?

- ◆ persistent sadness or anger, frequent crying
- ◆ difficulty thinking or concentrating, a worsening of school performance
- ◆ feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness
- ◆ lack of interest in friends, family and activities they previously enjoyed
- ◆ lack of energy, enthusiasm or motivation (feeling slowed down)
- ◆ restlessness, irritability or agitation
- ◆ changes in sleeping patterns
 - not being able to sleep or sleeping more than usual
- ◆ changes in eating patterns
 - eating more or less than usual
- ◆ thoughts of death, suicide or harming themselves.

what are the causes?

There is no single cause for depression. It may be a psychological, chemical or social problem, or a combination of any of these.

- ◆ **Psychological** – life events such as the loss of someone close can lead to feelings of hopelessness about the future
- ◆ **Chemical** – changes in brain chemicals can cause depression
- ◆ **Social** – a reduction in activities or interests can both cause depression and arise from depression.

what can you do?

When your teenager is feeling down, it's important to listen and offer help and support them to seek help.

Encourage them to:

- ◆ talk about their feelings (let them know they don't have to carry the whole load)
- ◆ talk to other people they trust
- ◆ ask for help when they need it
- ◆ spend time with their friends
- ◆ join in sports, school activities or hobbies which they enjoy and that help build their confidence
- ◆ get involved in organisations that support them and help them to develop interests
- ◆ exercise (exercise releases brain chemicals which help lift our spirits)
- ◆ find ways to relax (these can be simple such as seeing a movie or going for a walk or a surf)
- ◆ write down what they're thinking or to express their thoughts in other creative ways like painting.

If your teenager is depressed for a significant period of time it is important to seek professional help.

If you or they are not taken seriously at one place then seek help elsewhere until you are both satisfied.

where to get help

In an emergency contact your General Practitioner or local hospital Emergency Department
24 hour telephone services are:

- ◆ Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
- ◆ Lifeline 13 11 14
- ◆ Youthline (youth counselling) 02 9633 3666 (Parramatta).

For other help, the first point of contact can be:

- ◆ Your local Area Health Service (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services.
- ◆ Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians, child psychiatrists and psychologists may also be able to provide help.

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

- ◆ NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service Monday to Friday, 12.30pm – 4.30pm 02 9816 5688 or 1800 674 200 (freecall outside Sydney)

Source: 'NSW Health Family Help Kit'

Extracts from the

NSW HEALTH

Family Help Kit [15]

preventing **suicide**

– when **young** people **need help**

Suicide prevention is everybody's business. Suicide attempts rarely happen without some warning. Learning how to recognise the early warning signs and taking them seriously may help someone close to you. Often this is the crucial first step in suicide prevention.

While all of us feel sad or unhappy at some time, when young people are depressed they may feel hopeless, helpless or overwhelmed by despair.

Remember, not all young people with depression are suicidal, and not all adolescents who attempt suicide are depressed. However, if young people are depressed they should be assessed for suicide risk.

Suicide may take one life, but it affects whole communities. It is a human tragedy, especially when it involves the lives of young people.

Some young people resist asking for help simply because they aren't aware of the range of services available to them. Your GP or local community health centre is a useful starting point.

Possible warning signs

Many young people may, as part of their adolescent development, push the limits at home, isolate themselves from family members and experiment with risky behaviour. Some families need help

to identify which behaviours are associated with an illness like depression and which behaviours are part of their teenager's personality.

who is at **risk**?

All teenagers are vulnerable. Few will have learnt how to deal with everything that life can throw at them and some people have stronger coping skills than others.

The following stress factors may make a young person more vulnerable to suicide risk:

- ◆ loss of an important person through death or separation
- ◆ recent suicide of a friend or relative
- ◆ breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend
- ◆ trouble with school or the police
- ◆ feared or confirmed pregnancy
- ◆ being a victim of sexual or other abuse (now or in the past)
- ◆ family conflict or domestic violence.

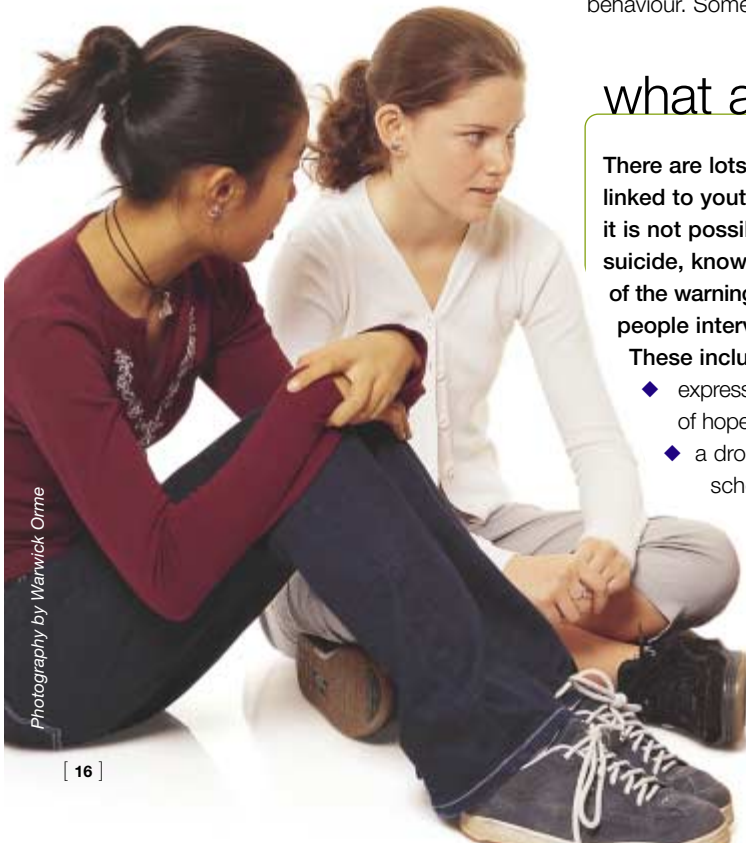
what are the **warning signs**?

There are lots of factors which are linked to youth suicide. Although it is not possible to prevent every suicide, knowing about some of the warning signs may help people intervene sooner.

These include:

- ◆ expressing feelings of hopelessness
- ◆ a drop in their standard of school work and attendance
- ◆ painting, drawing or writing about death or suicide

- ◆ giving away personal possessions
- ◆ talking about death and suicide, such as "I wish I was dead", "no one cares if I live or die", "does it hurt to die?"
- ◆ feeling worthless or letting parents or others down
- ◆ withdrawing from friends
- ◆ a sudden bout of cheerfulness after a long period of sadness or anger. This is critical. Having made a decision (i.e. to die) they may feel as though they can now stop worrying about their problems.



Photography by Warwick Orme

where to get help

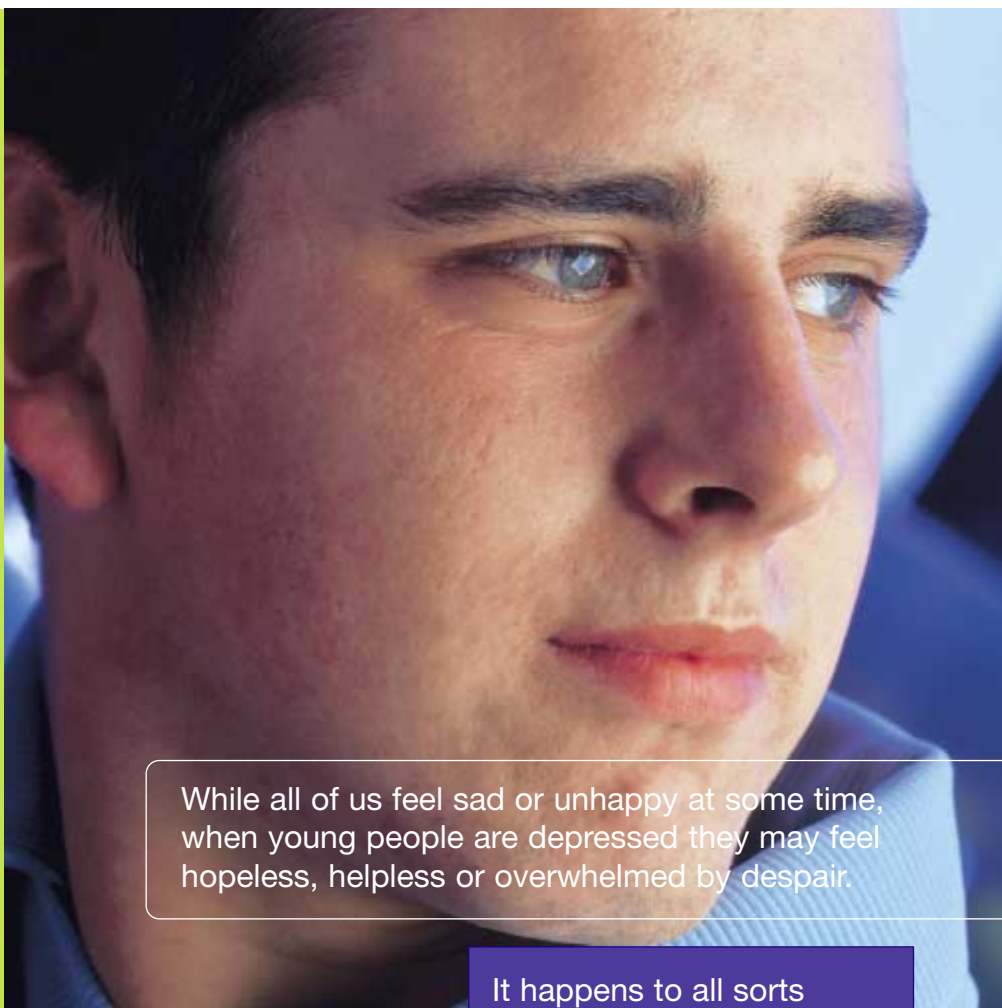
- ◆ In an **emergency** contact the Emergency Department of your local hospital or dial 000.
- ◆ Your local **Area Health Service** (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services
- ◆ Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists
- ◆ The **'Reachout'** website which provides a comprehensive online database of services to prevent youth suicide: **www.reachout.asn.au**
- ◆ Your local General Practitioner

24 hour telephone services are:

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- ◆ **Lifeline** **13 11 14**

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Source: NSW Health Family Help Kit



While all of us feel sad or unhappy at some time, when young people are depressed they may feel hopeless, helpless or overwhelmed by despair.

It happens to all sorts of families

“When I first started working in this area I was looking for reasons why this awful thing had happened to these particular families. I was looking for flaws, for faults in the way they ran their lives, for mistakes in the way they raised their children. I wanted to feel safe in the knowledge that it couldn't happen to me or mine. I discovered that there is no such guarantee. These people were just like me. These families were just like mine. Suicide can happen to anyone, anywhere, any time.”

Gail Kirby, Community Health Educator in 'Leaving Early – Youth suicide: the horror, the heartbreak, the hope', by Bronwyn Donaghy, Harper Health 1997

what you can do to help?

Although parents may have difficulty in talking with young people about personal issues, good communication is important to understanding what they are feeling and thinking.

- ◆ Listen to them. Giving them your full attention and listening can immediately say, “I care”.
- ◆ Let them know you take their concerns seriously (no matter how minor they may seem to you).
- ◆ Ask them if they're thinking of hurting themselves.
- ◆ Take any talk of self-harm or suicide seriously.
- ◆ Tell them that if they need help you are there for them.
- ◆ Don't promise to keep any threat to hurt themselves a secret (keeping their confidences is important, but you may need to break a confidence to save their life).
- ◆ Stay with them if you think there is an immediate risk they'll hurt themselves.
- ◆ Give them messages of hope and support; talk to them about alternative ways of solving their problems.
- ◆ Help them make and maintain contact with a professional who can help (few teenagers will seek help on their own).