



NEW YORK
CENTER FOR LIVING

Adolescent Mental Health:
Risk Factors and What to Do

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Introduction

The term "mental health" refers to the way individuals think, feel and act as they face life. Mental health affects how children and adolescents learn and progress, develop friendships, make decisions and handle challenges. It affects how they view themselves and the world, and it impacts their relationships with family, friends and others.

Mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression, interfere with the way adolescents think, feel and act. Mental health problems can prevent normal development, impact learning and interfere with the ability to develop and maintain healthy friendships. Mental illness can also contribute to behavioral problems, family conflict and engaging in risky behaviors.

Learning all you can about mental illness in adolescence will help you better respond to your child's mental health needs, including knowing when and where to find help.





Common Mental Illnesses
Among Adolescents



One in five adolescents has a history of serious mental illness, according to the Office of Adolescent Health.¹ The most common mental health conditions among adolescents are anxiety, depression, ADHD, eating disorders and substance use disorders.

Anxiety Disorders

Around 32 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds suffer from an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are characterized by feelings of extreme uneasiness, fear, and worry. It's normal for adolescents to have some anxiety around school, social relationships and other areas of life. But when anxiety interferes with daily life and quality of living, it can take a serious toll on anyone.

Common anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder**, characterized by excessive, long-lasting anxiety
- **Panic disorder**, marked by frequent panic attacks, or bouts of sheer terror
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder**, which often results from trauma
- **Social anxiety disorder**, which can make social situations excruciating
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder**, which is characterized by repetitive behaviors and intrusive thoughts
- **Phobias**, or irrational fears

One in five adolescents has a history of serious mental illness.



Depression

One in eight adolescents and young adults suffer from depression, which is characterized by a depressed mood and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Depressive disorders include:

- **Persistent depressive disorder**, which is a depressed mood that lasts for at least two years
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**, characterized by depression during the winter months when there's less sunlight
- **Bipolar disorder**, formerly known as manic depression, which is characterized by recurring depression alternating with periods of mania, or intense activity
- **Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder**, a childhood condition characterized by extreme irritability, anger and frequent outbursts
- **Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**, is characterized by the inability to focus and often includes hyperactivity and impulsive behaviors that make it difficult for a child to function. It can also interfere with normal development. Around nine percent of 13- to 18-year-olds have ADHD.





Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are characterized by abnormal or extreme eating behaviors, including eating too little or too much. Nearly three percent of 13- to 18-year-olds have an eating disorder. While they're more common among girls and women, eating disorders also affect boys and men. Eating disorders develop for a number of reasons, including low self-esteem and as a response to trauma.

The most common eating disorders are:

- **Anorexia nervosa**, which is characterized by dramatic weight loss and extreme under-eating or excessive exercise
- **Bulimia nervosa**, characterized by bingeing on food and then purging it through vomiting or the use of laxatives
- **Binge eating disorder**, which is characterized by eating a large amount of food in a short period of time, without purging behaviors



Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

Mental illness is frequently an underlying cause of substance abuse, and substance abuse can cause the onset of a mental illness, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.² Adolescents face a greater risk than adults for developing drug or alcohol problems, especially if they have a mental illness.

When a mental illness and a substance use disorder occur together, it's known as a dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorders. Co-occurring disorders require specialized treatment that addresses the substance abuse in the context of the mental illness and vice-versa. Addressing just the mental illness or just the substance abuse is largely ineffective for treating either disorder.

Some important signs that your child may be abusing drugs or alcohol include:

- Paraphernalia, such as pipes or baggies
- Changes in mood, appetite or sleeping patterns
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Losing interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Periods of elevated activity or subdued activity
- Changes in their social group
- Bloodshot eyes or pinpoint pupils
- Secretive behaviors

Adolescents face a greater risk than adults for developing drug or alcohol problems, especially if they have a mental illness.





**Risk Factors and
Protective Factors
for Adolescent Mental Illness**

Some adolescents have a higher risk than others for developing a mental illness, including a substance use disorder. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, risk factors include genetic, biological, environmental and cultural considerations.³

Genetics

A family history of mental illness may increase your child's risk for developing one, as well, although most people with a mental illness don't have relatives with the same mental illness.

Stress

Chronic stress can lead to anxiety and depression and is a major risk factor for substance abuse.

Trauma

Traumas such as physical, emotional or sexual abuse; neglect; witnessing or being the victim of violence; or surviving a natural disaster can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, characterized by nightmares, insomnia, anxiety, anger, flashbacks and a startle response. PTSD is also a risk factor for substance abuse as a form of self-medication.

Identity issues

Adolescents who are questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation may be at a higher risk for anxiety and depression, especially if they don't have their family's support or support in the community.





Family dysfunction

A dysfunctional or chaotic home life can lead to symptoms of mental illness. This is especially true if the dysfunction stems from a parent's substance abuse problems, according to an article in the journal *Social Work in Public Health*.⁴ Children who live with a parent struggling with an addiction may have difficulties forming healthy peer relationships, experience problems at school and develop a mental illness. They're also at an increased risk for developing a substance use disorder.

Other illnesses

Young people with developmental disabilities and chronic medical conditions may develop anxiety or depression. They are also at an elevated risk for developing a substance use problem.



Poverty

Adolescents from poor families may experience considerable stress, and the insecurity and uncertainty that comes with poverty can lead to mental illness and self-medicating with drugs or alcohol.

Involvement in the juvenile justice system

Adolescents in the justice system -particularly girls -have a considerably higher risk for developing symptoms of mental illness and substance use disorders than those who aren't in the system.

Substance abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse leads to changes in brain function that can cause mental illnesses like anxiety and depression.

Some of these risk factors can be reduced by certain protective factors, the most important of which is a supportive family and community.



Protective Factors for Mental Illness

Protective factors are those that help reduce the risk of mental illness. One of the most important protective factors for mental illness and substance abuse is family stability and support. When the family is stable, children are less likely to develop anxiety and depression, and when they feel supported, they're more likely to have higher self-esteem and make better choices. LGBTQ adolescents who have love and support at home are far less likely than those with an unaccepting family to develop a mental illness or engage in substance abuse.

Other protective factors include a strong community, a supportive social network and healthy, nurturing relationships.

Despite these protective factors, some adolescents will still develop a mental illness or substance use disorder, for various reasons. The protective factors then become a source of support that helps young people cope with and recover from a mental health disorder.



One of the most important protective factors for mental illness and substance abuse is family stability and support.





The Signs and Symptoms
of Adolescent Mental Illness
and How It's Treated



Each type of mental illness has its own signs and symptoms. However, not everyone will experience every symptom of a mental illness, and symptoms vary from person to person. Adolescents may have symptoms just once, or they may occur infrequently. This can make it difficult to know whether the problem is a mental illness or just the challenging emotions that occur in adolescence.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, your child may need help if he or she:⁵

- Frequently feels anxious, stressed or worried
- Has frequent tantrums or is extremely irritable much of the time
- Has frequent headaches or stomachaches that have no physical explanation
- Can't sit still for any length of time
- Has trouble sleeping or has frequent nightmares
- Loses interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Withdraws from friends or family
- Does poorly in school or experiences a decline in grades
- Is obsessed with a fear of gaining weight and exercises or diets excessively
- Has low energy or no energy
- Periodically has spells of intense activity
- Engages in self-harm behaviors like cutting
- Engages in risky, self-destructive behaviors
- Abuses drugs or alcohol
- Has suicidal thoughts
- Hears voices, feels out of control or believes their mind is controlled

If any of these signs or symptoms last for weeks or months, and they interfere with your child's daily life at home and school, talk to a health professional. Early treatment will not only improve your child's quality of life, but it can help prevent more severe and lasting problems later.





How Treatment Works


High quality treatment for a mental illness or substance use disorder takes a holistic approach to treatment that addresses issues of body, mind and spirit. Holistic treatment builds on your child's strengths and involves a variety of therapies and interventions, which are based on your child's unique needs and issues.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, medication isn't typically the primary form of treatment for most adolescents.

Treatment is typically a combination of therapies that help young people:

- Address relevant issues
- Resolve underlying problems
- Identify and change dysfunctional thinking and behaving patterns
- Develop the skills and strategies they need to cope with self-destructive thoughts, negative emotions, and other triggers
- Increase self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem
- Develop healthy habits
- Make healthy choices

When medication is used to treat a mental illness, it's almost always used alongside therapy, which leads to better mental health.



Holistic treatment builds on your child's strengths and involves a variety of therapies and interventions.



Therapies Commonly Used in Treatment

Depending on the diagnosis and your child's needs, a variety of therapies will likely be used to address mental health issues.

Some of the most common therapies used in mental health treatment include:

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy**, or CBT, which helps individuals identify and change dysfunctional thought and behavior patterns.
- **Dialectical behavior therapy**, or DBT, which helps teens reduce conflicts in their personal relationships and develop critical emotional coping skills.
- **Acceptance and commitment therapy**, or ACT, which helps adolescents develop psychological flexibility and learn to think and act in ways that honor their personal values.
- **Family therapy**, which helps restore optimal function to the family system through improved communication and resolving a variety of issues.
- **Exposure therapy**, which helps young people with intense phobias overcome their fears.
- **Complementary therapies**, such as yoga and meditation, which can help increase self-awareness and mindfulness.





What to Do

**if You Think Your Child
Has a Mental Illness**

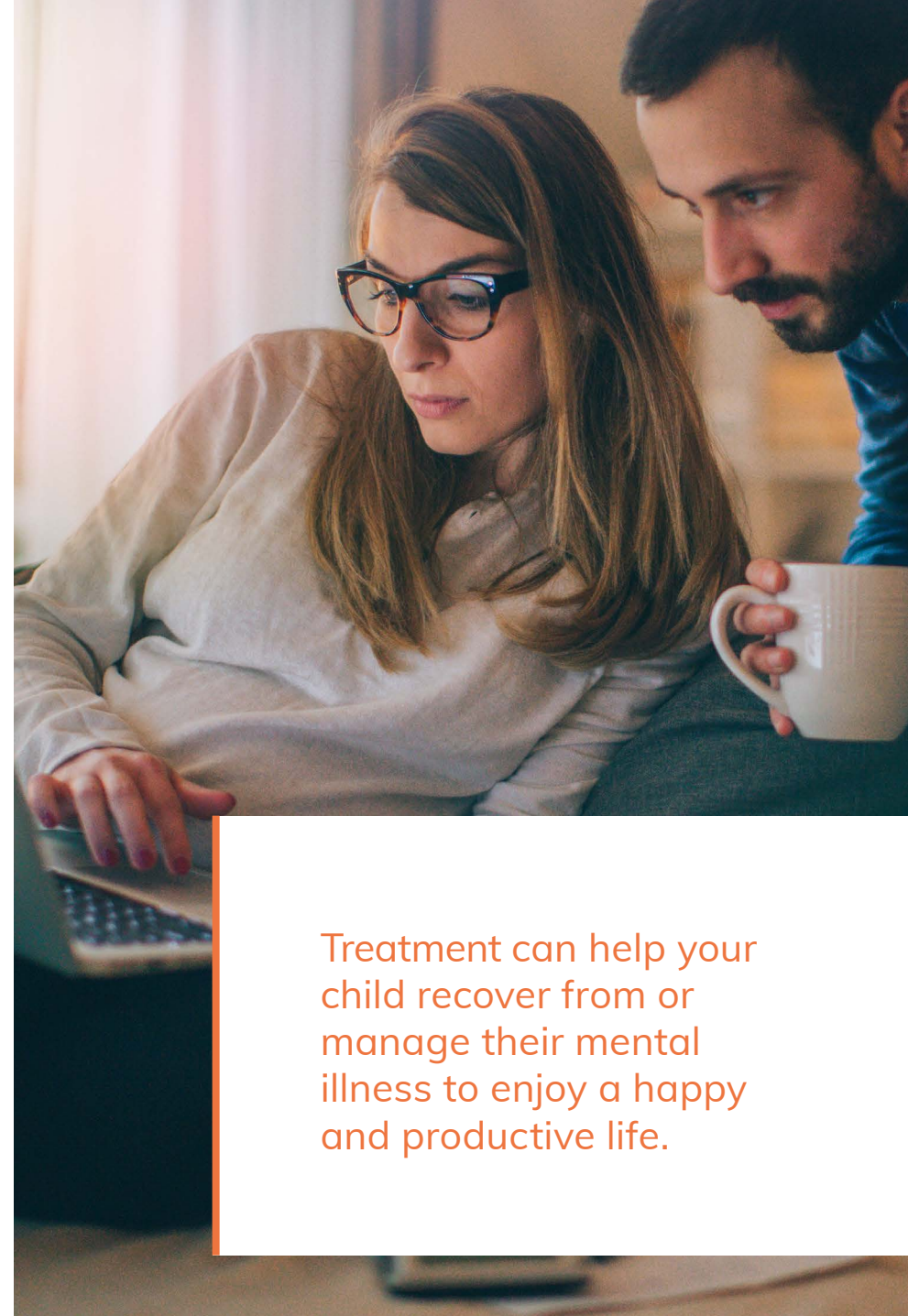
Unfortunately, fewer than half of adolescents who have a mental illness receive any kind of treatment. But mental illnesses are highly treatable through medication, psychotherapy or a combination of the two. Treatment can help your child recover from or manage their mental illness to enjoy a happy and productive life.

Where to Find Treatment

A high quality, reputable mental health clinic offers the best possible outcomes of treatment. Ideally, the clinic you choose should specialize in adolescent mental health.

To find a behavioral health clinic, you can:

- Call New York Center for Living at 212-712-8800
- Ask your primary care physician for a recommendation or referral
- Ask friends or family members for a recommendation
- Visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Behavioral Health Treatment Locator on their website, or call their Treatment Referral Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP.⁶



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What to Look for in a Quality Program

High quality mental health clinics have several factors in common. They:

- Use only research-based treatments
- Offer therapists with a range of specializations
- Offer integrated treatment for multiple mental health disorders
- Take a holistic approach to treatment
- Employ only licensed, experienced providers

Clinics that have an accreditation from CARF International, the Joint Commission or another accrediting organization have gone through intensive evaluations by a third party. These clinics meet or exceed the industry's standards for quality care.

What to Do if You Can't Afford Treatment

One of the most common barriers to mental health treatment is its high cost. If you don't have insurance or are unable to afford the co-pays associated with treatment, you have a number of options:

- Check to see if your child qualifies for Medicaid
- Find a center that offers a sliding fee scale and/or payment plans
- Contact one of New York's many college and university psychiatry or psychology departments, which may offer low-cost care through their training clinics
- Find a clinical trial. Care is usually free when you participate in a clinical trial. Visit the U.S. National Library of Medicine's clinical trial finder at www.clinicaltrials.gov



How to Best Support Your Child's Mental Health

The best thing you can do to support your child in recovery from a mental illness is to learn everything you can about the condition. The more you understand about it, the better you'll be able to control risk factors, respond to your child's needs appropriately and advocate for them.

There are a few other things you can do to help your child:

- **Get support.** Joining a support group for parents of children with mental illness gives you a safe place to express difficult emotions, get emotional support, find tips and resources, and help other parents going through similar struggles.
- **Be attentive.** Stay tuned in to your child's moods, behaviors and emotions, and seek the advice of their therapist if they worsen.
- **Talk with your child's school.** Make sure that your child's school is providing appropriate care and services and stay in touch with your child's teacher about their mood and behavior.
- **Take care of yourself.** Spending all your energy on your child can take a toll on your own physical and mental health. Be sure to include time for self-care in your day and spend a little time each day relaxing and enjoying life.

Treatment and support can lead your child back to good mental health. With the right care, your child can enjoy better mental functioning, a higher quality of life and a better sense of wellbeing for long-term recovery.

Treatment and support
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NEW YORK CENTER FOR LIVING

Located in Manhattan, NY, New York Center for Living is a 501(c)(3) non-profit providing addiction and mental health care for adolescents, young adults and families since 2007. Built on the conviction that addiction is a disease of the family rather than the individual, New York Center for Living believes in the importance of early intervention, peer support networks and strong family relationships for successful treatment outcomes.

New York Center for Living specializes in treatment, education, assessment and referral and is a valuable resource for anyone searching to learn more about addiction and mental health. Our team of experts in psychiatry, social work, substance abuse, nutrition, academia and the wellness sciences provide an evidence-based and holistic approach to combating addiction.

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