HEALTH + DEVELOPMENT/MENTAL HEALTH

COVID-19 Is Harming Teens' Mental Health — Parents, You Can Help

How to start a conversation about mental health with your teen

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The past pandemic year has been difficult, especially for teens. Peers are more important now than at any other time of a teen's life, and establishing independence is the primary developmental task. Yet for the past 13 months, they've been at home, missing in-person school and activities, and navigating their social lives by video chat. It's no wonder that as many as 40 percent of Washington's teens are experiencing levels of anxiety and depression significant enough to interfere in their daily lives. But parents can help their kids develop protective factors against mental illness, even in the midst of severe stress.

Promoting teen resiliency through the pandemic

Start Talking Now (https://starttalkingnow.org/) was developed as a resource for preventing teen substance abuse (https://www.parentmap.com/article/what-you-need-know-about-preventing-teen-marijuana-use). In response to the pandemic's intensification of anxiety and stress among teens, the website has expanded to provide broader mental health resources (https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/COVID19/HealthcareProviders/BehavioralHealthResources) for teens and their families.

"We want to get teens and parents to connect during the pandemic and help normalize the fact that everyone is struggling right now," says Tona McGuire, Ph.D., a pediatric psychologist and a co-lead for the Washington State Department of Health's Behavioral Health Strike Team (http://healthsupportteam.org/).

When teens are struggling, it tends to show up as "acting out" or "acting in." Acting out can include sneaking out of the house, using drugs, or being defiant and combative with family members. Acting in may result in teens spending all of their time locked in their bedrooms.

Many parents understand that teens benefit when we provide firm boundaries and structure. But fewer of us are familiar with protective factors, which are psychological, biological, family and community conditions that help lower the likelihood of problem

outcomes or that reduce the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes.

Protective factors

Connection, resilience, flexibility and a sense of purpose are protective factors against stress.

"Protective factors help people to keep moving forward in the middle of a disaster. They can be learned and practiced, regardless of temperament," says McGuire. Whether a teen turns inward or outward when faced with trouble, you can help them develop these factors.

Setting goals: Setting goals gives people a sense of purpose and helps internalize belief in a positive future. The present may be both boring and awful, but it's easier to handle when you are optimistic about future opportunities. Talk to your teen about what they want to do in the future and help them make post-pandemic plans.

Building healthy habits: It's hard to maintain good habits when our normal routines are disrupted. But eating well and getting enough sleep and exercise boost health and mood. Provide structure (such as regular mealtimes), which facilitates good habits, and talk to your teen about why healthy habits are so important. Together with your teen, strategize ways to strengthen good habits.

Developing coping skills: Conversations about meditation and mindfulness can induce eye rolls, even in adults. But it's important for teens to identify activities that help them feel better when they are feeling stressed or anxious. With your teen, find ways to incorporate those activities into their life, even during lockdown — whether it's backyard volleyball after dinner, weekend hikes, a daily arts break or simply counting to 10 and breathing deeply when things feel out of control.

Start Talking Now

If your family doesn't already talk about feelings a lot, the prospect of starting to do so during the teen years — and during a period of high stress at that — is daunting. But McGuire says no matter what kind of front our teens put up, they are listening and do want

to be heard. So, your first job is to make them feel comfortable opening up.

"If your kid is willing to talk, unless the house is on fire or somebody is bleeding, you need to drop everything and focus on that conversation," says McGuire. If they aren't opening up first, be prepared to throw out some low-key prompts or conversational segues and wait for them to take the bait. If you're stuck for ideas, Start Talking Now has developed a Truth or Challenge game (https://starttalkingnow.org/find-resources) with conversation starters.

If subtlety isn't your style or you're worried there's a serious problem, take a more direct approach.

"I would 100 percent say make sure you're in a safe space, sit them down and approach it head-on. Make sure you have the resources and tools you need to build out that conversation. It's super important to be very open with your teen," says Laney Brackett, a 16-year-old Teen Link volunteer.

Teen Link

Teen Link (https://www.teenlink.org/) is a free, confidential statewide helpline that teens can access by calling, texting or chatting in order to connect with a trained teen volunteer. Adults may also call Teen Link to speak with a clinician specializing in substance use prevention.

"Teen Link is best at providing teens support in a way that parents never could. Talking with another teen can offer a supportive and understanding perspective on teen issues. It can also be really helpful to talk to other individuals your own age because we often experience similar challenges and stressors," says Brackett.

That makes the helpline a good resource for parents to suggest when kids feel uncomfortable talking to them. And if your teen is already using Teen Link, Brackett has advice.

"Definitely feel proud. Using Teen Link means that your teen is brave enough to start to reach out and work to get the support that they need. I would advise sitting down with your

teen and discussing what brought them to Teen Link. Some people just want to talk to a friend, and others are in much more dire situations and may need to discuss reasons to continue living," says Brackett. Among the most common themes Brackett hears on Teen Link is that teens are feeling too much pressure from their parents and want their parents to grant them more independence.

The spike in mental illness during the pandemic has many therapists fully booked right now. If there is a serious problem, McGuire suggests reaching out to your child's primary care provider as a first step in seeking professional help.

The most important part of the conversation

Whether you're having a discussion about Teen Link or another topic, how you listen matters more than what you say. When your teen is talking, listen without judgment. Don't interrupt and don't plan your response. Even if it feels hokey, try recapping what they tell you, starting with "What I hear is that …" You might find out you missed the point, which is okay, too. Even if you're wrong about your original understanding, you are still sending the message that you are engaged and trying to find out what their concerns are. Be curious and ask questions. When parents train themselves to listen well, kids become more willing to talk.

"Sometimes kids are talking to you because they want you to help them solve a problem, but often they just want to talk through the problem and have somebody who is really, really listening to them," says McGuire.

Listening while your teen talks through a problem is a way to let them practice developing solutions on their own during this health crisis and once it's over. You might not be able to change the circumstances right now, but these conversations are providing the connection that is crucial for teens and parents if they are to come through the pandemic whole and healthy.