



Adolescent
Mental Health:

A Post Pandemic Overview

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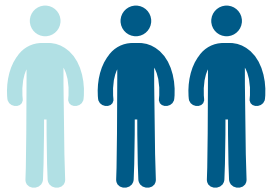
Introduction

Mental health concerns for our youth have been on the rise for years. Adolescence, generally defined as the age group of 10-18 years, is a stage for youth that involves many critical developmental tasks and challenges—both mentally and physically. This group is a particularly vulnerable population because most chronic mental health concerns emerge during this time in development. With the COVID-19 pandemic interrupting this developmental time, many adolescents are struggling to recover and overcome their collective trauma.

The Staggering Statistics

Research points to serious concerns for adolescents' mental health, with demonstrated short- and long-term effects. Prior to the pandemic, nearly a third of high school students in 2019 reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness—a 40% increase from 2009 (CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary and Trends Report 2009-2019). This was the concerning number before COVID-19 shut down schools, sports, social events, and celebrations.

In the new data collected by the CDC in 2021, 44% of high school students report that they experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the previous year. More than half of the students reported experiencing emotional abuse by a parent or another adult in their home in 2021. Another 11% reported that they had been physically abused by a parent or another adult. Additionally, about 36% of the youth reported experiencing racism at some point in their life.



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In December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory to urgently address the mental health crisis impacting youth. In a 2022 Boys and Girls Clubs of America National Youth Outcomes Initiative Member Survey, 71% of youth indicated that they cannot stop worrying something will go wrong in their life, and 67% reported that they would try to keep anyone from finding out that they are worried.

Understanding the Impact of COVID-19

The rate and amount of growth that happens in adolescence is second only to infancy. Teens are struggling to understand the world and themselves in new ways and to determine their own personal identities. In order to understand the significant impact of the pandemic on adolescent mental health, it is critical to understand the skills that youth learn in this phase in order to emerge into successful adulthood (MIT Work Life Center 2022).

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Learn to renegotiate relationships with adults/caregivers – Youth must find healthy ways to balance their autonomy with connectedness and trust with parents and caregivers. During the lockdowns resulting from COVID-19, youth were at home with adults for long stretches of time, delaying many natural opportunities for developing more self-reliance and becoming accustomed to separation from family.

two

Meet the demands of more mature and responsible roles – Throughout adolescence, there is an expectation that youth will become increasingly more responsible and ready to take on more commitments as they age and mature. They learn skills they'll need in the labor market and advanced education, such as professional communication, timeliness, and organization. Since March 2020, youth were at home more and had fewer outside responsibilities, as well as lower rates of employment and infrequent adult interaction outside of immediate family. Many teens were unable to get their driver's licenses or travel independently on public transportation.

three

Establish an individual identity – Identity includes physical attributes, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. Figuring who you are and how you want to express yourself is a key part of adolescent development. It is also a time for youth to become more aware of the differences in these areas in American society. To consider the impact of COVID-19 on this developmental task, we must consider all the community injustices that were exposed on news feeds daily in the past two years. While many teens were trying to figure out who they were as individuals, much of the country seemed to be questioning who we are as a nation.

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Develop supportive and close friendships – Teens tend to shift their close connections from family to friends during adolescence. They desire to spend most of their time and feel more understood when they are with peers. As a result of social distancing and lockdown during this critical social development period, teens were not at school, parties, or sporting events. Instead, they were in their homes with siblings and caregivers. Many teens typically become close with peers who share similar interests through clubs, sporting teams, school performances, music, and art. During the pandemic, they were unable to develop the deep connections and mutual trust with friends that often occurs through these shared interests and experiences.

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Understand and express more complex emotions – During this developmental period, teens begin thinking of emotional experiences in more abstract and complex ways. Most teens will report they are able to identify their feelings more easily than when they were younger and learn to express themselves in clearer ways rather than through behavior. They become more empathetic and self-aware. This is accomplished by being out in the world more and exposed to diverse people, such as coaches, friends, teachers, bosses, and other community leaders. With the lockdowns in place, many teens were not able to continue growth in this area due to minimal outside exposure.

six

Challenge and determine moral standards, values, and beliefs – Teens are often seen by adults as challenging, but this is a critical phase of their development. They need to question what they have been taught by adults in childhood and determine if they find personal meaning in those beliefs and values. The standards that they personally adopt will guide their decisions, views, and behavior as they transition into adulthood, so it is important they feel personally invested. When teens can navigate with more autonomy through difficult situations, they are able to make more complex decisions based on their own personal values and beliefs. A child decides their behavior based on what their parent or caregiver told them is correct, while an adolescent learns to make decisions based on what feels correct to them personally. When adolescents do not have the opportunities to be more autonomous, they have difficulty accomplishing this developmental task. Many spiritual and religious youth programs shut down during the pandemic, resulting in fewer opportunities for spiritual growth and education on specific belief systems.

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Develop and apply new coping skills – If teens are unable to go out and explore their worlds, their coping skills may be stunted. Teens have more complex emotional and cognitive capabilities, as well as changing physical bodies, so they must develop strong coping skills in order to function. An individual learns what coping skills will and won't work by trying them in the real world. Adolescents are test-driving new skills constantly. Without the ability to learn from peers, they are at a significant disadvantage and are more likely to struggle to understand injustice, trauma, and complex systems. Some of the tasks of this stage include problem-solving, moderating risk-taking behavior, and conflict resolution, all of which require dynamic social interaction in order to achieve skill building.

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Develop the ability to apply a new perspective on relationships – Teens build the ability to see things from someone else's perspective and understand that their worldview may not be the same as their peers. Growth in this area sets them up to succeed at conflict resolution and improve their communication with others. They often develop their first romantic relationships during adolescence, which may be emotionally complex and require more developed problem-solving skills. Adolescents begin to learn skills that will shape their future relationships. With restricted social contact, many youths were unable to develop new relationships or nurture current relationships, staying stunted in a younger set of skills that limit their interactions in relationships.

nine

Develop abstract thinking skills – Teens begin to “think about thinking” during this developmental stage. They learn to develop their own personal philosophies and test their hypotheses. They develop time management skills as they become more independent with increased homework, additional activities, and new jobs. If they are traveling to school or other activities alone, they learn how much time it takes to make that trip and what happens when they don't allocate enough time. They budget their energy and discover the importance of sleep and rest. This means teens at home and on restricted social schedules were unable to continue this growth process in many ways because their contact with the outside world was so limited.

ten

Adjust to sexually maturing feelings and bodies – During puberty, adolescent bodies and hormones change significantly. Teens are often flooded with feelings that they barely understand, and they must learn to manage sexual feelings in healthy ways. They are also undertaking the task of identifying and expressing their own sexual identity. With limited social contacts, teens had great difficulty during the pandemic expressing their sexuality, developing romantic relationships, and making healthy sexual choices.

How to Help Adolescents Grow and Recover

Teens need to feel connected. Studies have shown that youth who felt connected to adults and peers at school were significantly less likely to report feeling hopeless, feeling persistently sad, or considering suicide (CDC 3/21/2022). However, during the pandemic, less than half (47%) of youth reported feeling close to people at school. This statistic alone highlights the importance of school connectedness for mental health in the teen years.



According to Kathleen A. Ethier, PhD, Director of CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, "School connectedness is a key to addressing youth adversities at all times—especially during times of severe disruptions." Students need to feel the support of their peers and caring adults during school hours. The routines and predictability of school are comforting for many adolescents who may have chaotic home lives. There is always a hot meal available, the physical comfort of a heated or cooled building, familiar faces, and a predictable schedule.

Adults can relate, considering the impact on their own mental health of no longer going into an office with a predictable set of circumstances each day; it took some time to adjust. Now, imagine that disruption trying to deal with a changing body, hormones, complex intense emotions, and feeling a lack of autonomy, all while undergoing the aforementioned developmental tasks. It's not hard to understand why there is a current mental health crisis among teens.

All adults have a role to play in helping youth recover from this period of stunted development through COVID-19. Mental health concerns in youth often present as risk-taking behaviors, violence, substance use, poor academic progress, and risky sexual behavior. While we know that schools play a critical role in helping youth avoid isolation and encouraging development, schools cannot do it alone. There are a few steps to take to provide stability, encourage growth, and support adolescents:

Develop and maintain a regular routine.

Humans thrive in routine and predictability. Try to keep sleep and wake times, as well as mealtimes, predictable. Teens need a lot more sleep than adults, but their circadian rhythm is often disrupted by falling asleep much later than needed. Explain and enforce healthy bedtimes with no screen time in bed.

Help adolescents stay socially connected in healthy ways.

Many teens became overly dependent on technology to socialize during the pandemic. Encourage teens to join clubs and activities with youths who have similar interests. Help teens explore what options are available in your community, religious organizations, and school. Remember the importance of in-person social interaction for accomplishing many developmental tasks related to autonomy.

Give honest and accurate information to develop trust and connectedness.

Teens receive information from many sources every day. It's important that parents and caregivers give information on their understanding, values, and opinions to teens to help them understand the world through their family's foundation, as well as allow them to question and hypothesize themselves. Asking an adolescent's opinions helps them to develop healthy communication, independent thinking, and abstract thinking skills.

Listen more than you talk.

Adolescents often withdraw from caregivers as they try to figure out who they are while vying for more independence. Caregivers and parents must get more creative to encourage teens to talk more and open up about their concerns. Teens tend to shut down if they feel they are being judged or lectured. Use conversation starters such as "Tell me about friends at your lunch table" rather than "What did you eat for lunch?" Other examples are "Can you share with me one thing that you are looking forward to this week?" and "How about one thing that you are nervous about?" Carefully listen to the teen's responses, looking for more ways to encourage them to open up. If a teen is seeking your advice or guidance, ask if they can share any details about the difficult situation they are facing before advising them on how to handle it.

Be alert for any changes in behavior.

Adolescents are known for a lot of mood changes that are frequently brought about by hormonal changes at puberty. However, if you notice your teen becoming more withdrawn at home, less socially active, engaging in rule-breaking behavior at school, slipping academically, pushing the limits more within your family rules, or taking more risks, it may be time to seek help. You may want to speak with your teen's teachers and/or guidance counselor at school to see if they are also noticing any changes and what support may be available. Teachers see your teen many hours a week and may have valuable insight into the situation if asked. You may also want to seek professional help. Offer a mental health counselor to your teen as a confidential and safe place to talk through concerns, problems, intense feelings, and trouble with expressing themselves.

Model healthy stress management and emotional regulation.

It's okay to tell your teen that you had a difficult day at work, or that you feel sad and angry about the news that day. You can also share that your coping mechanisms for when you feel stressed are things like physical exercise, eating healthy, journaling, talking with friends, and practicing mindfulness. When teens see coping strategies modeled at home, they are more likely to engage in those coping skills themselves.



When you make a conscious decision to help your teen, they are more likely to grow resilient and continue their development into emotionally healthy and successful adults.

Not sure where to get started? Carebridge can help! We provide mental health counseling services to covered employees, as well as their partners, teens, and school-aged children.



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About the Author

Elise Merenda is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with over 20 years' experience as a mental health practitioner in the fields of individual, couples and family treatment, crisis intervention, trauma, and intimate partner violence. At Carebridge EAP, she has provided organizational leadership and guidance through a wide range of critical incidents including natural disasters, threats of violence, workplace shootings, and active aggressors in the workplace. Elise has extensive experience providing consultation and assistance to leadership and Human Resource professionals in the areas of organizational change and industrial psychology. She is also credentialed as a Department of Transportation qualified Substance Abuse Professional (SAP) and a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (CEAP). Elise graduated from James Madison University with a B.S. in Psychology and LaSalle University with a M.A. in Clinical-Counseling Psychology.



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