

Talking to Adolescents and Teens: What to Do and Where to Go

Things to Consider

What kind of symptoms is the child/teen experiencing?

If there is self-injury (such as cutting or hair pulling), threat of harming self or others (including suicide), or a disconnection with reality (hearing or seeing things that aren't there, or having strange thoughts) then you should seek help from a mental health professional as soon as possible. Symptoms like irritability, changes in sleep or appetite, and loss of interest in activities that the child/teen used to enjoy, could be associated with puberty or be early signs of a mental health problem.

How long have the symptoms been going on?

Has your child been struggling over the last few days? Weeks? Months? Now that you've determined what symptoms your child is experiencing, it's important to establish when symptoms started, whether they are persistent or come and go, and if they have gotten worse over time. Mental health problems tend to last for longer than 1-3 days. Feeling consistently "off" for weeks is a good sign to seek a professional assessment.

When are the symptoms the worst, and do they follow patterns?

As you learn about your child's symptoms, you may notice that they are associated closely with certain situations. For instance, if your child is worried every morning before school and sad afterward, but seemingly better on weekends, this could be a sign of bullying or other difficulties with their peer group and be best addressed by finding a way to improve their school environment. In cases of girls and young women, mood swings may align with hormonal cycles and require little or no action, or an evaluation from a gynecologist. Maybe changes in mood are due to a triggering event, like a fight with a friend or trauma. In these moments, it's important to identify the triggering event and provide a safe space for your child to express and work through thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, some events or situations may act signs or symptoms of a mental health problem. For instance, if your child/teen has a minor physical problem, obsesses over the problem and seems convinced they are dying because of it, or struggles to breathe, they could be showing signs of an anxiety problem. Taking notice of details can help determine the nature of problems and what kind of actions you should take to address them.

Where to Start Getting Help

- **School support staff.** If you feel like your child needs accommodations in school, it's worthwhile to start early in soliciting support from the school system. The process of obtaining an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be daunting and complicated, but hang in there. You will first have to request an evaluation. Having prior treatment or testing through a psychologist might help you to talk about why your child is eligible and conceptualize the kinds of changes that can help in school. Until then, other school support staff (guidance counselor, school social worker, or a teacher) might also provide extra support and guidance.



Phone: (414) 276-3122 or (866) 948-6483

Email: info@mhawisconsin.org

www.mhawisconsin.org

- **Your Wisconsin MHA affiliate** can help you find information and resources around mental health disorders, treatment and support strategies.
- **Your family doctor.** Pediatricians and primary care doctors are not mental health professionals, but some are trained to recognize the symptoms of mental health disorders and can help to distinguish between other health problems. You may want to start by calling your child's doctor to discuss symptoms. They can decide based on your conversation whether you should bring your child in for an office visit, or make a referral to another doctor/mental health professional.

Dealing with your own feelings

Fear and Anxiety – You're not sure what to do. You knew someone with a mental health condition and life was rough for them. It's ok and normal to have these thoughts, but important to remain composed during a conversation with your child. Do your best focus on your child's needs and concerns as they confide in you. They are likely already fearful and nervous about what they have been experiencing and are looking to you for support, guidance, and reassurance. Once you've finished having a conversation with your child, get informed. Keep in mind that almost 60 million Americans have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year and media coverage disproportionately focusses on those instances with the worst outcomes. The vast majority of people with mental health conditions live full, productive, healthy lives with proper treatment.

Sadness or Disappointment – It hurts to see your child hurting. Life can be hard enough, and as a parent, naturally you don't want life to be any more difficult for your child than it has to be. It's ok to let your child know that it's hard for you to learn that they are struggling, but reassure him or her that their struggles don't mean that they have let you down. Reserve any further expression of sadness for a separate conversation between yourself and another adult.

Disbelief – "Not my kid." "How can this be happening?" Confusion and disbelief may be your initial reaction to hearing that your child is having problems, but pretending like it isn't happening doesn't make it any less real. Mental health conditions are real, and common, and most of the time symptoms start during youth. It is important to take your child seriously if they've come to you in need of help, because the sooner you are able to address their problems, the more likely they will be to get better.

Guilt – It can be easy to think about all the "what ifs", and things you should have or could have done when your child tells you they are struggling with their mental health. Keep your focus on what your child has told you and how you can help him or her moving forward, rather than dwelling on the past. You can't change what has already happened, but you can make a big difference in what will happen.

Regardless of which particular feelings you have after a discussion with your child about their mental health, it is important to seek support for yourself as you seek support for your child. Talk to friends and loved ones. Join an online support group. You are not alone and may be able to glean valuable lessons from others who have sought help for their children.

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