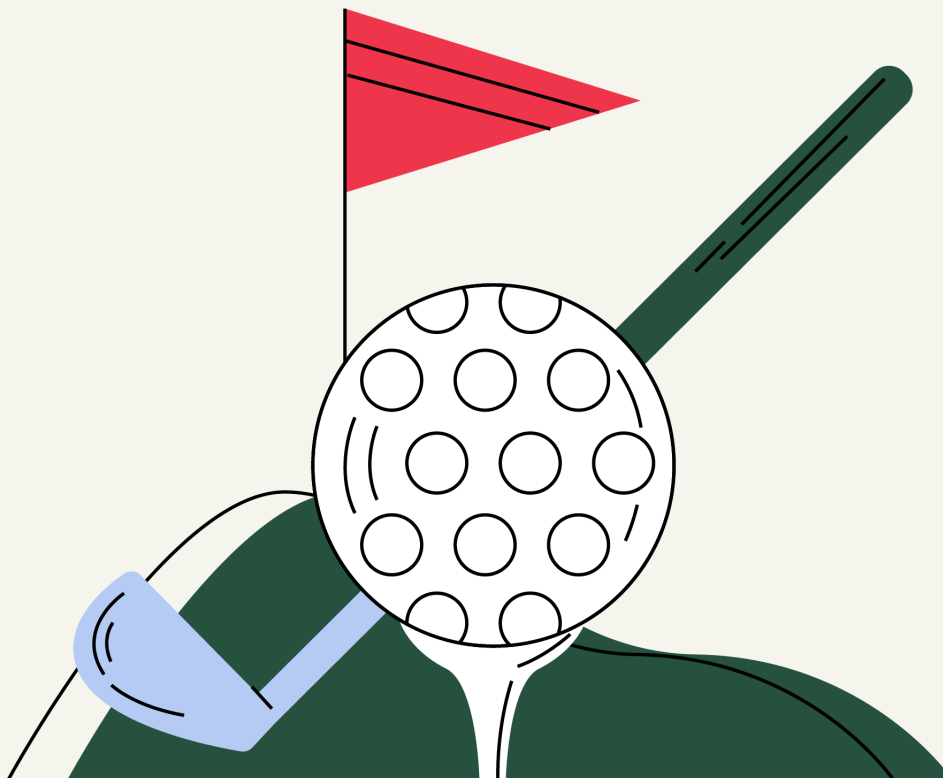




Teen Mental Health Toolkit

Strategies for Prioritizing Mental Wellness in Adolescents



About *Momentous* Institute

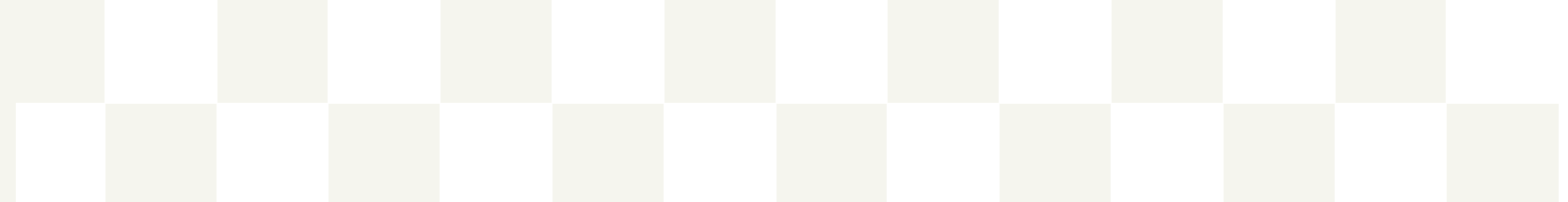
Momentous Institute, founded by Salesmanship Club of Dallas in 1920, is a leading mental health organization that exists to strengthen children, families, and communities. By working alongside and within larger systems, we are cultivating a world of emotionally thriving people reaching their full potential.

Teen Mental Health Toolkit

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About *Adolescence*

Adolescence is the time between puberty and adult independence. It is marked by significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes.

During this time, teens are:

- Establishing their personal identity separate from their families
- Exploring friendships and romantic relationships
- Experiencing the world more broadly
- Questioning their values and beliefs
- Examining their role in society

Each of these experiences can be accompanied by both challenge and joy. Teens may experience a wide range of strong emotions as they navigate complex relationships, and they may experiment and explore diverse qualities or aspects of their identity. At the same time, they may have increased passion and curiosity, engage in meaningful conversations and form deep connections with those around them.

Recently, developmental psychologists have extended the period of adolescence, citing numerous reasons including delayed adult milestones, prolonged education delaying entrance to adulthood and evidence that the brain's prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until the mid 20's.

This guide will dive into the world of adolescence and provide tangible strategies to support the teens in your life.

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THE BRAIN AND BODY

Understanding how the brain and body develop during adolescence gives us insight into teen behavior, allowing us to respond more appropriately and effectively.

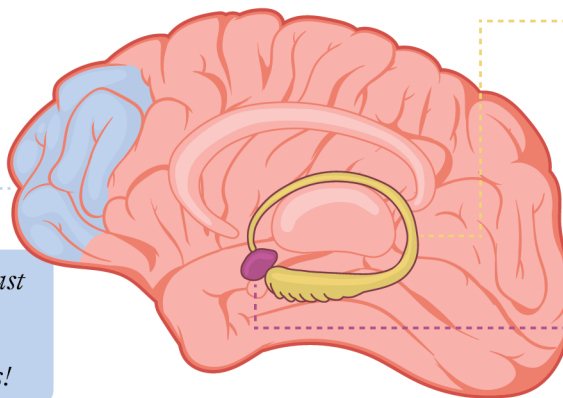
The Brain

The brain guides everything that we do: our body's movements, our decision making, and our emotions. When we understand how the brain works, we can make better sense of our reactions.

There's a lot to know about the brain, but for simplicity, let's focus on three important parts: prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala.

The *prefrontal cortex* helps up make good decisions and control impulses.

The prefrontal cortex is the last region of the brain to fully develop, nit reaching full maturation until the mid-20s!



The *hippocampus* processes and stores information and memories

The *amygdala* regulates emotions and takes over when we feel big emotions like stress

Neuroplasticity

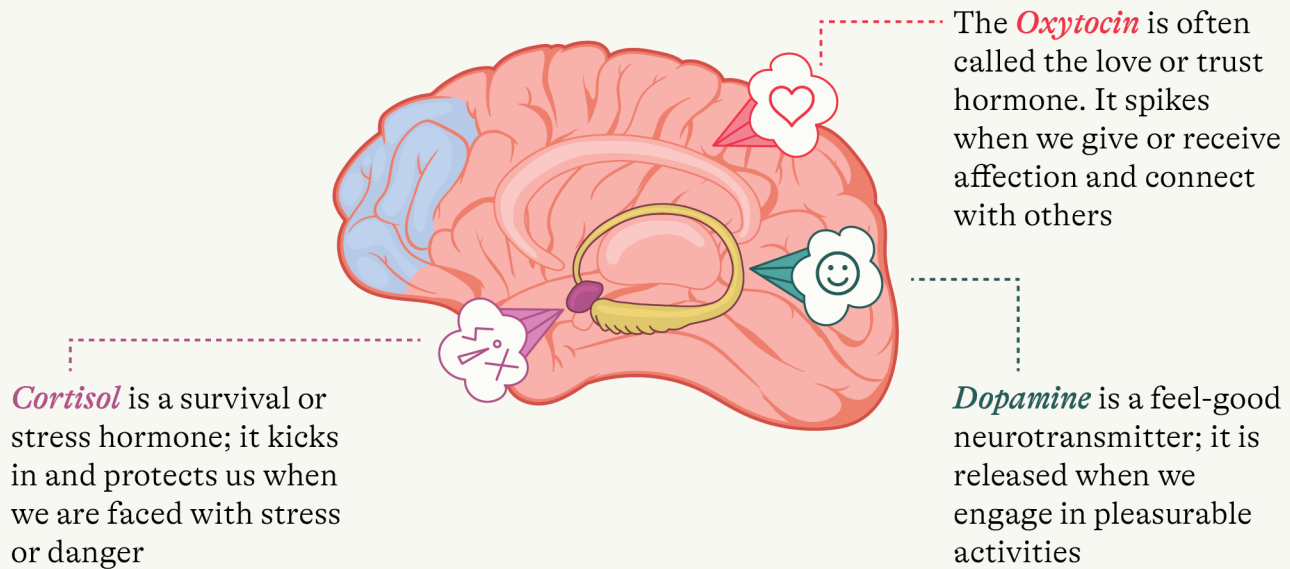
Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to form new neural connections, allowing us to learn new information and skills throughout life. The biggest milestone for brain development happens in our first three years, but the second biggest is during adolescence when two major things happen.

One, **the brain becomes more efficient**. Through a process called pruning, the brain lets go of the neural connections made in childhood that are no longer necessary.

Two, **the brain experiences an increase in processing speed**. During this process, called myelination, neurons are covered by a myelin sheath which allows connected neurons to communicate with each other in a more effective way. In fact, myelin helps neurons communicate 3,000 times more effectively, creating deeper and more efficient neural connections.

Hormones and Chemicals

There are also hormones and brain chemicals at play in the adolescent brain.



Cortisol is released when the brain detects danger. Cortisol is helpful in dangerous situations, but should only be released strategically. Think of cortisol like bleach. It is helpful in small amounts and for specific situations, but too much can disintegrate the healthy development of the brain over time, just like too much bleach can burn holes in clothing.

Dopamine is part of the brain's reward system that drives us towards certain behaviors. In the adolescent brain, the baseline level of dopamine levels is lower than in childhood and adulthood. This may explain why teenagers complain about being bored. While the baseline of dopamine is lower, the dopamine release is higher. When they experience something exciting or pleasurable, their brain releases more dopamine than the brain of an adult.

The adolescent brain is working with an overactive amygdala, an increase in the pleasure hormone dopamine and an under-construction prefrontal cortex. That might sound like a recipe for disaster, but this combination primes adolescents to take risks and make mistakes, which are necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

The Body

The brain and body are two integrated systems that work together, influencing how we interact with the world, regulate our emotions and care for our physical and mental health.

The Nervous System

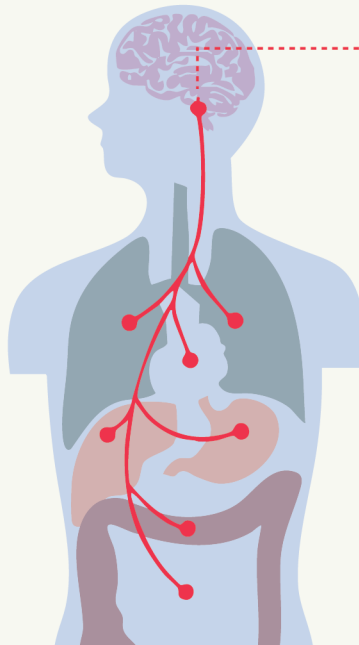
One important component of the brain-body link is the nervous system.

The *nervous system* is the network of nerves and cells that carry messages between the brain and body.

The nervous system has *two* parts:

The Parasympathetic Nervous System calms the body. Often referred to as the "rest and digest" system.

The Sympathetic Nervous System activates the body.



The main nerve in the parasympathetic nervous system is the *vagus nerve*.

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in the nervous system and is connected to every major organ including the *heart, lungs, and digestive system*.

Puberty

The body of an adolescent undergoes significant changes as it enters puberty. Puberty refers to sexual maturation and is accompanied by changing hormones. This period of time is marked by physical changes including hair growth, breast development, voice changes, menstruation, growth spurts, body odor and acne. It also comes with emotional changes including mood swings, silence and/or emotional intensity.

New research indicates that puberty begins earlier and lasts longer than in previous generations. Puberty educators Dr. Cara Natterson and Vanessa Kroll Bennett point to several potential causes including endocrine-disrupting chemicals, increased stress and environmental factors, all of which make puberty more complex for today's young people.¹ Today puberty begins between the ages of 8 and 14, and girls typically develop slightly earlier than boys.

The brain and body changes during puberty are an important element of understanding teens. It's important to remember that their rapidly changing bodies can be the cause of stress, awkwardness, anxiety, excitement and more.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

The adolescent years mark a significant shift in child development. Understanding these important features of adolescence helps us better connect with teens.

In the book *Brainstorm*², Dr. Daniel Siegel shares four important features of adolescent development: **novelty seeking**, **social engagement**, **emotional intensity** and **creative exploration**. Let's look at each of these features.

Novelty Seeking

Teens often search for new and exciting experiences. As mentioned, teens are wired to release more dopamine when engaged in enjoyable activities. This release of dopamine causes a “rush” that keeps them coming back for more.

THE UPSIDE

Teens tend to be open to change and engage in activities with a lot of passion.

THE DOWNSIDE

Teens might seek out riskier activities like sneaking out of the home, experimenting with substances and sexual activity. While most adolescents can logically understand the pros and cons of various situations, the reward of the “rush” can outweigh the risk.

Social Engagement

Adolescence is a transitional time to leave childhood behind and start preparing for independence. A big part of this transition is building a peer support system. Teens start to pull away from their families in favor of their peers because their peers are going through this transition to adulthood with them.

THE UPSIDE

These relationships help teens weather the “ups and downs”.

THE DOWNSIDE

The reliance on peers can sometimes show up as a rejection of authority. It can also be a “blind leading the blind” situation at times when adult insight could be helpful.

Emotional Intensity

We are born with a fully developed amygdala. This is great because we face situations that require a fight, flight or freeze response starting from a young age. However, the prefrontal cortex is still learning how to balance emotions. During the teen years, there is a developmental imbalance between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. The limbic system is rapidly developing and more active and sensitive than during childhood, but the prefrontal cortex is not yet fully developed. In other words, the gas pedal of emotions can be pressed down to full velocity while the brakes only work sporadically.

THE UPSIDE

The emotional intensity also makes adolescents enthusiastic about trying new things. They often approach things that interest them with energy and excitement.

THE DOWNSIDE

Teens may experience the full intensity of every emotion with a limited ability to slow them down or manage them. They may appear moody and impulsive, fluctuating between emotions frequently.

Creative Exploration

There are two things happening in the brain that make adolescence a great time for creative exploration. The first is the creation and pruning of synaptic connections. This makes adolescence a fantastic time to explore different areas of interest and develop new skills. The second is the development of the prefrontal cortex. Adolescents are gaining the ability to reflect, plan and think abstractly. This leads to self-reflection and the development of identity and values.

THE UPSIDE

Teens are discovering what makes them unique, and they may have an increased sense of awe, wonder and curiosity.

THE DOWNSIDE

Teens may face identity issues and feel a lack of direction or purpose. They may also experience increased peer pressure.

Identity

The teen years are a crucial time for physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson breaks this development into eight stages, spanning infancy to late adulthood.³ Each stage presents a unique task that can positively or negatively impact a person's development. If a child successfully completes one stage, they develop the strengths needed to successfully move through subsequent stages. Children who receive encouragement and support are more likely to experience success in each stage.

The stage for adolescence, 12 – 18 years, is called Identity vs. Role Confusion. These years find teens exploring their identity and place in society. The underlying question for many teens is, "Do I belong?" Success in this stage of development leads to a strong sense of self, while failure may lead to uncertainty around their role and identity that can extend into adulthood.

Here are a few components that impact a teen's identity:

Expanding Field of Influence

In our earliest years of life, our community consists of those in our immediate surroundings such as family and close family friends. As we age, we interact with wider groups and our communities expand. As teens begin to experience greater levels of independence, their communities grow and may include people such as classmates, teammates, teachers, coaches and more. By adolescence, the community of influence becomes much broader and includes awareness of public figures and state, national, and world issues. Social media enhances this awareness. Teens today have access to many more individuals who influence their thinking than teens of generations past.

Peer and Societal Pressure

Social Comparison Theory is a concept developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in the 1950s to explain the innate drive to evaluate our own opinions and abilities by comparing ourselves to others.⁴ The theory suggests that we feel inadequate or jealous when we compare ourselves to those we consider better, and gain a sense of self-esteem when we compare ourselves to those we consider worse off. Pressure to fit in and be accepted by peers and society has always existed. However, teens today face increased pressure due to increasingly high academic pressure and amplified beauty standards on social media. Near constant exposure to other people's online lives creates competition and unrealistic standards. These are further exacerbated by pressures such as financial stress, competitive college admissions, the threat of school violence and social and political factors.

Family and Cultural Expectations

As adolescents begin to develop their own identity separate from their families, they also carry with them their family and cultural expectations. This puts them between two worlds – that of their childhood where they may have accepted the norms of their family and culture without challenge, and that of adulthood where they can make their own choices about their values and lifestyle. In the teen years, they may begin to examine which aspects of their family and cultural origins are important and which they want to explore. This pull between family and cultural expectations and self-discovery is normal, but can cause tension when emerging values, interests or lifestyle choices conflict with deeply held family traditions or norms. This is especially true for children of immigrants, LGBTQ+ youth, those from devout religious homes who begin to question their faith, adopted children and teens in high-achieving career-focused families, among others.



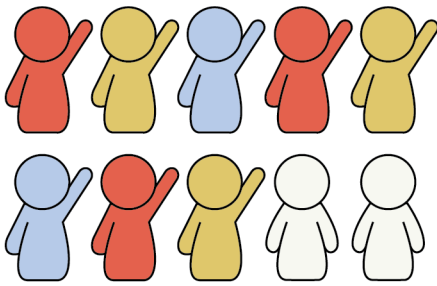
TEENS TODAY

While many aspects of adolescence have always existed, based on developmental milestones, some factors are new for today's generation of young people. Technology and social media have created an interconnectedness and a change in what we consider "community". This ever-changing technology landscape presents today's adolescents with different challenges and opportunities than previous generations faced.

The State of Teen Mental Health

Loneliness

Generation Z, generally defined as people born from the mid-to-late 1990s to the early 2010s, has been labeled the "Loneliest Generation".



Data indicates nearly **8 in 10** Gen Zers are lonely.⁵

Loneliness can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, making it more dangerous than obesity or physical inactivity.

In addition to loneliness, young people today face a serious mental health crisis.

A 2021 study found that an estimated **5 million**, or 20% of U.S. 12-17-year-olds had at least one major depressive episode.



In a 2024 study on teens⁷, **40%** reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the last year. **20%** reported seriously considering attempting suicide; **16%** reported making a suicide plan. Suicide has become the number two most prevalent cause of death after accidents, with higher rates for females and LGBTQ+ youth.

Post-Pandemic Reality

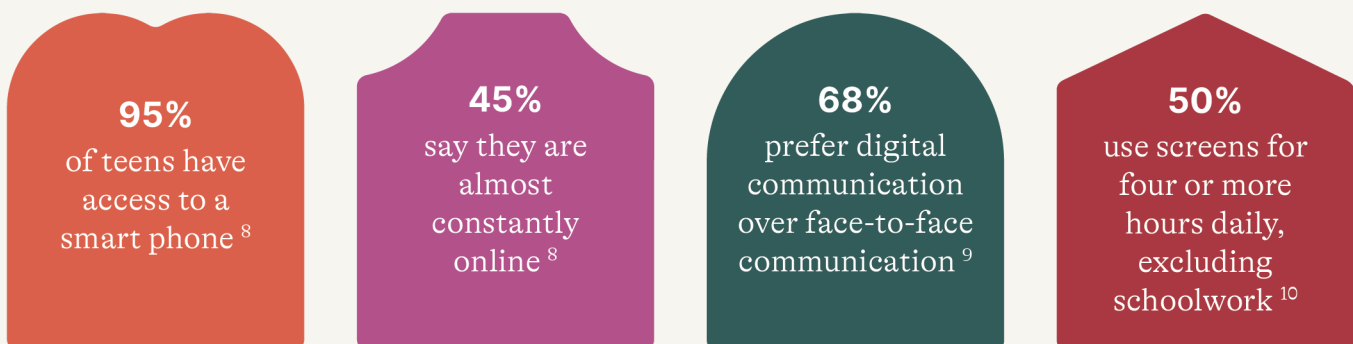
Children and teens experienced the Covid-19 pandemic at a critical point in their development. As years pass and we become more removed from the pandemic experience, we may forget or dismiss the impact it had on children. But the collective trauma of the pandemic is still lingering for many young people. Some of the ways the pandemic impacted young people include:

- Missed social and cultural milestones, such as graduations and one-time celebrations and events such as quinceañeras, sweet 16 birthdays, bar mitzvahs and dances
- Loss of predictability and a rise of instability
- Increased reliance on technology for virtual school, entertainment and social connection during a period of isolation
- For some, the pandemic included loss of loved ones, financial burdens and other significant life changes

Traumatic events and experiences can have immediate effects on mental health, but issues can also surface years later. Traumatic experiences in childhood are linked to a higher risk of adverse health effects later in life. For some, the post-pandemic reality includes increased stress, anxiety, and depression. It also has led to a rise in technology to replace in-person social connection.

Technology

Teens today are called “digital natives”, a generation that has never lived in a world without the Internet, social media, or smartphones. This has led to:



Technology plays a vital role in how teens connect socially with their peers. The digital landscape is in a constant state of change; how teens connect may look significantly different in even a few years. However, technology is going to continue to play a key role in how teens connect. Let's look at the good and the not good of this reality

Good: Teens have the ability to connect with others who share an identity or interest.

The internet has granted us all the ability to easily connect with people outside of our immediate communities. For some teens, this is invaluable because they can connect with people they may not be able to connect with in person.

Good: The internet grants access to information.

During adolescence, the brain goes through a heightened period of creating and pruning neural connections, and the brain's reward system is in overdrive. Because of this, teens are naturally curious. They are seeking new information and experiences, and the internet offers them a place to satisfy that curiosity.

The digital world also exposes teens to other cultures and to people who have different lived experiences than their own. Learning about others helps build empathy and perspective-taking – two vital skills teens will need as they navigate adulthood.

Not Good: Access to information also means access to disinformation.

The negative side to unlimited information is access to disinformation. Because the critical-thinking part of the brain is still developing, distinguishing quality information from disinformation can be challenging. It is extra challenging on social media where algorithms are designed to feed you content relevant to what you are seeking. Additionally, algorithms reward content through engagement, and often controversial content or content containing disinformation receives high engagement.

Not Good: Connecting online can be unsafe.

There are several safety concerns when it comes to connecting online, including:

- Cyber-attacks looking to access personal information
- People who are not who they claim to be
- Dangerous, violent or scary content
- Cyberbullying

Online platforms offer an additional risk because they are available around-the-clock. A generation or two ago, bullying occurred within limited hours and locations (such as at school), but today there is 24-hour access, offering no reprieve.

Not Good: Connecting online is not the same as connecting in person.

There can be many barriers to connecting with others, and technology can allow us to maintain relationships when connecting in person is not possible. However, connecting via technology is not a replacement for connecting in person. It is great to maintain relationships digitally, but it is important to prioritize the in-person relationships that each of us needs to live a full and healthy life.

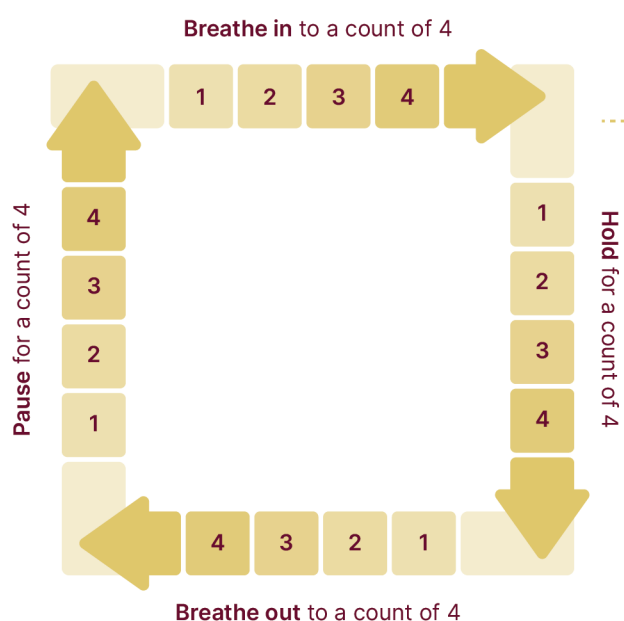
STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

Start with *Empathy*

Take a moment to think about your teen years. Reflect on the following questions:

- *When you were a teenager...*
- *What was technology like?*
- *What did you do for fun?*
- *Who did you feel safe and comfortable around?*
- *Where did you feel like you could be/express your best self?*
- *What was one embarrassing moment?*
- *What caused you pain, fear, or shame?*
- *What coping skills did you have when you experienced a challenge?*
- *What caused you the most frustration?*
- *How did you view adults and their behavior?*

If this reflection brought up difficult memories, take a moment now calm your nervous system by tracing this box while taking deep breaths.



This act of reflection is an important strategy for supporting teens because it helps us remember how tumultuous this period of life can be. While we (hopefully) had positive experiences to recall from this time, we likely also remember times of shame, pain or frustration. Simply remembering these experiences helps us have more empathy for the teens in our lives.

Communication Starters

Communicating with teens can sometimes feel like talking to a brick wall, especially when their head is buried in their phone. Skip, "How was your day?" and try one of these:

Who is your favorite adult at school and why?

What's one fun memory from your childhood so far?

What's something that made you laugh today?

What do you wish adults understood about teens?

What's a skill or hobby you would like to have or learn more about?

If you could plan a trip with your friends, where would you go and who would you take?

Describe your dream day.

Emotional Regulation and Coping Skills

Emotional regulation begins in infancy when babies learn to self-soothe and continues throughout the lifespan, as we are faced with increasingly complex emotional experiences. During adolescence, emotional regulation and coping skills are often tested, as relationships and emotions can be volatile and change frequently. The good news is that these skills can be explicitly taught and practiced. Consider these tips.

Build a Robust Feelings Vocabulary

Researcher Brene Brown suggests that most adults can only name three emotions: happiness, sadness and anger, despite the wide range of human emotions and experiences⁶. Helping teens dig deeper than sad, happy or angry can help them better notice and articulate their emotional experience. Introduce words such as frustrated, overwhelmed, discouraged, embarrassed, grateful, calm, and hurt. Expanding their feelings vocabulary helps them better manage their feelings - now and in the future.

Introduce Mindful Breathing

Mindfulness is the practice of being present in the moment and focusing one's awareness on their feelings, thoughts, and sensations, without assigning judgment. Mindfulness allows us to be fully aware in the moment. Mindfulness can take many forms including sitting in a quiet room, listening to music, taking a walk or engaging in another form of gentle movement. With mindfulness, it is important to focus on the present moment.

Breathing is one of the most accessible tools we have for mindfulness and regulation in moments of dysregulation, including stress. Mindful breathing sounds simple, but can be difficult during a time of stress. It is helpful to have a practice of mindfulness or mindful breathing that you can rely on during difficult times. An easy breathing practice is 4-7-8. Breathe in for four seconds, hold for seven seconds, and breathe out for eight seconds. This strategy can help teens self-regulate when needed.

Practice Grounding

Grounding is the act of bringing yourself into the present moment using your body and/or senses. We often need to return to safety in our bodies after we experience significant stress or trauma or when we recall a painful experience. Grounding strategies tell your brain and body that you are safe using physical movement to remind your body that it is on steady ground. This can include strategies such as placing both feet firmly on the floor, connecting with nature or 5-4-3-2-1, which is noticing five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.

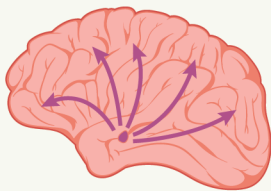
Monitor Thoughts and Feelings

Many people - adults and teens alike - act without thinking. This is especially true in emotionally-charged situations. Helping teens connect their thoughts and feelings to their actions can build their capacity to be self-aware and can help them respond in healthy ways. This can be done as simply as asking teens what they were thinking and feeling before, during and after an experience.

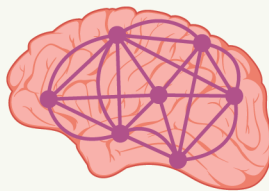
Sleep

Sleep is a critical component of mental health. Let's take a quick look at the brain science of sleep.

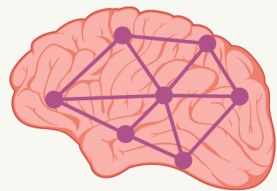
During sleep, **neural pathways** in the brain are connected and strengthened, helping us process and store information.



Pruning, the process through which the brain gets rid of things we don't need, occurs while we sleep.



Recent research also suggests that during sleep the brain undergoes **waste management**, by removing waste and toxins.



When we lack quality sleep, the brain is unable to connect the neural pathways, store memories, and clear out toxins and unnecessary pathways.

Newborns sleep more than they are awake, but by the time they reach adolescence, many people face significant changes in the sleep department. Teens are notorious for late nights and sleeping all day on the weekends. But most teens need 8-10 hours of sleep per night to keep their brain and body healthy.

Here are a few tips for setting up healthy sleep patterns.

Keep Screens out of the Bedroom

One of the biggest barriers to sleep for teens are phones, TVs and other devices. Texting, scrolling and streaming keep the brain in an alert state and prevent it from preparing for rest. Work with the child to identify a reasonable time limit for devices and then have them charge for the night in a common area outside the bedroom. (Be prepared to buy an alarm clock if they are used to using their phone alarm!)

Pay Attention to their Activities and Workload

While some teens choose to stay up late, many feel that there simply aren't enough hours in the day for school, practice, homework and other activities. The teen years provide a good opportunity to review commitments and see what, if any, could be shifted.

Get Exposure to Natural Light

Exposure to natural light during the day affects the body's ability to sleep at night. Studies show that at least 30 minutes of natural sunlight has a significant effect on the body's internal clock. Our circadian rhythm, a 24-hour internal clock, is synchronized to the 24-hour day through light exposure. When exposed to natural light, the circadian rhythm is in sync with sunrise and sunset, making us alert and awake during the day and allows us to sleep at night. Artificial light can misalign the body's circadian rhythm, affecting sleep quality and mood.¹²

Get Plenty of Exercise

Movement during the day is critical to sleep. Whether it's a team sport, strength training, dance, cheer, running, walking or anything else that gets the heart rate going, people who move their bodies during the day get better sleep at night.

Maintain Sleep Consistency, If Possible

Many teens will sleep only a few hours during the week but well past noon on weekends. It may seem like they're "catching up" on lost sleep, but the reality is that it's likely disrupting their circadian rhythm. When the body has inconsistent sleep routines, it struggles to adjust, making it harder to wake up and function on Monday morning. Still, extra sleep on the weekend is better than seven days of sleep deprivation! The goal is not to limit the extra sleep, but to create a more consistent schedule with restful sleep every night of the week.

Encourage Reflection

Teens are old enough to understand their own brain and body and reflect.

Ask questions such as:

- How do you feel during the day?
- How well are you able to focus at school?
- Do you ever feel sleepy during the day?

If they are able to reflect and share about the impact of poor sleep on their brain and body, they're more likely to engage in a conversation about how to get better sleep. Ultimately, as teens enter adulthood and prepare to leave home, they can learn that they're at their best self when they're well rested.

Nutrition

A healthy diet plays an important role in supporting mental health during the teen years, and well into adulthood. During this period of rapid brain development, physical growth, neurological changes and emotional volatility, focusing on a healthy diet helps regulate the brain and body. Teens require higher levels of certain nutrients than adults, such as iron, calcium, zinc, and omega-3 fatty acids to support the puberty process.

Diets high in processed foods, sugars, and unhealthy fats can negatively affect mood regulation, concentration, and emotional stability and can increase the risk of anxiety and depression. Nutrient-rich diets of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats help support physical and mental health.

Teens are especially vulnerable to the effects of poor diets due to their developing brains and hormonal shifts. Establishing healthy habits during adolescents lays the foundation for the lifelong benefits of a nutritious diet.

Mindful Eating

A strategy that supports a healthy relationship with food for people of all ages, especially teens, is mindful eating. Mindful eating is the antidote to eating on the go and involves paying attention to the experience of eating, focusing on the senses and physical cues of hunger and fullness. Practicing mindful eating is as simple as slowing down and being present while eating, noticing the smell, texture, taste and other sensations of eating.

Movement

Movement and exercise are critical components of mental health. Moving the body releases endorphins, hormones that provide feelings of pleasure and help reduce stress. It also strengthens the brain/body connection by activating the receptors that send information to the brain from the body.

Physical activity is essential for mental health for all ages, but its impact is especially important during adolescence due to brain development. Teens require more frequent and intense movement, such as moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, to support not only physical growth but also emotional regulation and brain function.

Regular physical activity in teens has been shown to enhance mood, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve self-esteem, and these effects are even greater when exercise is done in a group or team setting. During this period of development, teens may need many opportunities to find the right way to move their body and may bounce through several options before finding something that sticks. Every form of movement, from walking to workouts, helps brain and body function and overall wellbeing.

Technology

Despite the changing trends in technology, some things remain true. Consider these tips for helping teens create healthy screen habits.

Teach teens about online safety.

We teach teens about all kinds of safety, and the Internet should be no exception. Teens need to be taught safety around posting on social media, interacting with unknown people, and recognizing things like phishing attacks.



Work together to establish boundaries.

When developing boundaries and norms around technology use, it is important to include teens in the process. They best understand how and why they use technology and, with some guidance, can establish healthy boundaries. *Consider these tips:*

Help teens use technology to foster in-person connections.

Because technology is so ingrained in how teens connect, it can feel like a social lifeline to them. One way to help teens shift away from this mindset is to help them learn to use technology to foster in-person connections, by setting up opportunities to meet in the real world. For example, suggest that they make a plan for everyone in their group chat to meet for lunch one Saturday or plan a bowling party.

Maintain an open dialogue. Encourage teens to talk about the apps, games and technology platforms they're using. When they mention something new, ask them to explain it and walk through it together to determine its value and safety level.

Be honest about why you want to establish boundaries. Teens will better be on board with boundaries if they know why they exist.

Charge teens with managing the boundaries you've established. Teens have entered an age where they can practice responsibility. Together, create a plan for consequences if boundaries are not maintained, and then work with them to establish how they'll manage the boundaries on their own.

Some teens develop a dependency on devices and begin to exhibit behavior consistent with addiction including anxiety, irritability, depression and cravings. In these instances, teens may need additional support to help their brain return to a balanced state and better manage their technology use. Consider these tips.

Turn Off Notifications

Some teens receive near-constant notifications, which is like someone constantly tapping your shoulder all day long. Notifications make it harder for teens to focus spend extended time away from devices. Disabling notifications can help teens reduce distractions, manage their time more effectively, and minimize the stress and anxiety often triggered by constant digital interruptions.

Have Uninterrupted Focus Time

Work with teens to have dedicated time away from devices to focus on a task or activity. This might be an activity such as cooking, music, art or reading without a device present. Have them start small with ten minutes of focus, followed by permission to check a device for three minutes. Work up to 15 minutes, stopping to check the phone for three, then up to 20 minutes. If ten minutes to start seems impossible, try five. Just try something to get started and they can build tolerance over time.

Reset

Online gaming is especially challenging to limit because it is social and teens use games to connect with peers. Because they're playing together, they often continue to play for hours without breaks. If gaming becomes a problem, it may be necessary for a hard stop with no playing time for a set amount of time, which can vary based on the person and the situation. This break, sometimes 15 days or longer, can help get the game addiction out of the system and regulate dopamine in the brain. When the child engages again, start with one hour on and one hour off. Set a timer because it can be easy to lose track of time while playing. Adding something that will help them stay socially connected will be important during the time they are not playing their social games.

Seek Challenge

Technology gives the brain pleasure without the counter-balance of effort. When teens seek challenges, it helps the brain restore balance and can lead to greater contentment and satisfaction. This can look like trying a new hobby that is slightly difficult, engaging in exercise or a form of movement that is slightly strenuous, or sitting calmly through a mindfulness practice. Any of these can be uncomfortable or even painful in the moment, but can help the brain reach that level of homeostasis.

Technology will continue to play an important role in how teens connect. We can support teens by helping them understand the importance of technology as a tool and finding balance between technology and life offline.

Navigating *Social Anxiety*

The teenage years are when social engagement between peers comes out in full force. With the onset of puberty and sexual interest, reliance on peer relationships over adults, and persistent questioning of identity and self, it's no surprise that social relationships can take a hit. This can show up as exclusion from social groups, cliques, bullying or cyberbullying, dating violence, breakups or social anxiety.

Social anxiety is a fear of social situations, usually around being judged. This anxiety might occur when meeting new people, dating, answering a question in front of the class, public speaking or asking for help.

It's more than shyness; it's an intense fear that can get in the way of going to school, work or forming relationships.

To overcome social anxiety, teens may need a combination of therapy, practice and self-care.

Therapy

Some cases of social anxiety should be handled in collaboration with a trained mental health professional. Medication, such as anti-anxiety or antidepressants may be helpful, as recommended by a medical practitioner.

Practice

Teens can gradually face challenging social situations to build confidence and learn new coping strategies. This might include:

- Meeting up with a friend in a public place, rather than at home
- Smiling at people on the street
- Calling a store and asking what time they close
- Attending a small event with a safe friend or adult
- Asking a grocery cashier how their day is going
- Ordering for themselves at a restaurant
- Holding a door open for someone

Encourage Reflection

Teens can practice ways to regulate their nervous system during and after social situations, such as:

Mindful breathing

Paying attention to their senses

Movement or exercise

A calm-down mantra

Healthy Dopamine Seeking

As teens test their limits and pursue novelty-seeking behaviors, they may engage in risky behavior, such as experimenting with drugs and alcohol or engaging in sexually explicit content or behavior. When teens seek novelty and reward, adults can respond with healthy novelty and reward that will increase their dopamine levels in a safe and constructive way.

Consider some of the following options:

*Physical
movement,
sports and
exercise*

*New
activities,
experiences
or places*

*Acts of
service*

*One-on-one
attention from
a safe adult*

*Creative
activities,
art, music or
expression*

Reflecting on impulsive or risky behaviors after an incident helps slow the process and can help teens reflect before engaging the next time.

Note: some risky behavior isn't impulsive but planned. In these cases, it's not about curbing impulses but developing the capacity to pump the brakes when risky opportunities present themselves.



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