

Teen Mental Health: What's Normal and When to Get Help

Mental Well-Being

The teen years bring a lot of change. Hormones are shifting, emotions run high, and your child may seem like a different person from one day to the next. Pulling away from parents and some mood swings are expected, but they may also point to something more serious. So how do you tell the difference between normal moodiness and anxiety, depression, or substance use?

At VNS Health, we support teens and their families across New York City with expert mental health care.

What Is Normal Teen Behavior?

Teens go through big changes as they grow. It's normal for them to want more privacy, to hang out with friends more than family, or to feel frustrated or sad at times. They might sleep more or have a less regular schedule. It's also common for school motivation to go up and down.

Moodiness, acting out, or needing space are all part of growing up. But if these changes start to affect everyday life, they might mean that your teen needs extra help.

Worried About Your Child?

Sometimes, kids and teens need help when they feel anxious, act out, or go through tough situations.

Promise Zone is a program where VNS Health partners with schools in the Bronx to offer free, short-term behavioral health support. Social workers meet with students to provide care, coping tools, and family support

[Learn More About Promise Zone](#)

Signs Your Teen May Be Struggling

Some behavior that seems like typical “teen stuff” at first can actually be a sign of anxiety, depression, or substance use. Watch for these signs, especially if they last more than two weeks or seem to be getting worse:

- Changes in mood or personality
- Ongoing sadness, anger, or irritability
- Big mood swings that make it hard to function
- Pulling away from friends or family
- A sudden drop in grades or school attendance
- Trouble focusing or making decisions
- Changes in sleep or eating habits
- Feeling tired all the time
- Having lots of headaches or stomachaches
- Smelling like smoke or alcohol
- Being secretive or lying about where they are
- Using or hiding items like lighters, pipes, or eye drops

Get help right away if you notice your teen:

- Saying they feel hopeless
- Talking or joking about death or suicide
- Writing or drawing about sadness or violence
- Taking big risks or hurting themselves

Even if you're not sure there's a problem, it's better to take action as soon as you suspect something's up. Talking to your teen is a good place to start. Getting help from an expert early can make a big difference — and could even save your child's life.

Good News: Teens Are Open to Talking

Teens are often more open about mental health than adults expect. In fact, many of them want to talk, but they need to feel safe first.

The first step: Make sure your teen knows you care. This is especially important if your relationship has been rocky. Ask open-ended questions like, “How have you been feeling lately?” If they share challenges, say something like, “That sounds really hard,” instead of “You’ll get over it.” If they respond with “I’m fine” or “OK, I guess,” that’s still a start. Don’t push. Instead, say, “Thanks for telling me. I’m here if you ever want to talk more.” You can also set an example by talking about your own stress and how you handle it.

Pick low-stress times to talk, like during a car ride or before bed. If your teen does open up, listen more than you talk, especially if they share something that upsets you. Don’t rush to fix a problem. Just let them know you’re available and they’re not alone. Staying calm and present — whether they open up or not — helps your teen feel safe coming to you later.

How to Help Your Teen with Depression or Anxiety

If you’re worried about your teen, don’t wait to act. Getting help early can make things easier for your whole family.

[VNS Health’s Bronx clinic](#) offers accessible mental health care in New York City that meets teens and families where they are — at home, at school, or in the community. Our services include:

- At-home and local mental health care for teens with anxiety, depression, trauma, or substance use
- Support and care planning for families
- Special programs for teens leaving the hospital or at risk of needing one

You can also ask your teen’s pediatrician or school counselor for guidance or [recommendations](#).

Raising a teen can be hard, but you don’t have to do it alone. If something doesn’t feel right, trust your gut. Knowing what to look for and keeping the conversation open can help your teen feel better — and stay safe.

VNS Health offers comprehensive mental health services for children and teens and their families.

[Learn About Youth & Family Services](#)

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