

## MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN YOUNGER PEOPLE

### QUICK FACTS

Like all of us, teenagers can feel a bit down sometimes. Everyday frustrations, disappointments, problems at school or family troubles can cause this feeling. If the sadness or worry go on for more than two weeks and start to affect their daily life, though, this may be a symptom of a mental illness which needs medical assessment and treatment.

- Around **four in every hundred** young people experience depression or an anxiety disorder at some time.
- Globally, mental disorders are the **single most common cause of disability** in young people.
- More than 70% of mental illnesses will emerge for the first time by **the age of 25 years**.
- The chances of developing **some mental illnesses are higher** if there is a history of it in the family.

*'I think back to how things might have been different, to how a strong connection could have made a difference. If someone had noticed my anxiety and withdrawal when I was 10 or 11, my anorexia and depression might never have escalated like they did.'*

*Rachael*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING HELP

Symptoms of mental illness may go unrecognised by others, especially during the teenage years. Untreated depression or anxiety can go on to affect adult life, can result in long-term social and emotional problems, alienation from family and friends, and may lead to more serious depression.

If symptoms are detected early, and help is sought, there is a very good chance that the symptoms can be reduced and overcome. Psychological therapy and medication are the main forms of treatment. Encouraging someone to talk openly about the thoughts and feelings that

go with mental illness are an important first step towards overcoming the problem.

**Related:** [The first steps](#)

## **WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR**

These changes may indicate that someone is developing a mental illness. The person may:

- be unusually sad or worried for more than two weeks.
- lose interest in doing things, especially activities they usually enjoy.
- change their sleeping patterns; be constantly tired, lack energy, or have troubled sleep or insomnia.
- withdraw from their social life; spend less time with friends and family.
- become over-sensitive to criticism or authority.
- have a change in appetite; start to eat very little, or eat much more than previously; lose weight; vomit frequently.
- experience frequent health complaints such as head or stomach aches, general aches and pains.
- become persistently irritable.
- have trouble concentrating or making simple decisions.
- think they are worthless and have low self-esteem.
- make comments about suicide, talk about feeling hopeless, or say life is not worth living.
- become so anxious they have difficulty breathing, start to sweat or choke, or feel faint and shaky.
- blame themselves unreasonably for things not going right.
- behave aggressively and provoke fights.
- abuse drugs or alcohol.

It is important to understand that these are symptoms and that they are treatable. A school counsellor, youth worker or close friend may be able to help in encouraging the person to see a doctor.

## **COMMON CONCERNS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **Drug use**

Concerned family members and others often believe that drug use is causing the erratic or withdrawn behaviour. Sometimes this may be true. Drug and substance abuse among young people is common. Many use drugs with friends for recreation. Some, however, use them as a way of dealing with the distressing symptoms of mental illness.

Try to talk to the young person about it when they seem willing to open up. It is important to

find out if the drug use points to a serious problem, and this is not easy to assess. Remember, if you are concerned, talk to a doctor about getting specialised help.

**Related:** [Supporting someone with substance abuse](#)

## Eating disorders

Feelings of worthlessness experienced by a mentally ill person can sometimes affect how they view their bodies. This may lead to a change in eating habits, such as extreme dieting, bingeing and purging. Such behaviour can result in an eating disorder such as Anorexia nervosa or Bulimia. Eating disorders are more common among girls, but boys can also be affected.

People with an eating disorder are usually secretive about it, so the condition may be hard to detect. Anorexia nervosa usually involves continued strict dieting even when weight has dropped below the normal healthy range. Bulimia can be more difficult to recognise as there may not be a significant change in body weight. If you are concerned that someone you know may have an eating disorder, it is essential to seek professional help as soon as possible. Eating disorders can be overcome with treatment and support; left untreated they may be life-threatening.

**Related:** [Finding hope when fighting an eating disorder](#)

## Suicide

Depression can often lead to feelings of great despair and distress. These feelings can be so profound that they lead to thoughts of suicide. This does not necessarily mean that the person will act on these thoughts – it is important, however, that any talk of suicide is taken very seriously, and help should be sought immediately.

It is especially important to seek help if the young person:

- talks about feeling worthless or hopeless, and has very low self-esteem
- is experiencing regular panic attacks
- is giving away their personal possessions
- has delusions or hallucinations
- does dangerous, life-threatening things
- has made previous suicide attempts.

**Related:** [How to help when someone is suicidal](#), [Self-care after someone discloses suicidal thoughts](#)

## SEEKING HELP

Someone who is experiencing symptoms of mental illness may find it difficult to talk about what they are experiencing. They might feel very sensitive, that they are being criticised, or frightened about what is happening. This may result in a rebellious response, or they may deny that there is a problem.

It is important to reassure and support the young person. Let them know that you want to help and that you are willing to listen. Reassure them that, with treatment and support, a lot can be done to help how they feel.

- Talk to the person when they seem willing to discuss things with you. Choose a time when they are more likely to be relaxed and open up.
- Make contact with a school counsellor or youth worker who may also be able to help.
- Encourage the person to consider the doctor as someone who can help, who will be confidential, and will not judge them.
- Suggest that you or another trusted friend come along as support when visiting the doctor.
- Discuss the situation with the doctor yourself, to ensure any relevant information is known. It is always helpful to write down your concerns and bring them with you. If the doctor does not seem to understand, or the young person is not comfortable with them, look for another.

**Related:** [Treatments for mental illness](#)