



Mind your Health

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**HOW TO SPOT THE SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS,
 AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**
 BY ZOE H. TODD

Your teen years can be unpredictable. You're expected to balance school, friends and extracurriculars. At the same time, you're planning life after high school.

"Parents and teens need to acknowledge that this is a period of change, and that change can be hard," says Sara Dimerman, creator of the online mental health resource helpmesara.com. "They need to be patient with themselves and expect that there will be many zigzags in the road before it straightens out." Social worker Nicole Loreto agrees with Dimerman listing school, friends and extracurriculars as the biggest sources of stress for teens.

SPOT THE SIGNS

Although worry and stress are unavoidable, it's important to know when something more serious might be developing. Anxiety, depression, eating disorders and addictions are common mental health concerns during high school and are typically triggered by stress or an unhealthy

family environment, says Dimerman. Genetics can also play a role if there is a family history of mental illness.

Anxiety. A normal response to stress that can help motivate you, anxiety becomes a problem when you feel anxious all the time, even if there is nothing to worry about.

Depression. Commonly appearing with anxiety, depression often feels the opposite. It is characterized by low energy, low mood and low self-esteem. Additional symptoms can include self-harm (cutting), disordered eating or substance abuse.

KNOW WHERE TO TURN

Speaking up can be tough. You may feel embarrassed or confused about how you feel, but it's important to talk to someone you trust if you notice a significant change in yourself or one of your friends. Loreto emphasizes that "mental illness is not a character flaw" and wants to stop the stigma surrounding it.

“You’re not going to be happy-go-lucky Mary Poppins every day,” Loreto says. “It’s important to seek help if you haven’t felt like yourself for more than two weeks. Go talk to somebody because if you can intervene early then you can prevent [your feelings] from becoming very complex. Learn how to take care of your mind.”



A great place to start is by visiting a counsellor, either at your school or a local health centre. “Counsellors are like life coaches, teaching us techniques and skills to improve our well-being,” says Michelle Baulch, a counsellor for students living in residence at Carleton University in Ottawa. “Our job is to listen and be here to support you.”

When reaching out to a counsellor, Baulch says you are in control. You can ask questions, talk about how you want to feel, and even request a new counsellor if you don’t have a good connection with the first one.

Dimerman adds that, though it’s hard to start talking, finding someone who is trained to listen can help you feel better. If this makes you uncomfortable you can also try helplines like Kids Help Phone, which is free and open 24 hours a day (see right).

SELF-HELP IS IMPORTANT TOO

If you feel depressed or anxious, but talking to someone isn’t immediately an option, you can also self-help. Baulch says it’s especially effective to breathe deeply and repeat, “I am OK right now.”

“We fear that we will always feel the way we do in that moment, but emotions come and go just like weather patterns,” she says. “We can take the time to remember earlier moments when we felt more positively. There is a lot of power in knowing that things will get better.”

Above all, Baulch says it’s important not to be too critical of yourself. “If we treat ourselves with compassion, the way we would treat our best friends, we build a far better foundation for mental health,” she says. “If our friends are wonderful, exactly the way they are, then we are as well!” ✨

Know Where to Go: Five Mental Health Resources

Kids Help Phone

1-800-668-6868

kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/Home.aspx

Need help now? Try Kids Help Phone to call a counsellor at any time, day or night. Don’t be fooled by the name – the organization has a webpage specifically for teens.

Ontario Mental Health Helpline

1-866-531-2600

mentalhealthhelpline.ca

If you have questions about mental health, you can call the Ontario Mental Health Helpline for free. Not comfortable talking on the phone? Try their chat or email service instead.

Canadian Mental Health Association

cmha.ca

Visit the Canadian Mental Health Association for general information about mental health. The website includes links to events, resources, and support services near you.

Here to Help

heretohelp.bc.ca/screening/online

Try this online screening to check for the warning signs of depression, anxiety, and risky drinking. Talk to a doctor or counsellor if you have questions about your results!

Helpmesara.com

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Check out psychologist Sara Dimerman’s website, helpmesara.com, for more tips and information from Dimerman.

HealthyMinds App

theroyal.ca/mental-health-centre/apps/healthymindsapp

Check out this app by mental health care centre The Royal, for Androids and iPhones. *HealthyMinds* can help to identify how you’re feeling and what to do about it. Learn and apply different coping methods, wherever you are.