

Exploring anxiety and depression

Most of us are aware of what physical health is and means, and most people understand that everyone has their own 'state' of physical health, which is affected by factors including lifestyle choices (such as nutrition and activity levels) as well as environmental factors and genetics.

The same is true for our emotional and mental health, in that we will all have a particular 'state of mind'. Yet many of us have less understanding about how the mind works. And unlike a physical health condition, when our mind is working less well for us and needs some professional support, we can feel embarrassed about acknowledging this or seeking help from a clinician or other professional such as a therapist.

While we are comfortable talking about 'good' or 'poor' physical health, the same isn't true of our mental health. As a result, we can neglect our emotional and mental wellbeing, and as with physical health, if we ignore mental health symptoms, things tend to get worse.

Some of the indicators that tell us our mental health needs some attention are feeling very stressed, overwhelmed, anxious or low. While all of us will feel these at some points in our lives, if we experience them most days or over a longer period of time, *and* they are affecting how we're functioning and what we're able to do, we need to take notice. It's also important to recognise that just like the state of our physical health can affect our mental health, so our mental health can affect our physical health: our body and mind are not separate things, rather they are deeply connected.

Having challenges with our mental health doesn't mean there is something wrong with us; it's not anyone's fault and it's important not to assign blame. And like physical health, for most low to medium level states of mental health, there is a lot we can personally do – through self-help and lifestyle adjustments – that will improve our state of mind.

About anxiety and depression

Two of the most common states of mental health that can cause challenges with daily living are [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), with anxiety often leading to or being linked with depression. This is because anxiety usually leads to 'avoidance behaviours' as someone seeks to avoid or have some control over what is making them anxious. Avoidance can then lead to 'withdrawal behaviours', which are often seen in depression because someone feels so low or helpless that they withdraw from life.

The signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression may be less visible than a physical condition such as a sprained ankle. It can also be hard in young people to know if some of the normal teenage behaviours are actually indicative of challenges they're having with their emotional and mental health. Young people, like adults, can also go to great lengths to conceal their difficulties and be reluctant to talk to someone about how they are feeling.

Causes of depression and anxiety

Depression and anxiety do not discriminate; they affect people of all ages, races, cultures and classes. As a parent, it's very normal to wonder why your teenager has become anxious or depressed, and even to feel some responsibility for it despite there being many factors involved.

Teenagers can be particularly vulnerable to these difficulties because of the enormous physical, emotional, social and cognitive changes that occur during adolescence. These include significant

structural and functional changes that affect their emotions and behaviours. Watch [Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore's TED talk](#) on this.

Like many physical and mental health difficulties, depression and anxiety have a number of different causes, which fall into four broad categories:

- Social – triggers such as difficult experiences in childhood or adolescence; the nature of relationships with family, friends and girlfriends/boyfriends; social expectations around things like success, achievement and failure or fear of failure; negative life events such as bullying, social exclusion, bereavement or divorce; physical or emotional abuse and neglect
- Biological – someone's DNA and genetics, developmental factors, and other physical or mental health difficulties, such as disease
- Psychological – someone's ability to cope with life's challenges, such as stress, pressure of studying, money problems, difficulties at home
- Drugs and medications – anxiety and depression can be a side effect of medications for other conditions, disorders and diseases, as well as from using recreational drugs and alcohol.

Most people who develop depression or anxiety tend to have a combination of risk factors from all four categories.

Core signs of depression

These may include:

- **Feeling low or unhappy for a prolonged period of time.** This is different from the more normal ups and downs experienced by teenagers in response to everyday life, for example, falling out with peers, difficulties at school and family arguments.
- **Loss of interest in and enjoyment of usual activities.** It's normal for the appeal of existing hobbies to change as young people develop new interests and 'find themselves'. However, losing enthusiasm for a range of things that a young person previously enjoyed over a period of time may indicate low mood.
- **Irritable mood is a less commonly known sign of depression.** This may just be a part of growing up, but if a young person appears irritable about lots of different things over a period of time, it may also be an indication of depression.

The list of possible depressive behaviours that might need further investigation or support is extensive. It's important to be aware, however, that all of these could reflect normal teenage behaviour. Adolescence is a challenging time for a young person, so mood swings are common, as are changes in sleeping patterns and behaviours.

Learn more about [depression in young people](#).

Core signs of anxiety

These can include:

- **Feeling nervous, on edge, panicky and/or overwhelmed**
- **Physical symptoms** such as a fast heartbeat, a dry mouth, trembling and/or nausea
- **Poor appetite and/or sleep**

Again, we all feel some of these things sometimes, but if your teenager is experiencing these and other anxious feelings frequently and for longer periods of time, and it is affecting their daily life, it is worth speaking to your GP as it may be they are experiencing an [anxiety disorder](#).

Learn more about [anxiety in young people](#).

When should you be concerned?

It can be helpful to compare how your young person is currently with how they previously were. Try to keep an eye on things and make a note of what you have been noticing and how often signs of anxiety and/or depression are coming up. Sometimes you may notice a cluster of symptoms which are very different from what's normal for your teenager.

The [NHS self-assessment mood questionnaire](#) is helpful to do as it assesses current feelings and advises if it would be helpful to consult your GP.

The criteria that healthcare professionals follow when trying to determine a diagnosis of depression or anxiety is information based on the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(or DSM-5\)](#), which is applicable throughout the world. It uses the following criteria:

- The young person needs to be experiencing at least one 'core' symptom and four or more further symptoms.
- They need to have experienced these symptoms for at least two weeks (nearly every day).
- The symptoms are causing significant distress or interfering significantly in different areas of the young person's life.

Coping with depression and anxiety

Living with depression is challenging. [Facing Shadows](#) is a short, animated film about what it is like to suffer from depression as a teenager, made by young people who had been to a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for help with their depression.

[Living with Anxiety](#) is a short film in which young people share what it's like to feel so anxious that it affects everyday life. Learn more about [supporting your young person](#) with their anxiety.

Research also shows that caring for a depressed or anxious teenager can be difficult and stressful for parents. Parents might feel guilty that they have somehow caused the depression or anxiety, or haven't been able to protect their child from the stresses and challenges that may have contributed to it. They may also feel frustrated that they can't get through to their teenager, or hopeless about not being able to change the situation. The reality is that parents can play an important role in supporting their teenager – from recognising difficulties when they first emerge, through to supporting with treatment and beyond.

[Journey Through the Shadows](#) is a short film showing parents' experiences of seeing their child live with depression (by the [Anna Freud Centre](#)).

Support and treatment for anxiety and depression

Low level anxiety and depression can be supported through the sixth form wellbeing service. We are able to provide students with information to help them better understand anxiety and depression as well as access to self-help tools and techniques they can use.

However, if they are experiencing more severe symptoms, we recommend speaking to their GP who will refer or signpost you to appropriate services, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service ([CAMHS](#)). They offer a range of support, including using and teaching Cognitive Behavioural Therapy approaches and stress reduction techniques.

Low to medium levels of anxiety and depression can respond well to self-care practices, such as talking to someone, keeping active and journaling (keeping a diary of how you're feeling). Specific [self-care for anxiety](#) includes using breathing, relaxation and mindfulness exercises, while [self-care for depression](#) also includes mindfulness as well as spending time in nature. For both, looking after one's physical health is also important, through [nutritious food](#), [being active](#) and getting good [sleep](#).

Other approaches that don't involve medication and can be provided by trained professionals include [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#) (CBT), [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#) (ACT), [Emotional Freedom Technique](#) (EFT) and [EMDR](#).

The NHS website has some excellent resources, including [audio guides](#) that offer advice on how to cope with low mood and anxiety.

Resources and further reading

[5 steps to emotional and mental wellbeing](#)

[Anxiety explained for Teens](#)



[Pooky Knightsmith You Tube channel](#): excellent videos, including her 'Anxiety Hacks' series, by this respected young person's mental health expert

[The Black Dog of Depression \(World Health Organisation video\)](#)



Visit [HealthTalk.org](https://www.healthtalk.org) to find out about the experience of depression and low mood in young people by seeing and hearing young people share their personal stories on film

[HelpGuide](https://www.helpguide.org) is an evidence-based wellbeing website with information and practical advice on a whole range of areas.

[The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust](https://www.charliewallertrust.org.uk) (CWMT) is a local UK charity that works to increase awareness of the symptoms and dangers of depression and remove the stigma that is attached to mental illness. The website has a number of practical [resources](#) including videos like this one on [managing stress](#) to help the whole family look after their mental health and well-being.

[Students Against Depression](https://www.studentsagainstdepression.org) offers information and advice aimed at young people on a range of challenges, from feeling depressed or anxious, trouble sleeping or struggling with life.

[Family Lives](https://www.familylives.org.uk) is a family support charity providing help and support to families who are struggling with anything life throws at them. They have a helpline which operates Monday – Friday 9am – 9pm, and 10am - 3pm Saturday – Sunday. Family Lives provides [online parenting courses](#) and [helpful short videos](#).

The charity Young Minds is a useful source of information on [depression young people](#) and also offers [support for parents](#). They have a free, 24/7 [Crisis Messenger service](#) for young people that's staffed by trained volunteers (text YM to 85258), and [Helpline, Email and Webchat services](#) for parents.

[Mind](https://www.mind.org.uk) has a lot of information and advice about many different mental health difficulties. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/>. They operate an information and signposting service: call 0300 123 3393, email info@mind.org.uk or text 86463. 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday

[Young Minds](https://www.youngminds.org.uk) is a UK charity offering support and information around child and young people's mental health. It offers a free and confidential parent's helpline (0808 802 5544) which is open Monday – Friday, 9.30am – 4pm.

The [Simon Says](https://www.simon-says.org) charity offers support if you or someone in your family has been or will be affected by loss and bereavement

The [Hope Again](https://www.hopeagain.org) service is designed by young people for young people coping with loss and bereavement.

24 hour support lines

[Childline](#) offers information and advice on a range of issues relating to children and young people. You can call them anytime (free of charge) on 0800 1111 or visit their website.

[Samaritans](#) offers a listening service if you are having a difficult time or are worried about someone else. You can call them anytime (free of charge) on 116 123 (UK and Ireland) or visit their website.