



Teen Guide to **MENTAL HEALTH**

Don Nardo





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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Stress Among Teens Is on the Rise	
Chapter One	8
Balancing Home and School	
Chapter Two	19
Friendship and Dating	
Chapter Three	29
Healthy and Unhealthy Body Image	
Chapter Four	41
Major Life Transitions	
Chapter Five	52
Signs of Trouble	
 Source Notes	 63
For Further Research	68
Organizations to Contact	70
Index	73
Picture Credits	79
About the Author	80

Stress Among Teens Is on the Rise

“I’m kinda hard on myself,” says a teenager named Rachel. “Like I feel really bad if I don’t have a 4.0 grade average.” Another teen, named Tim, is not worried about grades. Rather, he says he worries about “making new friends without ex-friends spreading rumors.” Relationships also concern fourteen-year-old Lolo, who complains, “My best friend left last year, and I’m worried about who I’ll hang out with.” Amina, who is in the same grade as Lolo, says, “There are these really jealous girls and they are always stressing me out.”¹

Other teens have problems with parents or siblings, while still others are anxious because they are gay and find it hard to fit into a social scene in which certain stigmas against gay people are common. Other groups of young people are repeatedly bullied, suffer from depression or an eating disorder, or have become addicted to drugs. In fact, experts on mental health point out that a majority of today’s teens feel some level of stress, anxiety, or upset over one or more aspects of their lives. According to a 2018 study of US teens ages thirteen to seventeen, conducted by the widely respected Pew Research Center,

Anxiety and depression are on the rise among America’s youth and, whether they personally suffer from these conditions or not, seven-in-ten teens today see them as major problems among their peers. Concern about mental health cuts across gender, racial and socio-economic lines, with roughly equal shares of teens across demographic groups saying it is a significant issue in their community.²

Sources of Teenage Worries

The worries at the top of the list for teens relate to school and friends. According to the Pew study, of the numerous possible sources of stress or anxiety for teens, the single most prevalent one consists of worries surrounding grades. About 61 percent of those surveyed said they felt a lot of pressure—from parents, teachers, and/or themselves—to do as well as possible in academic pursuits. Meanwhile, about three in ten teens said they felt a certain amount of pressure to look good and fit in socially, both at school and within their peer groups.

Many other concerns also trouble teens. Fully half of the teens surveyed pointed out that overconsumption of alcohol and drug addiction are serious problems among the teens in their communities; in addition, 6 percent said they felt undue pressure to drink alcohol even when they did not want to, and 4 percent said they had been pressured by friends to take illegal drugs. At the same time, 23 percent of the respondents said they worried daily about whether their parents would be able to make enough money to keep paying all the bills. Another 7 percent said that, regardless of their financial situations at home, most of their stress came from them frequently being in trouble with law enforcement.

Other similar sources of teenage worries and stress were revealed by data collected in 2018 by the American Psychological Association (APA). This survey also singled out the various ways that teens tend to react to and deal with their worries and stress. A surprisingly high proportion—35 percent—of the several thousand teens questioned reported lying awake at night, overeating, or eating unhealthy foods in reaction to the stresses they felt in their lives. Fully 40 percent said they felt angry fairly often. Another 36 percent described feeling nervous or uneasy on a regular basis, and the same proportion—36 percent—said they felt overly

“Concern about mental health cuts across gender, racial and socioeconomic lines.”²

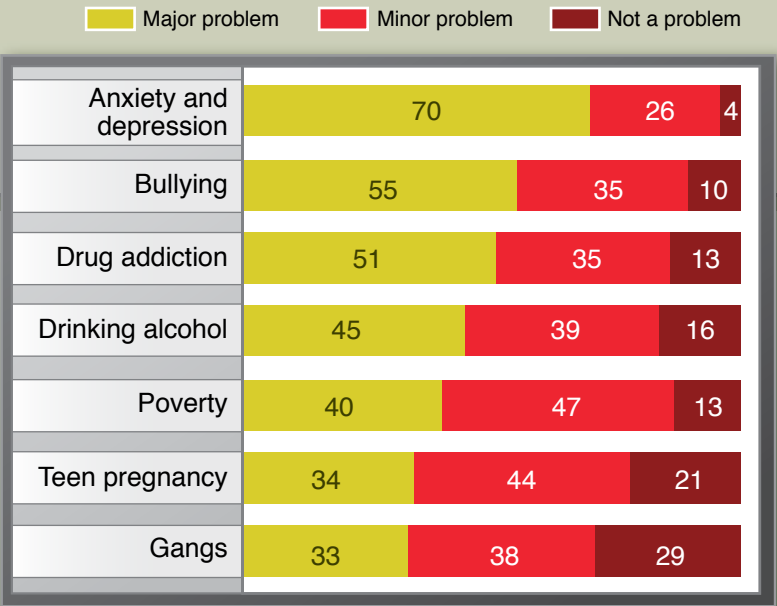
—Pew Research Center

US Teens Worry About Anxiety and Depression

A majority of US teens considers anxiety and depression to be a major problem for their age group, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey of youth aged thirteen to seventeen. Seven in ten teens say these conditions represent a serious concern, even if they themselves do not experience anxiety or depression. Depression and anxiety rank higher even than bullying and drug addiction among teen concerns.

Anxiety and Depression Top List of Problems Teens See Among Their Peers

Percentage of teens saying each of the following is a _____ among people their age in the community where they live



Note: Share of respondents who did not offer an answer is not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center, Juliana M. Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, "Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers," February 20, 2019. www.pewsocialtrends.org.

tired one or more times per week. Particularly revealing was the finding that half of the teens in the study said that at least once a month someone tells them they appear to be stressed out.

Considering these and other facts, the mental health therapist who reported the APA study's findings online, Kathleen Smith, remarks that many teens "struggle with significant stress levels

you have projects due, tests scheduled, and practices and games scheduled,” advises Jeanne Goodes, who coaches teen baseball teams in Lake Zurich, Illinois. “Plan *how* you will study and *when* you will study. Use your weekends wisely. Use your weekend as preparation time for the week ahead. Start homework for the upcoming week. Read chapters and take notes ahead of time.”¹⁴ Goodes also advises devoting part of each weekend to doing some schoolwork ahead of schedule and using all free periods and study halls in one’s school week to catch up on any homework or school papers one is behind on.



High school runners vie for the prize in a 3000-meter race. Although balancing academics and sports can be difficult at times, many teen athletes demonstrate strong academic achievement.

A Scary Wake-Up Call

Stress over supposedly normal things like managing home life and school can sometimes build up and affect young people in ways they neither expect nor understand. That stress can manifest itself not only in emotional ways but also in physical ways. For instance, an eighteen-year-old Illinois high school student named Hannah recalls a scary incident during her senior year:

I had a really difficult time with stress last year. I was in the middle of switching friend groups and college applications were just around the corner. During my first round of finals, I noticed my right wrist going numb, but I didn't think much of it. Within a couple of months, it was numb practically all the time; on two occasions, I couldn't feel my entire left arm or part of my face. I didn't even have enough control over my hand to text my dad that this was happening! I went to my doctor who explained that I was carrying my stress in my shoulders. They had become so tight that my vertebrae were pushed forward, cutting off the nerve endings and causing me to lose feeling. That was a wakeup call—I couldn't keep doing this to myself.

Quoted in Alexandra Thurmond, "Under Pressure: Teens Speak Out About Stress," *Teen Vogue*, March 17, 2014. www.teenvogue.com.

The Cyberspace Factor

Budgeting one's time efficiently does more than help balance a person's schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Becoming better organized overall also helps balance school life with home life. This is because most of the time that a teenager spends outside of school is spent at home. So getting on an efficient schedule of doing homework automatically coordinates some school hours with home hours.

In addition, another potent factor now connects teenagers' supposedly private home lives to school and other sectors of the outside world, in the process making their private lives far less private. That factor is cyberspace, particularly in the form of social media. Before the advent of cell phones and the Internet, a teen's home life was distinctly separate from the hours she or he spent at school, at a job, or going out with friends. Today, in contrast,

most teens use their cell phones to bring the outside world into their private spaces. “Back in the day,” remarks Los Angeles clinical social worker Linda Esposito, “we got a break from our peers after school and on the weekends. But now kids are on social media all day long.”¹⁵

Moreover, that breach of privacy that is by default part of modern social media has created still another source of stress for teens. Many of them regularly find themselves worrying about the image they project through their cell phones. A 2016–2018 survey conducted by Britain’s Royal Society for Public Health asked thousands of young people how social media platforms impacted their health and well-being. A majority of the teens responded that using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media increased their existing feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, many of the respondents said that connecting to people through those media increased rather than decreased feelings of depression and loneliness. As CNN correspondent Kelly Wallace puts it:

“[Using a lot of] social media and advanced technology mean more distractions for kids and less time to truly unplug.”¹⁶

—CNN correspondent Kelly Wallace

Today’s teens, unlike when I was growing up, can now compare their academic performance and everything else about their existence to other teens 24 hours a day through updates on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, you name the social network, and that only increases the stress. [All that] social media and advanced technology mean more distractions for kids and less time to truly unplug.¹⁶

Trying to Reduce Stress

The added pressures of social media at least partly explain why modern teens are overall more stressed-out than teens were in prior generations. Indeed, Kathleen Smith writes, the average teen

SOURCE NOTES

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Chapter One: Balancing Home and School

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FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Sherri Gordon, "5 Ways to Help Your Teen Navigate Social Media During a Breakup," Verywell Family, March 12, 2018. www.verywellfamily.com.

Rachel Hills, "4 People Explain What It's Like Being Genderqueer," *Cosmopolitan*, April 28, 2017. www.cosmopolitan.com.

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

3615 Wisconsin Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20016-3007
website: www.aacap.org

AACAP's mission is to promote the health of children, adolescents, and families. On the group's website, teens can find lists of doctors and other health care professionals in their areas, as well as a section—illustrated by cartoons—telling what it is like to visit such doctors.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

3803 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22203
website: www.nami.org

NAMI is a foundation linking hundreds of organizations that help people suffering from various forms of mental illness. The website has a 24/7 hotline, along with links to articles that provide teens with advice about what to do if they or members of their family need help.

National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE)

1133 Nineteenth St. NW, Suite 302
Washington, DC 20036
website: <http://transequality.org>

The NCTE's mission is to help trans teens and other trans people enjoy equality and social justice. The group's website features sections that explain to young people the complexities of what transgenderism actually is, along with updates on changing laws that affect trans teens.

INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

academics

- balancing sports and, 12–13
- stress related to, 11–12
- adjustment disorders, 43
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), 70
- American Academy of Pediatrics, 10, 19
- American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 59
- American Psychological Association (APA), 5, 8–9
- Anderson, Monica, 22
- anorexia, 33, 34, 37–39, 55
- anxiety, 4, 52
 - percentage of teens citing as major problem, **6**
 - prevalence among teens, 53
 - social media use and, 15
- anxiety disorders, 53

- symptoms of, 53–54
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 52–53, 60

- Barlow, Krista, 36
- binge eating disorder, 33, 34–35
- Blosnich, John, 59
- body image
 - negative, 29–30
 - consequences of, 30–32
 - eating disorders and, 32–34
 - positive, 29
- Brown, Nancy, 8, 16, 17, 18
- Brown, Topanga, 58, 62
- bulimia, 33, 34, 36–37
- bullying, percentage of teens citing as major problem, **6**
- Burger, Cody, 41, 47
- Buzzelli, Dana, 49–50
- Callahan, Todd, 53, 54, 60
- Center for Eating Disorders, 33