Leanne Currie-McGhee

BEING THERE

Tips for Supporting a Friend in Crisis

CONTENTS

How Do I Recognize a Mental Health Crisis?

Elaine Russell was in the seventh grade when she discovered that her best friend was cutting herself. The realization scared her, but she did not know this meant her friend was undergoing a mental health crisis. Not knowing how serious this was or what to do, Russell chose to ignore the situation at first. "As much as I pretended not to notice, I knew that she was struggling,"[4] Russell recalls. While worried, she kept quiet and did not say anything to her friend, her parents, her friend's parents, or anyone at all. Her friend ended up being admitted to the hospital for her cutting and self-harm. It was then that Russell realized the importance of recognizing the signs of a mental health crisis and knowing how to respond.

What Is a Mental Health Crisis?

A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's behavior prevents them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively in their daily lives. It may even put them at risk of hurting themselves or others. For teens, these crises can take many forms and often involve extreme emotional distress.

Several types of mental health crises are common among teenagers, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and grief. The CDC found that in 2021, more than four in ten high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless.

Nearly a third experienced poor mental health, and this was most prevalent among LGBTQ, Black, and female students due to societal pressures and negative interactions with others. Additionally, grief and the challenges associated with significant life changes, such as a parent losing a job or dealing with a physical health issue, can lead to severe emotional distress. Vivek Murthy, then US surgeon general, issued a warning in 2021 that teens were experiencing a mental health crisis. He reported that suicide rates had gone up 57 percent from 2009 to 2019 among youths ages ten to twenty-four. While the causes behind these statistics are multifaceted, if a person is struggling, it is important to intervene no matter the cause.

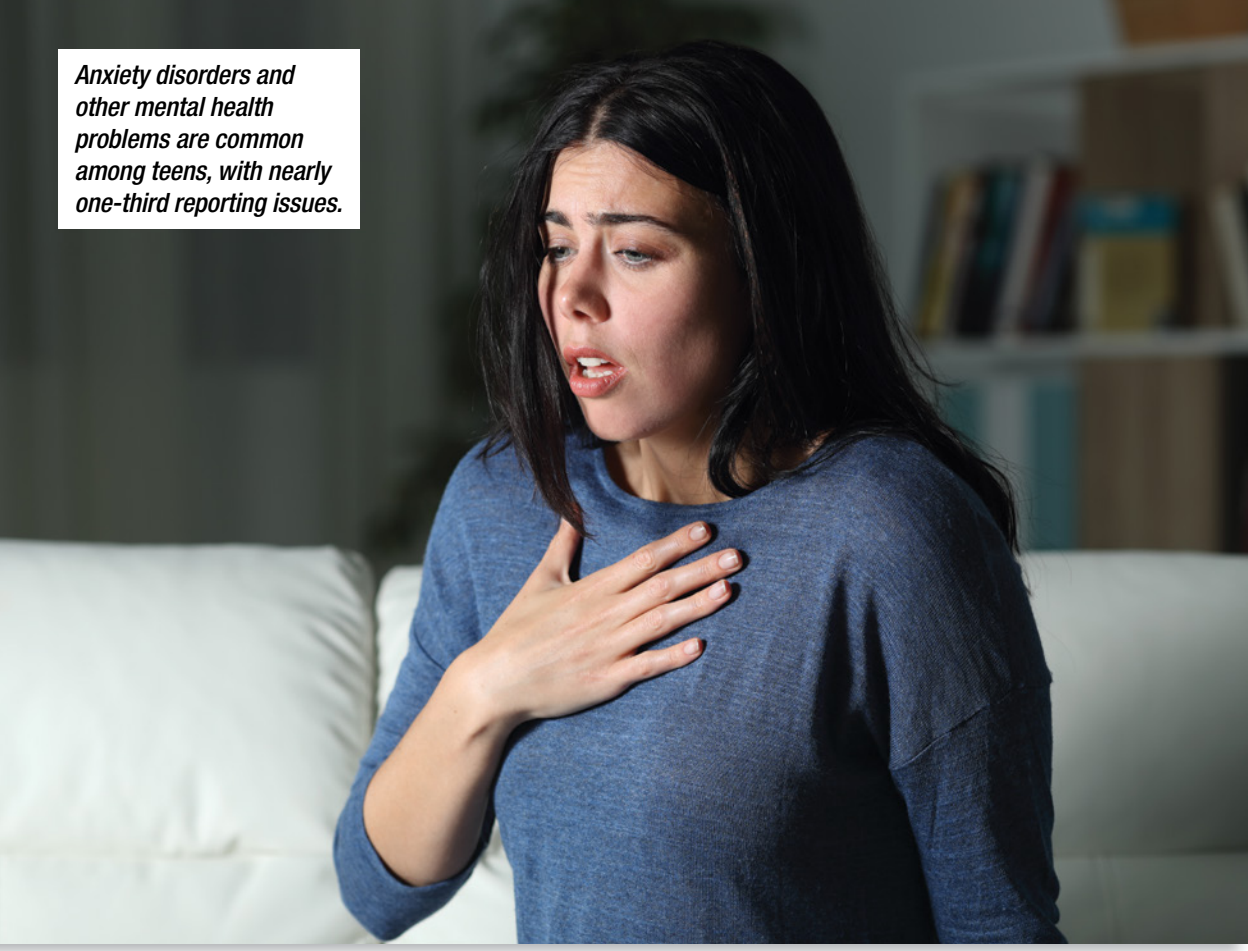
It is critical to address such crises promptly to prevent long-term consequences. "The mental health of our children is crucial," writes Claire McCarthy, a primary care pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. "Not only does mental health affect physical health, but untreated mental health problems interfere with learning, socialization, self-esteem, and other important aspects of child development that can have lifelong repercussions."[5] Ignoring a mental health crisis can have severe impacts, including worsening symptoms, increased risk of self-harm or suicide, academic decline, and strained relationships. Timely intervention can make a significant difference in a teen's recovery and overall well-being. For this reason, it is important for teens to understand what behaviors can indicate a mental health crisis.

"Not only does mental health affect physical health, but untreated mental health problems interfere with learning, socialization, self-esteem, and other important aspects of child development that can have lifelong repercussions."[5]

—Claire McCarthy, a primary care pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School

Know the Signs

There are some common signs of someone experiencing emotional distress. Physical changes are typically the most visible indicators



Anxiety disorders and other mental health problems are common among teens, with nearly one-third reporting issues.

that something is wrong. These can include sudden and unexplained changes in weight, recurring pains such as headaches or stomach pain, and constant tiredness.

Sudden and unexplained weight changes can be a significant red flag. If you notice that a friend's weight is fluctuating a lot or that he or she has changes in appetite, whether increased or decreased, these can signal mental health concerns. If someone suddenly loses interest in food or starts eating significantly more than usual, it might be the person's way of coping with emotional distress. Rapid weight loss might indicate severe stress, anxiety, or depression, while rapid weight gain can be associated with emotional eating or other coping mechanisms. Both can have serious implications for a person's physical and mental health. Additionally, these changes may be a sign of an eating disorder, another type of mental health issue.

Constant tiredness and changes in sleep patterns are also key indicators of mental health issues. If a friend is consistently exhausted, sleeping much more or less than usual, or experiencing insomnia, these could be signs of depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. Sleep is closely linked to mental health, and sleep disruptions can further exacerbate emotional and psychological difficulties. If the sleep issues are due to emotional stress, a cycle of disruptive sleep can develop that makes the emotional problems seem even more daunting.

Additionally, unexplained physical complaints—such as frequent headaches, stomachaches, or other aches and pains—can sometimes be linked to mental health issues. These symptoms can result from stress, anxiety, or depression, especially when there is no apparent physical cause. Understanding these physical signs is crucial for recognizing when a friend might be struggling with their mental health.

Behavioral Changes

Behavioral changes are also crucial indicators of a mental health crisis. According to the American Psychological Association, the most common indication of mental health issues is any abrupt change in behavior. Sudden changes in temperament, social interactions, or personality, such as becoming more aggressive or irritable, can be a sign of emotional distress.

Not everyone experiences depression or anxiety in the same way, and symptoms can vary. However, there are certain behaviors that a person going through a tough time may exhibit. According to ReachOut, a nonprofit organization in Australia dedicated to improving youth mental health, "If your friend is experiencing depression, they might seem down or tearful a lot of the time, or cranky more often, stay up really late or sleep in a lot, or have problems with sleep, miss a lot of school, work or their regular activities, or miss hangouts or often cancel at the last minute."[6]

Specific actions to look for are when your friends stop engaging in activities they typically enjoy or are invested in. For example,

Trust Your Gut

It is hard to decide to intervene in a friend's life if they have not asked for help or talked about mental health struggles. But professional mental health organizations emphasize that a significant number of people struggling do not actively ask for help. For this reason, teenagers should trust their instincts if they have a feeling that something is wrong. "You know your friend, and when you notice signs that make you think that your friend is struggling, your gut may tell you that they need help. In moments like these it's important to follow your instincts, even if you aren't totally sure they are right on," recommends the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the mental health of teenagers and young adults.

Friends know how other friends act and behave, so ultimately, they are likely to notice a difference in another friend's behavior. If you see a difference, acting on it may ease your friend's struggle and in some cases may save his or her life.

Jed Foundation, "How to Follow Your Instincts When You're Worried About a Friend." https://jedfoundation.org.

some teens who are depressed may stop attending social activities or sports or putting effort into their classes. Behavioral changes may also include a sudden drop in grades or frequent absences from school. Daneisha Carter experienced extreme anxiety when she was eighteen and recalls how it affected her ability to keep up with her daily life. "As time went on, it felt like my anxiety was getting worse and worse. I became very stressed out. I started losing focus on school, work, everyday tasks, and I had personal issues at home I was battling,"[7] Carter explains.

Also, how peers react to others, including friends, is something to look out for. If they are persistently irritable with others, this could be an indicator that something is wrong. Increased secrecy or withdrawal from family and friends are other red flags. Teens might start spending more time alone, avoiding interactions, or becoming unusually secretive about their activities and feelings. These behaviors can indicate that they are struggling to cope with their emotions.

> **"Maybe I see them and they're acting different than they usually do, and I don't know what that means. So I ask them about it."[8]**
>
> —Cooper Devine, a senior in high school and member of Hope Squad

Another behavioral sign is a decline in personal hygiene. When someone stops taking care of their appearance, it might reflect their internal struggle. Neglecting basic grooming—like showering, brushing teeth, or changing clothes regularly—can be a sign that a person is feeling overwhelmed or too fatigued to maintain his or her usual routines.

Cooper Devine, a senior in Wisconsin in 2024 and a member of Hope Squad, a school-based suicide prevention group, has learned about and used his understanding of emotional distress signals to help others. "Sometimes it is me reaching out to someone I see is struggling," says Devine. "Maybe I see them and they're acting different than they usually do, and I don't know what that means. So I ask them about it."[8] Understanding the signs can give peers the ability to be proactive in reaching out and offering support.

Sudden changes in temperament, social interactions, or personality, such as becoming withdrawn or sad all the time, can be a sign of emotional distress.

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