

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

# Anxiety and Depression

*ON THE RISE*



Kristina Castillo



#### About the Author

Kristina Castillo is a writer originally from South Carolina. She writes books for children and teens.

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# Teens Struggle with Anxiety and Depression

Dylan Buckner was an Illinois high school senior with a strong academic record. He was also an accomplished football player. As a star quarterback, he had fourteen offers from colleges to play football. His top choice for college was the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, on January 7, 2021, he took his own life. Buckner had depression. His parents said that his depression, which appeared several years earlier, had increased during the pandemic. Buckner's depression seemed to worsen after the closure of his school, where he thrived. The activities he participated in outside of school, such as mentoring students with special needs, also disappeared during the pandemic. When Buckner's parents recognized that his depression was worsening in the summer of 2020, they took him to a psychiatrist right away. Buckner started taking antidepressants and received therapy. His parents were stunned by his death, as were his classmates. They had seen him on Zoom in their remote class one hour before his death. Buckner's father believes that his son's brain chemis-

try made him susceptible to depression but that the pandemic fueled it. Buckner's father said, "Covid's not just killing people by the disease. It's killing people by depression and suicide."<sup>24</sup> Buckner's parents want others to know his story in order to save other teens who might be struggling.

## How Teens Experience Anxiety and Depression

Not all teens experience anxiety in the same way. Teens may experience excessive fears and worries, restlessness, and nervousness. Many teens who experience anxiety are concerned with their body image and social acceptance. When teens feel particularly anxious, they may appear overly shy or withdrawn. They may also avoid their usual activities or refuse to engage in new experiences. Some teens may start performing poorly in school or even stop attending school. They may complain when they are not with their friends or assert their need for independence. Some teens turn to risky behaviors, including experimenting with drugs and alcohol or engaging in impulsive sexual behavior. These behaviors may be an attempt to reduce or escape their fears and worries. Teens with excessive anxiety may experience physical symptoms as well. Some teens may report chest pain, stomachaches, muscle pain, headaches, and fatigue. They may also hyperventilate, tremble, flush, or sweat.

Teens with depression may experience similar symptoms. One early symptom may be irritability. Teens may spend less time with friends or participating in extracurricular activities. They may gain or lose weight, feel tired, and have trouble concentrating. They may also believe that everything is their fault and care less about

**"Covid's not just killing people by the disease. It's killing people by depression and suicide."<sup>24</sup>**

—Chris Buckner, father of Dylan Buckner, who took his own life during the pandemic

performing well in school. Some teens may feel like life is not worth living. Physical symptoms include frequent headaches and stomachaches. The symptoms may arise after an event, such as the death of a loved one, or appear out of nowhere.

## **Trends in Anxiety and Depression in Teens**

According to most reports, anxiety and depression are on the rise in teens. This trend was occurring even before the pandemic, which created more mental health challenges for teens. According to the National Survey of Children's Health, researchers found a 20 percent increase in children and teens (aged six to seventeen) diagnosed with anxiety from 2007 to 2012. As of 2016, over 10 percent of teens were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Of course, that number does not reflect cases of teen anxiety that are undiagnosed. According to Dr. Richa Bhatia, spokesperson for the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders affect approximately 15 to 30 percent of teens in the United States. A CDC report showed that more teens experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019 (36.7 percent) than in 2009 (26.1 percent).

Teen girls are especially prone to developing anxiety and depression. According to various studies, teen girls are two to three times as likely as teen boys to experience anxiety and depression. Teen girls are also more likely than teen boys to attempt suicide, although teen boys are more likely to die by suicide. However, according to a study published in *JAMA Network Open*, the gap between male and female teen suicide death rates has narrowed over the past decades.

Suicide rates have actually been increasing over time. A CDC report showed that more teens attempted suicide in 2019 (8.9 percent) than in 2009 (6.3 percent). Also, the suicide rate for those aged ten to twenty-four increased 56 percent from 2007 to 2017, according to the CDC. Forty-two states experienced an increase in youth and young adult suicide rates from 2007–2009 to 2016–2018.

## Troubling Trends in Teen Mental Health and Suicide

Experts have identified a troubling picture in mental health and suicide trends among US high school students. National surveys conducted between 2009 and 2019 reveal rising numbers of students who report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Those same surveys also show an increase in students reporting suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The survey results, described in a 2020 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, do not take into account the additional stresses brought on by the pandemic.

The percentage of high school students who:	2009 Total	2011 Total	2013 Total	2015 Total	2017 Total	2019 Total
Experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness	26.1%	28.5%	29.9%	29.9%	31.5%	36.7%
Seriously considered attempting suicide	13.8%	15.8%	17%	17.7%	17.2%	18.8%
Made a suicide plan	10.9%	12.8%	13.6%	14.6%	13.6%	15.7%
Attempted suicide	6.3%	7.8%	8%	8.6%	7.4%	8.9%
Were injured in a suicide attempt that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse	1.9%	2.4%	2.7%	2.8%	2.4%	2.5%

Source: "Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report 2009–2019," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

Some researchers caution that the increase in anxiety and depression rates may be due to increased awareness, although that does not explain increasing rates of suicide. Dr. John T. Walkup, chair of the department of psychiatry at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, explained, "If you look at past studies, you don't know if the conditions themselves are increasing or clinicians are making the diagnosis more frequently due to advocacy or public health efforts."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the prevalence of anxiety and depression among teens is concerning.

It is critical that teens with anxiety and depression obtain treatment. If anxiety disorders are not treated, teens are at risk of poor



## School Shootings and Anxiety



School shootings are an unfortunate reality and can cause anxiety for teens. Being exposed to a school shooting can cause trauma, which can trigger anxiety, depression, and PTSD. In addition, school shootings can cause worry and anxiety for teens who learn about the shootings from the news or social media.

Following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, a Pew Research Center survey showed that a majority (57 percent) of teens were worried about a shooting at their own school. One in four teens said that they were “very worried.”

Worry can even arise during active-shooter drills. Em Odesser describes her thoughts during such a drill when she was a high school senior living in Westchester, New York: “This would be my only protection against someone who was trying to murder me: A desk. A door. A dark closet.”

Quoted in Claire Lampen, “Living in Fear of Mass Shootings Is Giving Students PTSD,” *Teen Vogue*, May 24, 2018. [www.teenvogue.com](http://www.teenvogue.com).

academic performance, impaired relationships, and substance abuse. Teens with untreated depression are at higher risk of self-harm, substance abuse, and suicide. They are even more likely to develop other diseases later in life, such as heart, kidney, and liver disease.

### **Pandemic Impacts Teen Anxiety and Depression**

Anxiety and depression have increased in teens during the pandemic. Teens’ ability to socialize has been severely impacted during the pandemic, which is one likely source of increased anxiety and depression. According to John MacPhee, executive director and chief executive officer (CEO) of the Jed Foundation, a nonprofit that seeks to increase mental health support programs in schools, lack of socialization has been detrimental to teens. “They’re wired to be with other people, to be separating their



identity from their parents. It's very, very important for their identity, and this pandemic has really interrupted and insulted that."<sup>26</sup>

There have been mixed reports about whether suicide and suicide attempts have increased during the pandemic. Some data indicate an increase in suicide rates in teens, at least at certain time periods during the pandemic. According to CDC data, during May 2020, emergency room visits involving suspected suicide attempts increased in teens aged twelve to seventeen. During a one-month period in early 2021, there was a 51 percent increase in those visits for girls compared with the same period in 2019. For boys, the increase was about 4 percent.

The CDC speculated that young people were at higher risk of suicide during the first year of the pandemic due to physical distancing and lack of connectedness to schools, teachers, and peers. Other reasons cited were the cancellation of activities, lack of access to mental health treatment, increase in substance use, and anxiety about family health and economic problems. Some teens may have felt cheated when forced to miss out on anticipated school activities like prom, school trips, or graduation. Many teens depend on school resources for their mental health needs. Without that safety net, many schools feared that students were not receiving the care they needed.

For Catherine Zorn, the beginning of the pandemic was particularly challenging. Although she has had suicidal thoughts and panic attacks since middle school, the closure of her dance school in March 2020 triggered troubling thoughts and feelings. As a seventeen-year-old ballerina, she found peace at the dance studio. Without it, Zorn's anxiety and depression took over. She engaged in self-harm and even considered ending

**“They’re wired to be with other people, to be separating their identity from their parents. It’s very, very important for their identity, and this pandemic has really interrupted and insulted that.”<sup>26</sup>**

—John MacPhee, executive director and CEO of the Jed Foundation

her life. Zorn explained, “I didn’t see a way out of the feelings and thoughts I was having.”<sup>27</sup> She asked for help and obtained inpatient treatment. Zorn is one of many teens to seek emergency treatment for suicidal thoughts during the pandemic.

Mental health concerns have been cited as a reason to re-open schools and after-school activities. However, even as schools reopen for in-person learning and activities resume, student quarantine orders and temporary school closures due to an outbreak are causing ongoing anxiety. Given the uncertainty of the pandemic, the full extent of its impact on teen mental health is unknown.

## **Social Acceptance**

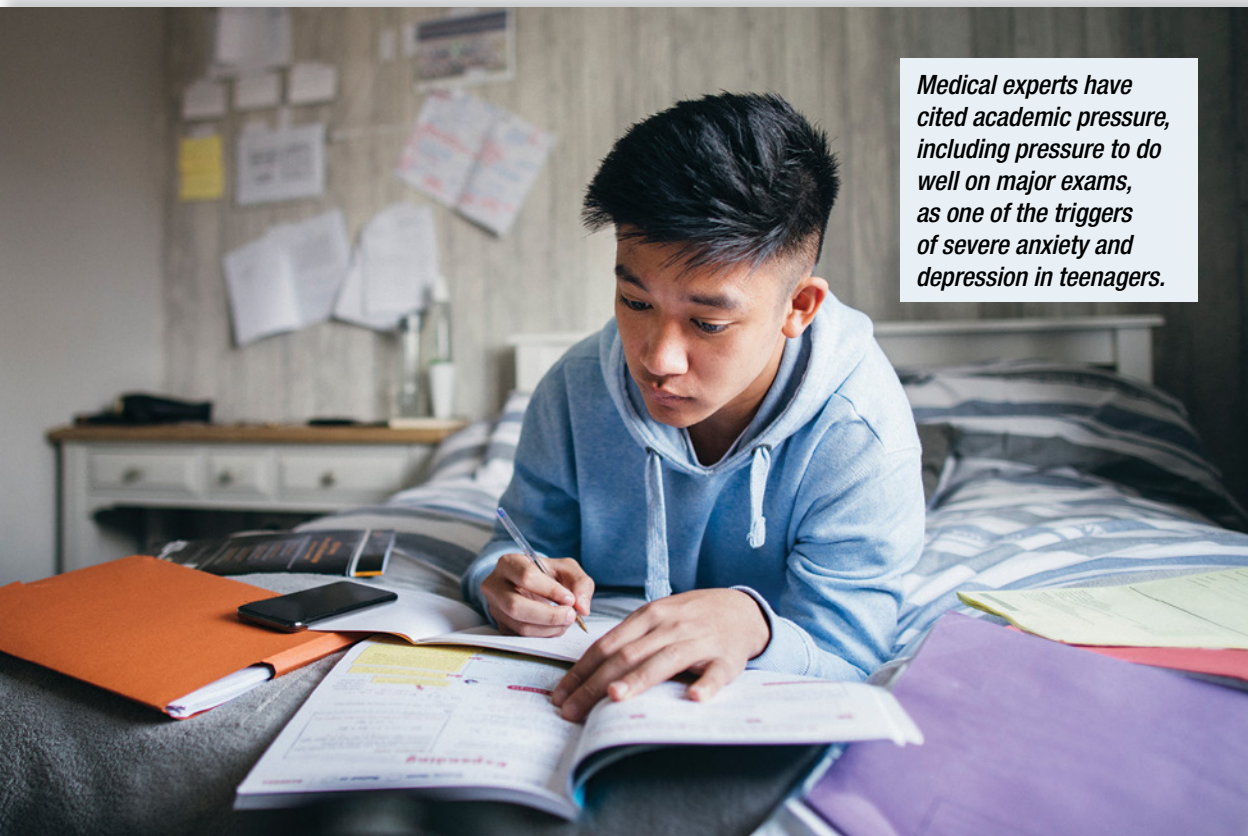
In addition to the pandemic, a variety of other factors has been blamed for rising anxiety and depression in teens. Pressures to fit in socially and to perform well academically are commonly cited as potential causes for the increase. Attention has also been paid to the impact of social media on teens’ mental health.

Many teens strive to be accepted socially. This desire is not unique to teens, but the school environment is a unique setting in which being accepted by peers feels particularly important. A 2019 report by the Pew Research Center indicated that three out of ten teens reported a lot of pressure to look good (29 percent) and fit in socially (28 percent). The desire to fit in can become a source of anxiety and depression, especially if behaviors are modified or activities are avoided.

Being rejected socially can also increase anxiety and depression. According to C. Nathan DeWall, a psychologist at the University of Kentucky, “Humans have a fundamental need to belong. Just as we have needs for food and water, we also have needs for positive and lasting relationships.”<sup>28</sup> It is important to recognize that everyone experiences social rejection at times. DeWall recommends talking through the feelings surrounding rejection in order to move past them.

## Academic Pressure

Academic pressure is another reason cited by experts for the increase in teen anxiety and depression. According to a 2019 report by the Pew Research Center, six out of ten teens (61 percent) said they personally felt a lot of pressure to earn good grades. A 2018 study by the Better Sleep Council reported that 74 percent of teens are stressed out because of homework. Increased competition can be a source of motivation for some students. However, too much competition can cause some students to become anxious or depressed. Academic pressure can come from outsiders, such as parents and teachers, or from the teens themselves. Teens' own expectations, which may be influenced by societal expectations, can make strong academic performance seem vital for survival into adulthood. Intensely focusing on college can be a source of the problem too. Teens are worried not only about getting into college but also about paying for it. For many teens, the high costs of college make attendance impossible without the



*Medical experts have cited academic pressure, including pressure to do well on major exams, as one of the triggers of severe anxiety and depression in teenagers.*



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# GETTING HELP AND INFORMATION



## **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

The CDC is the premier public health agency in the United States. Its website includes the latest information about anxiety and depression, including information about children and teens.

## **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

NAMI is a large grassroots organization that seeks to improve the lives of those living with and affected by mental illness in the United States. Its website provides information as well as ways to connect with mental health professionals and to join online discussion groups.

## **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

The NIMH is the leading federal agency in the United States that focuses on researching mental illness. Its website provides information on a range of mental health disorders, as well as the latest research.

## **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

(800) 273-8255

(888) 628-9454 (en Español)

(800) 799-4889 (for deaf and hard of hearing)

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers. It operates twenty-four hours a day and provides free and confidential support for people experiencing a suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

## **The Trevor Project**

[www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

(866) 488-7386



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*Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.*

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