

Young Adults and Mental Health: A Guide for Parents

Talking with your kids about mental health can take many shapes and forms. Here's what you need to know. Transitions are often a challenging time for many families. Whether it's going to middle school, going into high school, going to college, or entering the workforce full-time, any major life change comes with mixed emotions. You may be excited one minute and scared or stressed the next. That's completely normal, and normal for your kids, too.

As a parent, your role in your kids' lives changes as they grow up, but maintaining an open line of communication can be beneficial for everyone. Talking with your kids about mental health can take many shapes and forms, but with a few questions in mind, and an open dialogue, you can help major transitions run a bit smoother.

What is "normal?"

Clinical Psychologist Dr. Bobbi Wegner has parents who often come to her with concerns about their student's transition periods. She says that many kids go through adjustment issues, and it's completely normal. But often young adults and their parents aren't expecting these feelings to come up, so when they do, there is a heightened sense of worry.

"Anxiety and depression is the common cold of mental health, but people don't talk a lot about it," Wegner says. "As a parent, a part of helping is normalizing anxiety, and feeling low or depression can be a 'normal' part of the experience."

"Normal" difficulties during transition times include increased anxiety, depression, and relationship issues. Young adults can have a hard time making new friends in the workplace or at school and start to feel lonely or isolated. Increased workload and responsibilities can contribute to stress. Raising their awareness that those feelings are valid can go a long way.

Know the red flags

As a parent, hearing that it's "normal" might not help when you're worried whether or not your kid is able to handle what they're going through. Fortunately, there are ways for you to help identify whether or not something more serious is going on.

Dr. Wegner recommends keeping an eye out for any major changes in behavior in three categories she calls the "holy trilogy of health": sleeping, eating, and energy. Any major shift in any of those areas (eating much more, eating much less, sleeping much more, sleeping much less, etc.) can be a red flag and a time for you to get curious and ask more about what is going on with your kid.

Acknowledge, empathize, and be intentional

Ways to support your young adult are to acknowledge their feelings, empathize with them, and be intentional about the questions you ask. Often, when young adults reach out to parents in times of struggle, they're looking for support or a shoulder to cry on. Dismissing their feelings or trying to fix their problems for them is a surefire way to end the conversation completely.



For example, if your teen is feeling anxious or depressed, don't dismiss those feelings by saying "That's not something to be stressed about," or "Everyone feels like that." Similarly, trying to fix the problem also isn't the answer. If your kid says they "don't have any friends" don't point out all the friends they had. It may be that they mean they don't have the same strong friendships they used to have, which is something that can make them feel isolated or lonely.

Instead, be intentional in your responses and turn the question or concern back to them. Dr. Wegner says this is a common tactic used by therapists to validate a patient's concern and empower them to find the answers themselves. You could try asking:

- "I'm sorry to hear you're feeling that way. Why do you think that is?"
- "It sounds like you don't want to go to class, why is that?"
- "What do you think is going on?"
- "What have you tried to make you feel better?"
- "How can I help you?"
- "I've noticed X, how are you feeling about that?"

Simply by listening, and allowing your young adult to come to conclusions on their own, you're empowering them to understand more about their feelings and address them.

Let your kids know It's o.k. to ask for help

Asking for help, especially for mental health, is often stigmatized in America. But it doesn't have to be.

"People think it's something you should only do if you're clinically depressed and that's not true," Wegner says. "You don't have to make a commitment, and you don't have to go forever. Sometimes just a few sessions and then moving on can be helpful."

When to get professional help

First and foremost, trust your gut instinct. You know your child more than anyone. Any drastic difference in behavior or temperament from what is normal for your young adult can be a sign that something more serious is happening.

If your young adult talks about self-harm, suicide, or suicidal thoughts, do not avoid it. Try to find out if they mean they want to hurt themselves right now and, if so, seek immediate help by calling 9-1-1.

For a small subset of the population that has psychotic disorders, young adulthood is often when symptoms start showing up. If your young adult is behaving erratically, having hallucinations, staying awake for extended periods of time, or sleeping for extended periods of time, seek professional help.

For more help, try any of these resources:

- National Suicide Prevention Life Line—call 1-800-273-8255 or visit <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- Crisis Text Line – Text "Connect" to 741741 or visit www.crisistextline.org
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Treatment Locator – call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or visit: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

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