

**A**dolescence is characterized by dramatic physical, emotional, and social changes, which are both exciting and challenging. For many

nurturing 21st century children

## adolescence

of weakness, but a sign that professional help and support are needed.

# *End stigma & support teens' mental and* **EMoTioNAL WELL-BEiNG**

Social stigma and misconceptions about mental health prevent many parents and teenage children from seeking professional advice. In this essay, I focus on adolescent mental health and how parents can support their children's emotional well-being

reena choPra

children, navigating these roller coaster changes are emotionally demanding and draining. It's an important parental duty to support children during this turbulent phase. However, there is lack of awareness and knowledge about ways and means parents can support teenage children's mental well-being. Moreover, social stigma and misconceptions about mental health prevent many parents and children from seeking professional advice. In this essay, I focus on adolescent mental health and how parents can support their children's emotional well-being.

### Common mental health problems

Adolescence is a time when most teens experience heightened emotions, peer pressure, academic stress, and the urge to become independent. While these challenges are normative, sometimes they trigger anxiety, depression, and eating disorders in teenage children. The World Health Organization estimates that 10-20 percent of adolescents globally experience mental health problems. Among them:

- Anxiety disorders — characterized by excessive worry, fear, and nervousness.
- Depression — persistent melancholia, hopelessness, and lack of interest in activities.
- Eating disorders — anorexia or bulimia.
- Substance abuse — turning to drugs or alcohol to cope with stress.
- Self-harm — deliberately hurting oneself as a coping mechanism for depression/anxiety. It's important to remember that mental health problems are not a sign



### Mental health stigma

Despite growing awareness of mental health issues, teens struggle to talk about their psychological problems. Mental health stigma is defined as “negative or discriminatory attitudes that others may have about mental illness”. This stigma often makes teens feel ashamed and embarrassed to admit they are struggling emotionally, leading them to conceal symptoms and avail professional help.

Major reasons why teens avoid discussing mental health include:

- Fear of being judged or misunderstood. Many teens worry that their friends, family, or peers will view them as weak or broken if they open up about their mental health struggles.

- **Misconceptions about mental health.** There is a general belief that mental health illnesses only happen to “other people” or that they should just “rough it out” on their own.
- **Lack of awareness.** Teens may not fully understand and/or recognize signs and symptoms of mental illness.

Addressing mental health stigma requires open conversations and education. By normalizing discussions about mental health, parents can change children’s mindsets.

### Warning signs and symptoms

It’s difficult for teens to recognise mental health problems in themselves. They believe it’s normal to experience mood swings, stress, and sadness during adolescence. Therefore, it’s important for parents to keenly observe their children’s behaviour. Some warning signs:

- **Persistent sadness or hopelessness.** Feeling down most of the time, even when there’s no clear reason.
- **Withdrawal from friends and activities.** Avoiding social interactions or losing interest in hobbies that were once enjoyable.
- **Changes in sleep or eating patterns.** Sleeping too much or too little, or drastic changes in appetite and weight.
- **Irritability or mood swings.** Frequently feeling angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed.
- **Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.** Struggling to focus on schoolwork, activities, or everyday tasks.
- **Physical symptoms.** Unexplained headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue that don’t have a clear medical cause.
- **Thoughts of self-harm or suicide.** Thoughts of hurting oneself or ending one’s life are serious and require immediate attention.

It’s important to let teenage children know that mental illness is not their fault. Encourage them to reach out to a trusted adult, such as a parent, teacher, or counselor, as a first step.

### Ways to seek support

Here are some ways teenage children can seek support for mental health problems:

Talk to someone you trust. Discuss and share your feelings with a trusted adult. This could be a parent, relative, teacher, or school counselor. Even if they don’t have all the answers, they will guide you towards appropriate counseling support services.

Seek professional help. Mental health professionals, such as therapists or counselors, are trained to enable teens to develop coping strategies. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), talk therapy, and other evidence-based

treatments can be highly effective in addressing mental health issues.

**Enroll in a support group.** Connecting with peers who are going through similar experiences is incredibly validating. Support groups provide a safe space to share your struggles, learn from others, and build a sense of community.

**Practice self-care.** While professional support is important, self-care plays an essential role in maintaining mental well-being. Encourage teens to develop healthy habits such as regular exercise, sufficient sleep, and mindfulness practices. This reduces stress and promotes mental wellness.

**Utilize school resources.** Many schools offer mental health services, such as counseling or wellness programs. These resources are designed to support students in managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

**Crisis Hotlines.** If a teen is in distress, crisis hotlines are available to provide support 24/7. Organizations such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline or local helplines offer confidential, judgment-free assistance.

### How parents and communities can help

Parents and local communities play a vital role in supporting teenage children’s mental health. Here are some ways to create a supportive environment:

- **Encourage open communication.** Encourage open dialogue about mental health at home. Create a safe space for children to discuss their emotions without fear of judgment or criticism.
- **Educate them about mental health.** Schools and communities should prioritize mental health education, teaching teens the importance of mental wellness and providing information about common mental health issues and coping strategies.
- **Reduce academic/social pressure.** Teens often face much pressure to succeed academically, socially, and athletically. Parents and educators should set realistic expectations and emphasize the importance of balance and self-care.
- **Model healthy behavior.** Parents and caregivers should model positive mental health behaviour by prioritizing their own well-being, practicing stress management, and seeking professional help when needed.

Prioritizing adolescents’ mental health and well-being is critical for ensuring they grow into resilient, confident adults. Parents, educators, and local communities must take the lead in fostering an environment that promotes mental wellness and empowers teens to seek professional advice and counseling. Mental well-being is just as important as physical health, and requesting professional diagnosis and therapy is a sign of strength, not weakness.

(reena chopra is a well-known child psychologist and founder of Saar holistic wellness, chandigarh)