

## Parent FAQ

### What is mental health and why is it important?

According to MentalHealth.gov, "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices." In adolescents, we hope for an adaptive level of social connection, signs of the ability to consider outcomes when making behavioral choices, and resilience when faced with fluctuating levels of demand from the environment. Mental health awareness is important now, because, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, among adult Americans with a mental health diagnosis, 50% of them showed signs by high school, and 75% by college. Like any illness, early detection and intervention can have a significant impact on prognosis.

### What are signs to look for in my teenager?

From NAMI, "Know the Warning Signs":

Each illness has its own symptoms, but common signs of mental illness in adults and adolescents can include the following:

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality)
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior or personality ("lack of insight" or anosognosia)
- Abuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing "aches and pains")
- Thinking about suicide
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance

Dramatic changes in eating habits, sleep patterns, social groups, and academics are red flags. It is developmentally appropriate for teens to begin to try to be independent from their parents as they get older, but they should have consistency in their social connections, supports, and areas of interest.

Sudden shifts in social groups can be a warning sign, especially if the new group seems to be engaging in unsafe behaviors such as drug and alcohol use. Lack of interest in old hobbies, a general avoidance of things that used to be fun or an overall pervasive mood of anger or sadness can indicate a need for mental health support. Consistent and dangerous risk taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, running away, engaging in unprotected sex, and use of drugs and alcohol are also behaviors that are often associated with an emerging mental health diagnosis, or a response to past trauma that can be treated with interventions in the present.

Sudden avoidance of school or an increase in somatic complaints such as headaches or stomach aches can indicate a need for mental health support.

Statements about hopelessness, not wanting to "be here anymore", giving away of prized possessions, or comments about how others would feel if the teen were no longer around should be taken very

seriously. Posting comments about death or dying on social media should be met with immediate concern.

### What about drugs and alcohol?

While many people believe that experimenting with drugs and alcohol is a "normal" teen age behavior, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey in 2015 shows us that 21% of teens surveyed reported having used marijuana in the last year. This means that over 75% have not. 32.8% of students surveyed reported having had a drink of alcohol in the last 30 days prior to the report. Again, over 70% had not. Repeated use, behaviors such as getting caught with substances at school, or having substances contribute to truancy and poor grades, should be considered a cause for concern and intervention.

### Is there a way to tell the difference between "normal teen behavior" and a diagnosable disorder?

Only a licensed professional can make a diagnosis, however, the best indicator that it is time to seek help could possibly be your gut instinct as a parent. It is important to consider that our brains are designed to help us stay alive and functioning at optimal levels at all times, therefore, often as parents, we fall victim to our unconscious engaging in denying behaviors, and can miss subtle signs that would create extreme disruption if we were to pay attention to them. It is important to mindfully tune in to your own experience when you begin to experience internal questions and concerns about your child. If your child seems to be suffering consistently, withdrawing from friends and family, engaging in unsafe behaviors that are not just goofy, but could be life endangering, or is suddenly unsuccessful in areas in which he or she used to excel, it is probably time to consult with a professional.

### What are the treatments for mental illnesses?

Mental illness is treated in a variety of ways. One of the most common is individual psychotherapy. There are also treatments such as group counseling, art therapy, play therapy, animal assisted therapy, and other modalities. Sometimes a medical professional will recommend medication for a diagnosed mental illness, just as they would for a physical illness.

It is important to work with a licensed professional when you are concerned about your teenager's mental health. Those professionals could be a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), a licensed Psychologist, or a Psychiatrist, which is a medical doctor, and the only one of the above listed professionals who is able to prescribe psychotropic medication.

In cases where there is concern about suicidal or homicidal ideation, a short stay in a psychiatric hospital might be necessary to ensure safety and stabilization. In that case, your teen would be evaluated by a psychiatrist, and receive individual and group therapy focused on building coping skills and moving back into the community, with support. Sometimes that support can take the form of a Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP), in which a teen would participate in therapeutic programming for a full day, returning home in the evening, or an Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP), in which a teen would participate in group therapy and therapeutic programming after school for several evenings each week for 6-8 weeks.

### What resources are available at Austin High School?

Austin High has an amazing team of counselors. There is sometimes a misunderstanding that our school counselors are there to focus on academics and college readiness only, but they are also able to provide emotional support, and assess the need for connection with more intensive resources. Austin High also has a Wellness Counselor, who may become involved when a student is experiencing suicidal or homicidal ideation, or has a personal crisis that may require intervention.

Austin High, like all of the high schools in AISD, has a private therapist who offices on campus. This provides an opportunity for students who need mental health support, but may have challenges which prevent them from accessing resources in the community. Contact your teen's academy, or alpha (non-

AGS 12<sup>th</sup> graders) counselor, the campus Wellness counselor, or the campus LMHP for more information about the School Mental Health Center Therapist.

**What resources are available in the Austin area?**

Austin has a wide range of services available for children, teens, and families. Inpatient treatment, PHPs, IOPs, support groups, individual therapy, family support, medical support, diagnostic and evaluative support, even wrap around services are available. Your school counselors are also here to help you navigate the sometimes confusing alphabet soup of resources and professionals available. Your pediatrician or school counselor are excellent places to start when you feel that a conversation about your teen's mental health is needed.

**How can I find a therapist?**

There are many ways to find a therapist. Insurance companies have provider lists, Psychology Today has an excellent listserve that allows one to filter for specific needs when searching for a professional, and to see reviews and feedback from other clients:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/tx/austin>

Word of mouth or recommendations from trusted friends can also be helpful.

It is important when looking for a therapist to keep in mind that the relationship is of vital importance, and you may want to meet with more than one therapist in order to find the best fit for you and your family. It is okay to "shop" for the therapist that best meets your needs.

**How do I start a conversation about mental health?**

Mental health can be an intimidating topic for many reasons; one of these being the stigma that has long been associated with diagnoses of mental illness in our country, and the expectation that is sometimes expressed that we should be able to "pull ourselves up with our boot straps". It is important to understand that a diagnosis of a mental illness is just that: an illness. We may not always be able to see the symptoms like we would with a broken leg or the measles, but just like a broken leg, or the measles, we need to connect with the professionals who can help. Talking about and learning about mental health and mental illness is the best way to fight stigma, and become more comfortable with the topic. If talking about mental health is difficult for you, ask your pediatrician or school counselor to help, or think about connecting with one of the programs in our community, such as NAMI or Integral Care, which have programs and classes to facilitate mental health discussions. There are also numerous websites where you can gather helpful information and fact sheets, which can be wonderful conversation starters.

No matter how you do it, it is important that you do it.