

Depression during the pandemic: How to support teens and young adults



If you think back to your own high school years, you probably recall some key events such as homecoming, sports, school plays, concerts, prom or graduation.

Over the past year, it's all been put on hold. And while classes have moved online or to hybrid formats in many places, they don't completely make up for the social interaction that usually comes with in-person learning.

College students have also missed some big moments, including a typical dorm experience, clubs and activities, internships and graduation ceremonies. And as they work through yet another term of mostly online classes, many are struggling to pay for them in a tough job market.

For many of these young people, the pandemic has taken a toll. Even if they haven't been sick or lost a loved one, they may be experiencing grief, 'a normal response to losing someone or something important to you',¹ due to missing significant life events.

Elevated depression rates

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 'Bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones.'²

While studies vary globally, many have shown just how much depression has climbed in various populations during the pandemic:

7x

increase in depression for all ages³

- **22.28%** prevalence of **clinical depression symptoms** in children and adolescents in China (vs. previous 13.2%)⁴
- **33% of college students** surveyed in the U.S. said that they're experiencing **depression**⁵
- **24% of high school students surveyed in the U.S.** said that they know someone who has had **suicidal thoughts** since the start of COVID-19⁵

A time for empathy and support

If you have a teen or young adult in your life, there are things you can do to support them during the pandemic. Give these tips a try.

Start with a conversation. Ask about how they're doing, and take their feelings seriously. Yes, in the midst of your own stresses, a missed soccer season or birthday party might seem insignificant. But to a teen or young adult, it may be a big deal. Acknowledge what they've lost, and tell them it's OK to not be feeling great right now. Also, watch for any concerning symptoms, including behaviour changes.

Explore options for telehealth counselling. According to a new WHO survey, 'The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide while the demand for mental health is increasing.'² In many countries, online counselling is a great option right now. Look for organisations – such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in the U.S. – that can connect you with resources, or call your employee assistance programme. Apps such as Sanvello can help manage the symptoms of depression, too.

Recommend healthy schedules. Encourage students to set routines when they're doing online school. And keep in mind that exercise can have a big impact on mental health. So can sleep. One study of teens found that not getting enough sleep was linked to a 62% increased risk of depressed mood.⁶ Also, remind them to social distance, wear masks and wash their hands.

Re-establish your rules for screen time. If your teen still lives at home and you have screen time rules, consider whether they're appropriate for the pandemic. Technology is essential for young people to remain socially connected during a time of distancing, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends reaching out to friends by phone, text, video chat and social media.¹ But make sure that you discuss the dangers of being online, too. The CDC warns that 'increased online activity also puts them at increased risk of online harms, such as online sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, online risk-taking behaviour and exposure to potentially harmful content'.¹

Be mindful of potential substance use. A study done in Canada showed that teen alcohol use is up during the pandemic – and that teens are drinking with their friends while they connect on social media.⁷

While schools are opening up and in-person activities are resuming in some locations, it's likely that we won't be back to normal for a long time. And depression won't just disappear when the pandemic ends. Stay supportive for the long term: the young adults in your life need you.

If you or someone you know has thoughts about suicide, seek help right away. To talk to a trained counsellor, you can call a suicide hotline. **If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 999 – or go to the nearest accident and emergency department.**

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2. World Health Organization. COVID-19 disrupting mental health services in most countries, WHO survey. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-10-2020-covid-19-disrupting-mental-health-services-in-most-countries-who-survey>. Accessed February 16, 2021.
3. Bueno-Notivol J, et al. Prevalence of depression during the COVID-19 outbreak: A meta-analysis of community-based studies. *Int J Clin Health Psychol*. 2021 Jan–Apr; 21(1): 100196. Published online 2020 Aug 31. doi: 10.1016/j.ijchp.2020.07.007. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7458054/>. Accessed February 16, 2021.
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5. Chegg.org. COVID-19 and mental health: How America's high school and college students are coping during the pandemic. Available at: <https://www.chegg.org/covid-19-mental-health-2020>. Accessed February 16, 2021.
6. Short M, et al. The relationship between sleep duration and mood in adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Sleep Med. Rev*. August 2020; Volume 52. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S108707922030054X?via%3Dihub>. Accessed February 16, 2021.
7. Dumas T, et al. What does adolescent substance use look like during the COVID-19 pandemic? Examining changes in frequency, social contexts and pandemic-related predictors. *J. Adolesc. Health*. September 2020; 67(3): 354–361. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X20303311>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

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