

## Mental Health Disorders and Teen Substance Abuse

1 in 5 teenagers have a mental health disorder (CDC). Teenagers and people with mental health disorders are more at risk for drug use and addiction than other populations (American Addiction Centers). Teens may turn to drugs or alcohol for a variety of reasons, including curiosity, to relieve boredom, peer pressure or to escape emotional pain. Just like adults, teenagers who are struggling with emotional or mental health problems may turn to alcohol or drug use to help them manage difficult feelings. Because the teenage brain is still developing, the result of “self-medication” can result in more immediate problems. Substance use can spiral from experimentation to a serious disorder more quickly in adolescents compared to adults. This progression is more likely to happen in teenagers with untreated mental health disorders compared to other kids. Studies show that ADHD, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression all increase the risk of drug use and dependence in adolescents. According to the Child Mind Institute, almost half of kids with mental health disorders, if not treated, will end up having a substance use disorder.

According to the Partnership to End Addiction, all behavior serves a purpose, even if it is risky behavior. Substance use is “reinforcing which means that a youth is more likely to keep using a drug if it seems to help with a perceived problem or need. At the root of teenage substance use may be an untreated or undetected mental health condition. While substance use may temporarily diminish unwanted mental health symptoms such as anxiety, hopelessness, irritability and negative thoughts, in the long term, it worsens them and may lead to abuse or dependence. Additionally, substance use also interferes with treatment for mental health disorders and may worsen the long-term prognosis for a teenager who is struggling. Substance use can diminish a teenager’s engagement in therapy, reducing its effectiveness. Likewise, substance use can lower the effectiveness of many prescription medications used to treat mental health disorders.

Research shows that identifying and treating mental health disorders can reduce substance use. Similarly, reducing substance use can improve treatment outcomes for mental health disorders. Helping to identify risk factors and protective strategies early on can help prevent adverse outcomes. Talking with youth about their mental health and giving them permission to share difficult thoughts and feelings with a trusting adult is a positive step in early identification. Recognizing anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders in youth and connecting them early with supports and treatment to help them cope can curb youth substance use (National Institute of Health). The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry also suggests the importance of incorporating substance use prevention into mental health treatment for adolescents.

Recognizing the difference between normal teenage behavior and behavior that may raise a red flag can be challenging for parents and caregivers. Just as it is important to monitor the physical health of teenagers, it is equally important to monitor their mental and behavioral health.

Signs of Mental Health Issues in Teens:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Trying to harm or end one’s life or making plans to do so

- Severe, out-of-control, risk-taking behavior that causes harm to self or others
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart or physical discomfort
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Seeing, hearing or believing things that aren't real
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, personality or sleeping habits
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities

#### Signs of Substance Abuse in Teens:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Ignoring or breaking curfew
- Acting irresponsibly
- Frequently asking for money
- Stealing
- Locking bedroom doors
- Making secretive calls
- Isolating from others/damaging relationships with family or friends
- Making excuses (or outright lying)
- Withdrawing from classroom participation/slipping in grades
- Resisting discipline or feedback
- Missing school or work
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities
- Abandoning long-time friends

When drug and/or alcohol use is present and overlaps with other mental health problems, it is necessary to seek out supports for both. Effective treatment starts with a detailed evaluation by a trained clinician who can address both substance use and mental health issues. For additional information, the Child Mind Institute and Partnership to End Addiction offers the following guide on addressing co-occurring disorders in teens.

<https://drugfree.org/article/substance-use-mental-health-your-guide-to-addressing-co-occurring-disorders/>

References: American Addiction Centers; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Mind Institute; Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; National Institute of Health; Partnership to End Addiction