

What Every Teen Should Know About Mental Health

A guide for teens and parents to understanding the importance of emotional health.

By Esther Boykin, LMFT



There are many issues facing teenagers and their parents today. Just turn on any daytime talk show and you'll find someone talking about sexting or bullying or body image disorders. It's overwhelming the number and variety of potential challenges that adolescents and their families face. Therapy is an excellent resource to help address these issues, develop effective coping skills, and improve family relations. While I am an advocate for therapy as a way to prevent major crises as well as a solution for dealing with them, I know that often parents and teens struggle to decide if their problem is "big" enough for therapy. While nearly every issue can be helped by having the support and guidance that therapy can provide; it is not always a feasible option. One way to determine your need for therapy is to understand what mental health really means.

The American Medical Association and the CDC offer complicated, technical definitions for mental health that focus on your ability to function but I find that most of us, whether we admit it or not, think of mental health either being crazy or not. The truth is that mental health, just like physical health, is a complex set of many factors. These factors can roughly be divided into three categories- psychological (or emotional) factors, social (or relational) factors, and biological (or physical) factors. You may even hear therapists and other mental health professionals refer to it as your bio-psycho-social functioning. Obviously each of these factors impacts the others and so we can't really separate them into neat little categories but for simplicity sake we will try. Here's a brief overview of what each set of factors looks like. By understanding these categories you can more readily assess your own mental health and decide when and where you may need help.

Psychological/Emotional

This area of your mental health is probably the part that you think of first. It is your mood and your ability to manage your emotions effectively. Managing your feelings is not the same as stuffing or hiding them. In fact a healthy emotional state is one in which you feel a wide range of emotions, including so-called negative emotions such as anger, sadness and worry. Healthy individuals are able to identify their emotions and act in socially appropriate ways in response to them. Some issues in your psychological/emotional functioning may be the result of mental health disorders (think of these as an infection of your emotional body, just like strep throat is an infection in your physical body) such as depression or anxiety. These are examples of normal feelings that become overwhelming or interfere with your ability to function in day to day life. Sometimes we experience poor emotional health as a normal response to life circumstances. For example if your parents divorced, you may feel overwhelmed by anger or sadness. These feelings don't necessarily meet the criteria for depression but they still need to be addressed effectively in order to maintain a healthy sense of well-being. As part of the psychological component to mental health, your thought process should also be considered. Anxiety, body-image and

self-esteem issues all involve a specific way of thinking that can have overwhelming effects on your mood and behavior. In more severe situations delusional thinking and even hallucinations can impair your psychological functioning. Therapy and medication are appropriate options when thought patterns become detrimental.

Social/Relational

People are social creatures and so our ability to relate to others is a crucial part of what keeps us healthy. Sometimes the social part of mental health is specific to one relationship in your life, such as getting along with your parents. But at other times, teenagers can struggle to make new friends or have difficulty maintaining a healthy relationship with peers. As you move through adolescence and into adulthood, developing and maintaining relationships is an important part of your development. Learning to establish healthy boundaries, resolve conflict, and maintain your identity within close relationships is all part of keeping yourself mentally healthy. Know how you feel when you are fighting with your best friend or your girlfriend breaks up with you? That's a great example of how social or relational factors impact your mental health. When we have trouble in our relationships our mood is often affected and at times you may even experience trouble concentrating. In the same way, difficulty expressing your emotions or specific mood disorders, such as depression, can lead to fighting or isolation from the important people in your life. While these experiences are an expected part of life and growing up, it is important to seek help when relational problems become so overwhelming that they keep you from managing your day to day life.

Biological/Physical

The biological or physical component of mental health is an important component that can easily be overlooked at times. Many of the mental health disorders you have heard about have some biological component to them. The reason medications can help with things like depression and anxiety is that there are actual neurological components to these diseases. There is a growing body of exciting new research on brain changes in response to addiction and trauma as well. While this information will likely become the basis for new and increasingly effective treatment options, it is important that we do not discount the importance of all the factors that impact mental health. Aside from the fact that many mental health disorders have biological components, it is also important to note the way in which biological or physical ailments affect mental health. Physical conditions such as obesity or severe asthma can change how you live your life possibly limiting your physical activity or your ability to engage with peers. These changes impact your social and emotional experiences. Chronic pain and life threatening illnesses are all commonly associated with some degree of depression or anxiety. While medications can be an excellent treatment option for some, it is crucial that you remember that mental health is a multi-faceted thing. Research shows that the most effective treatment for many commonly medicated disorders is a combination of talk therapy and pharmacology.

All three components of mental health are important and interconnected so we cannot simply ignore one in favor of another. The best approach to staying mentally healthy is to address all three components and seek help whenever you aren't sure how to improve an area that is troubling you.