



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

# TRENDS

## ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS: IDENTIFICATION AND RISK REDUCTION

It is a normal part of development for adolescents to experience a wide range of emotions. It is typical, for instance, for teens to feel anxious about school or friendships, or to experience a period of depression following the death of a close friend or family member. However, mental health disorders are characterized by persistent symptoms that affect how a young person feels, thinks, and acts. Mental health disorders also can interfere with regular activities and daily functioning, such as relationships, schoolwork, sleeping, and eating.

Adolescence is a critical period for mental, social, and emotional well-being and development. During adolescence, the brain undergoes significant developmental changes, establishing neural pathways and behavior patterns that will last into adulthood. These changes first begin during the middle school years and may result in increased emotional and behavioral difficulties for students. Issues of critical brain development combined with developing social skills and underdeveloped coping strategies, increase the risk of mental health disorders during middle school.

Adolescents' developing brains, coupled with hormonal changes, make them more prone to depression and more likely to engage in risky and thrill-seeking behaviors than either younger children or adults. These and other factors underline the importance of meeting the mental, social, and emotional health needs of this age group.

### A risky developmental period

- Approximately 20% of adolescents have a diagnosable mental health disorder.
- Many mental health disorders first present during adolescence.
- Between 20% and 30% of adolescents have one major depressive episode before they reach adulthood

Untreated mental health problems among adolescents may lead to poor school performance, school dropout, strained family relationships, involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, substance abuse, and engaging in risky sexual behaviors. An estimated 67% to 70% of youth in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder.

### Common Mental Health Disorders in Adolescence

The most common mental health disorders in adolescence include those related to anxiety, depression, attention deficit-hyperactivity, and eating.

### Anxiety Disorders:

- Characterized by feelings of excessive uneasiness, worry, and fear
- Examples include generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias
- Occur in approximately 32 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds
- The prevalence of youth experiencing clinically elevated anxiety symptoms—roughly 1 in 5—nearly doubled during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the importance of early identification and treatment

### Depression:

- Depressed mood that affects thoughts, feelings, and daily activities, including eating, sleeping, and working
- Occurs in approximately 13 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds
- Examples include major depressive disorder and seasonal affective disorder

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:

- Characterized by continued inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning or development
- Occurs in approximately nine percent of 13- to 18-year-olds

### Eating Disorders:

- Characterized by extreme and abnormal eating behaviors, such as restricted or excessive eating
- Occur in almost three percent of 13- to 18-year-olds
- Examples include anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and binge eating disorder

### Substance Abuse:

- Observe students for changes in behavior that may be due to using substances including alcohol, marijuana products, psychedelic drugs,

prescription medications and others. Substance use may also extend to misuse of over-the-counter drugs or medications prescribed to other people (typically friends or family).

### Trauma and Prolonged Stress:

The COVID 19 pandemic has exposed many young people to stress and trauma that increases the risk of emotional/behavioral problems. Young people responding to prolonged stress or trauma experiences may display symptoms including:

- Disturbances in memory or flashbacks
- Recurrent thoughts of the trauma
- Emotional numbing, such as avoiding social and emotional contact with others
- A hyper-state of arousal, and/or feelings of panic

### Risk Reduction:

Adolescent brains are still developing, so teens are particularly receptive to the positive influences of youth development strategies, social and emotional learning, and behavioral modeling. Mental health promotion and prevention interventions aim to strengthen an adolescents' capacity to regulate emotions, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviors, build resilience for managing difficult situations and adversity, and promote supportive social environments and social networks. As young people return to pre-pandemic activities and relationships, early identification of students at risk and treatment of youth displaying symptoms of mental health disorders is critical.

### To learn more:

- CDC: Adolescent and School Health  
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>
- NIH: Child and Adolescent Mental Health  
<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health>



*"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."*