

# Navigating the landscape of teenage mental health



Mass General Brigham  
Health Plan



## Table of contents



The Clay Center for  
Young Healthy Minds

*Shining light on mental health through education.*

The **Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds** at Massachusetts General Hospital is a free, web-based educational resource focused on the mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being of children, teens, and young adults. It provides evidence-based content for parents and caregivers through blogs, podcasts, and videos to promote resilience and reduce mental health stigma.

### CHAPTER ONE

#### **Stress and burnout**

**Page 4**

### CHAPTER TWO

#### **Trauma and adverse childhood experiences**

**Page 7**

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Social issues**

**Page 9**

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### **Technology and screen time**

**Page 11**



## INTRODUCTION

# Navigating the landscape of teenage mental health

Adolescence is a major turning point. It's a time of growth, self-discovery, and learning who you are. But it isn't always easy. The brain doesn't fully mature until around age 26. Between ages 14 and 26, the areas that control pleasure, stress, and impulses are still connecting to the parts responsible for reasoning and decision-making.

At 18, teens are only about a third of the way to full adulthood. Even if they look grown up, they still need guidance and support. The early teen years lay the foundation for what comes next. And today's teens face more pressure than ever—from school, activities, social life, technology, and global issues—making this stage both exciting and challenging.

You may be a parent, grandparent, a foster parent, an aunt or uncle, or a guardian. No matter which category you fall into, this eBook breaks down the complex realities facing youth: the signs of stress and burnout, the hidden impacts of trauma, the influence of social issues, and the ever-evolving role of technology in daily life. Drawing upon research and strategies, each chapter will help you navigate tough conversations with the teenagers in your life.

### Within these pages, you will find:

- Guidance for recognizing and responding to signs of emotional exhaustion and burnout.
- Insights into the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences on mental, behavioral, and emotional development.
- Discussions on how social issues—from discrimination to climate change—impact adolescent mental health.
- Strategies for creating a balanced approach to academics, activities, relationships, and downtime.
- Advice for navigating technology and social media use while fostering healthy boundaries and resilience.
- Resources and tools to support positive mental health, self-care, and open communication.



---

Continue reading to learn more from the experts at The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Mass General Hospital—Eugene (Gene) Beresin, MD, MA, and Khadijah Booth Watkins, MD, MPH.

---

## Stress and burnout

### What are the most common signs of stress and burnout in teens?

The definition of burnout is generally viewed as emotional exhaustion, detachment, feelings of isolation, and worthlessness. While [teenagers tend to be moodier](#) and more irritable—if they're dealing with burnout, they may display lower than typical energy. They may walk around feeling more exhausted and lose interest in a previous desire or passion. This will gradually worsen over time. Kids who feel burnt out often withdraw from family and friends, too. If they can't articulate the stress, they might complain of physical symptoms such as headache, stomachache, or grinding their teeth. They may be irritable, easily angered, or even withdrawn and shut down.



**Burnout is generally viewed as emotional exhaustion, detachment, feelings of isolation, and worthlessness.**

### How can parents help these teens build coping strategies before stress becomes too overwhelming?

Help them develop healthy habits and skills before they get stressed or burned out. You want to have them practice these skills before they really need them. And of course, model how to [manage stress](#) in a healthy way. Parents can help foster resilience. “Kids are not born resilient. No one is. It’s a process you learn, not a trait. Resilience is a double-edged sword—one edge prevents adversity, the other provides coping mechanisms during hard times,” said Harvard Professor [Dr. Chester Pierce](#) during a conversation with Dr. Beresin at the Clay Center.

Dr. Beresin added, “You learn resilience over time, predominantly fostered by a close attachment with parents. There are two major components to resilience. One is engagement; engagement with other people, thoughts, and communities. The other one is awareness of one’s own emotions, behavior and impact; and how things impact you and how you affect others.”



**“Kids don’t have to be great at everything. You can have your area of strength and let other areas go. We can’t do everything, so we must take kids off the hot seat and let them choose areas of life they wish to explore.”**

**—Dr. Beresin**

### **Are there ways for parents to reduce these performance anxieties by easing the pressure?**

Historically, overachievement has been influenced by parental standards. Dr. Beresin explained, “Parents should be aware we’ve all been living in a [toxic achievement culture](#) since the late 1970s. Some kids are encouraged, if not required, to take AP and honors courses, participate in community service, partake in sports and extracurricular activities, or play a musical instrument. But parents need to understand that kids shouldn’t be overscheduled. Parents can sit down with their teenagers to discuss what’s realistic, where they can cut back, and where to add time to decompress.

He continued, “Kids don’t have to be great at everything. You can have your area of strength and let other areas go. We can’t do everything, so we must take kids off the hot seat and let them choose areas of life they wish to explore. Teenagers are struggling for autonomy, separation, and independence, forming an identity of who they really are. They’re trying to discover where they fit into a group while trying to separate from family. They are learning who they are independently. If that’s interfered with, it can result in real negative effects.”



If teens are booked 24/7, there isn't any down time to process. Dr. Booth expanded, "When adults are hyper-focused on achievement and performance, it can remove some of the joy for teens. It's something parents need to manage because while some kids inflict pressure, it comes a lot from parents. So, we must check ourselves as adults and parents. Take a step back and set realistic goals. When kids are overscheduled, they can't become well-rounded, happy, healthy kids."

### How can parents or primary caregivers recognize when activities in and out of school are becoming too much for their teens?

Teens should collaborate with parents, caregivers, or other adults to take an inventory of their activities. Kids' brains are in overdrive, and they need time to process information. As parents, identify when kids are socially isolated. Recognize if they gradually or suddenly can't participate in activities they wish they could. Evidence of burnout can show up as a combination of exhaustion, detachment, and feelings of worthlessness.

### How can parents strike a balance between encouraging achievement and allowing space for rest and self-discovery?

Parents need to have conversations with their kids, partners, friends, mentors, and family members, to help set their priorities and determine what they can cut out or modify. Are AP or honors courses needed? Do they need to play an instrument? Do they need to play three sports a year? Have frequent conversations that help them set aside time for self-care, pleasurable activities, and connecting with others. Make suggestions if they aren't already included in their schedules.

"When we overschedule our kids, the learning part gets hampered because they don't have the time to process what they've already done and what they've already learned," said Dr. Watkins.

She added, "They also don't have time for themselves. They don't have that downtime to be able to engage in pleasurable activities, like connecting with friends or loved ones. When they're overscheduled, they're eating and sleeping poorly and up late trying to complete assignments. It disrupts their ability to engage in healthy habits."

**"When we overschedule our kids, the learning part gets hampered because they don't have the time to process what they've already done and what they've already learned."**

—Dr. Watkins

### How can parents encourage a balance between extracurriculars and downtime for mental health?

To help teens manage time, remember that a primary caregiver's role is to advocate for their well-being, rather than push them to accomplish everything. Remember for you as an adult, and for your teens, that:

- Saying "no" to the occasional enrichment opportunity won't endanger their future.
- Self-sacrifice does not equal good parenting. Being happy with our own lives is a wonderful gift to give our children. We all need time for our marriages, our friendships, and ourselves.
- Aim for equilibrium—stopping activities entirely is neither feasible nor advisable but cutting back just a bit may bring a better balance.
- Nothing means more than family time. Be unproductive sometimes—spend time together with only one goal: enjoying one another. Take the time to listen to your kids when they are ready to talk.
- Parent your own way. Raising children is an ever-changing ballet, a dance between parents, children, spouses, extended family, friends, and the community.
- Please don't judge them by their achievements but by who they are. Failures or setbacks are opportunities for learning and growth.

Have a conversation that helps your child understand the function of their behavior and what the goal is. To start the conversation, ask your child:

- Are you doing this activity because you enjoy it or because it's a requirement?
- Why are you exploring a new interest or skill?
- Are you doing this to connect with friends?

There are downsides to doing too much. Moderation is the goal. Dr. Beresin added, "I think a large part of loneliness is due to this overscheduling. Striving to do everything has its own consequences that compound the issues. Human beings are pack animals. We need relationships and we can't forget about that."

## Trauma and adverse childhood experiences

### How do early life traumas or adverse experiences impact a teen's mental and emotional development?

The [CDC](#) defines adverse childhood experiences as experiences that can have long-term negative impacts on health, opportunity, and well-being. For example, domestic violence, abuse, neglect, unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, racism, and discrimination.

[Research](#) shows notable changes to the brain when they compare kids who have experienced significant stress and traumas to kids who haven't. These kids are at an increased risk of:

- Physical injury
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Involvement in sex trafficking
- Maternal and child health problems (teen pregnancy, fetal death)
- Chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease
- Cancer
- Suicide
- Difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships
- Depression

When a child can't regulate their emotions, it can impact academic performance, relationship building, and overall behavior. These kids may get in trouble because they have a short fuse and react very quickly. If you can't regulate your emotions and your behaviors, you can't pay attention and focus. As a result, memory is negatively impacted, which can collide with brain development.

### 6 guiding principles to a trauma-informed approach for parents and caregivers:

- 1 Safety
- 2 Trustworthiness and transparency
- 3 Peer support
- 4 Collaboration and mutuality
- 5 Empowerment, voice, and choice
- 6 Cultural, historical, and gender issues



## How can primary caregivers identify when a teen's behavior might be rooted in trauma rather than typical adolescent mood swings?

Remember, as a primary caregiver you are the expert on your child. Not all adolescents go through mood swings. For most, adolescence is not a time of turmoil. But every teenager is different. It is important to differentiate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from depression, adjustment disorders (death of a loved one, loss of a pet), and anxiety disorder, and if you cannot, while this eBook defines the differences, it is highly useful to obtain a psychiatric or psychological evaluation from a mental health professional. PTSD can look like avoidance or panic states but triggered by something else. If anything seems to be an extreme deviation from your child's baseline or is going on for too long, know the **three W's**:

- 1 **What** to look for
- 2 **When** to worry
- 3 **What** to do



## 3 components of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

-  **Remembering:** flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts of a traumatic experience
-  **Avoidance:** social isolation, staying away from situations that remind you of the past trauma
-  **Autonomic arousal:** elements or traits of panic attacks (palpitations, hyperventilation, tremulousness, dizziness, and thoughts and feelings of impending doom)



CHAPTER THREE

## Social issues

### What impact do social issues have on teens' mental health?

Social issues have a huge impact on teens' mental health. Today, young people are more socially conscious of the world that they're inheriting than any other generation. They're worried about discrimination in terms of marginalized people—whether they're people of color, immigrants, or LGBTQIA+.

#### In particular, research shows inequity for [victims of discrimination](#):

- One out of every four is more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder
- Twice as likely to develop severe psychological distress
- 26% higher risk for having poor overall health
- Higher use of drugs such as amphetamines, marijuana, tranquilizers, barbiturates, or cocaine

Today's teens are also very concerned about **climate change** such as the increase in storms and the ferocity of flooding, mudslides, and wildfires.

All of this contributes to the mental health epidemic that's been increasing since the late 1970s. [Climate change](#) can also affect cognitive development of children with increased risks of anxiety, depression, ADHD, educational challenges, and psychiatric disorders later in life.

**Community violence** is another factor. Young people are aware that there's an increase in [sexual assaults and sexual harassment](#). For example:

- One in four women and about one in 26 men have experienced completed or attempted rape.
- More than half of women and almost one in three men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetime.
- One in three women and about one in nine men experienced sexual harassment in a public place.

During the last 20 to 30 years, incidents of [gun violence](#) have risen dramatically, with firearms now being the leading cause of death for children and teens in the U.S. According to the CDC, gun-related deaths among young people have increased by more than 50% in the last two decades.



**Victims of discrimination have a 26% higher risk of having poor overall health.**



**Gun-related deaths among young people have increased by more than 50% in the last two decades.**

## 6 ways parents or caregivers can approach gun-violence conversations

1. **Start with what they know**—Before diving into details, ask open-ended questions to understand what your child has heard or seen about gun violence.
2. **Validate their feelings**—It's normal for kids to feel scared, confused, or even angry when discussing gun violence. Let them know their emotions are valid and that it's okay to express their concerns.
3. **Provide age-appropriate safety guidance**—While you don't want to instill fear, giving kids practical safety advice can empower them. For younger children, this might mean reinforcing the importance of following school safety drills.
4. **Limit media exposure**—While staying informed is important, too much exposure to violent news can increase stress and anxiety in kids. Monitor what your child is consuming, and if necessary, set limits on social media and news viewing.
5. **Be a source of stability**—Children look to their parents or primary caregivers for reassurance, so model a calm and supportive approach when discussing tough topics. Even if you're feeling anxious yourself, showing them that you're there to listen and support them can make all the difference. But if they ask you if you are worried, be honest. You can say that you are worried. But you and your teen can do a lot to be protected. Further, there is more awareness and preparation for shootings than ever before, and most places, especially schools, are quite safe.
6. **Take action together**—If your child is feeling helpless about gun violence, getting involved in community efforts can be empowering. Look for local advocacy groups, participate in awareness events, or write letters to lawmakers. Taking action, even in small ways, helps kids feel like they can make a difference.

## How can parents support teens who are grappling with a sense of insecurity about the world around them?

First, parents or primary caregivers need to acknowledge their own sense of insecurity with the world and how things are changing around them. When parents manage their own angst, this prevents kids from feeding off their anxiety. While a lot of terrible things happen, there's still a very small likelihood that it's going to happen to them. Caregivers can help kids put this into perspective and build good coping skills to manage anxiety. Anxiety is contagious. Controlling your own emotional state is critical for being effective in helping your teen calm down.

More importantly, parents need to listen. Create a safe space to talk and have frequent conversations in between the cracks. Validate their feelings, even if you don't agree with them necessarily. Remember you can learn from each other so ask them where they get their information and share your experiences.

**To foster well-being and encourage [self-care](#), caregivers can encourage:**



a good diet



exercise



sleep hygiene



no blue screens a couple of hours before going to bed



meditation

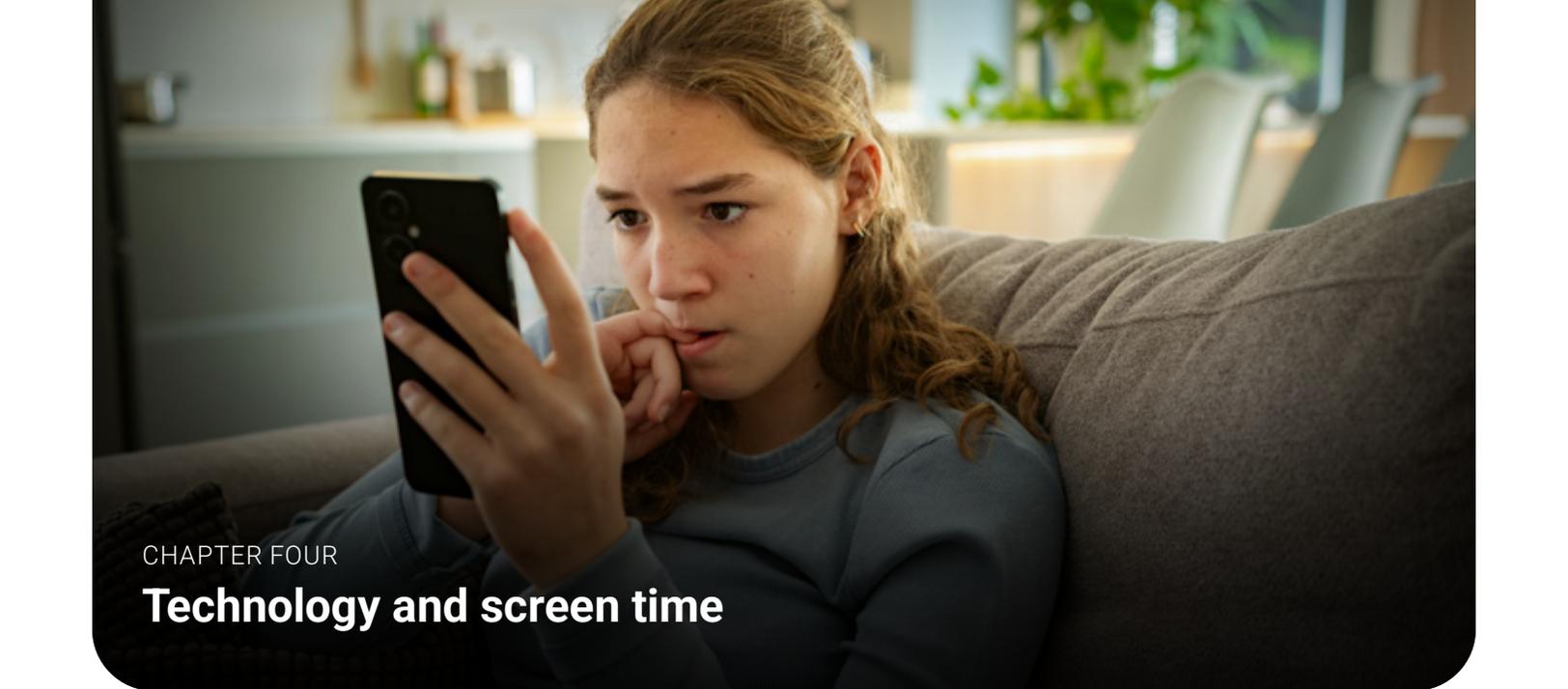


yoga



creative arts

[Research](#) shows that the use of [creative arts](#) can improve mental well-being.



CHAPTER FOUR

## Technology and screen time

“Everything is blamed on social media. But the problem is the overuse and misuse of digital media.”

—Dr. Beresin

Social media has become commonplace for teens today—and adults, too—regularly checking for social media updates or receiving push notifications throughout the day. So, not only do our minds never get a chance to rest from constantly processing “breaking news” (in the world and in our immediate lives), but we lose that time to spend on other important parts of our lives, focusing on academics or extracurricular activities, socializing with friends, or even just enjoying music or a good book.

### What are the potential **behavioral health impacts** of excessive technology use on teens?

- Displacement of in-person engagement, reducing the quality of interactions, and even diminishing self-esteem
- **Loneliness**
- Fear of missing out (FOMO), increased conflict, and reduced social connection
- Targets of online harassment
- Weakened emotional bonds and deficits in perceived belongingness
- Intrusion
- Trauma, stress, and high drama
- Brains in overdrive

### How can parents set boundaries around screen time without creating conflict or resentment?

It must be **collaborative**—but not in a way that lets kids dictate the rules. Parents must consider what kids have to say, what they have to offer, and what they want. And remember, you are the most important role model for your teens. You need to take stock of your use (or misuse) of social media. Most of the time you can find some middle ground by simply following three steps: assess, regulate, and promote.

- **Assess:** Look at how much time they spend online and how they are spending that time. Learn a lot from simply observing your teen and even more from **asking them about it**. Sit down with your teen and ask them to show you the apps they use, and the way they use them. Engage in discussions about the pros, cons, risks, and benefits of their use. Show them how you use apps and social media.
- **Regulate:** Set clear rules and limits around screen time, and agree on guidelines that prioritize in-person connection before online activities. Talk openly about social media etiquette and what responsible use looks like. Instead of removing phones altogether—which can create more conflict than clarity—focus on helping kids learn to monitor and manage their own use.
- **Promote:** Encourage non-online activities that foster connection such as social activities or creative arts. When using social media, show kids how it can be helpful to connect, network, or build community.



As parents, you can't be afraid of having **conflict** with your kids. Conflict is natural when you're asking someone to do something they don't want to do. You can use these conversations to help kids understand how to deal with conflict in a healthy way. Help them assess and be aware of how they feel when they're using social media. This can help them set boundaries. Explain what to do if they feel unsafe, overstimulated, or anxious while using social media. These conversations will help kids uncover what they're feeling and experiencing. It's an ongoing, ever-evolving process.

On the flip side, social media can help kids with a range of disabilities. For example, kids who are severely anxious or shy, or on the autistic spectrum. If they have extreme difficulty with social emotional communication, digital media can be used as a stepping stone to communicate and connect with others. Dr. Beresin noted a critical component is guidance from digital media into real face-to-face interaction.



There are other benefits to social media as well when it is used correctly. Social media can be a place where people can find helpful information. For marginalized groups, it can be a place to find community. That's why it's important for parents to model safe, healthy relationships whether that's online or in person. It's an important skill we can teach our kids by having these ongoing open discussions.

By fostering open conversations, modeling healthy coping, and recognizing the individuality of every teen, we can help young people thrive amid life's challenges. The journey may not always be easy, but together, we can cultivate resilience, joy, and hope for the future.

# Resources for parents

## Learn more from The Clay Center:

[Podcasts - Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds](#)

[Teen Loneliness - Ways to Help | Gene Beresin, MD, Mass General](#)

[When to Worry, What to Do \(PDF Library\) | MGH Clay Center](#)

[MGHClayCenter - YouTube](#)

[Clay Center Webpage: \[www.mghclaycenter.org\]\(http://www.mghclaycenter.org\)](#)

**Mass General Brigham Health Plan** offers a suite of innovative, digital features on its fully insured commercial plans. **Innovative mental health solutions** through **Lyra Health** include in-person, remote, and self-guided care, as well as advanced care coordination for members with more complex mental health needs. Here are some additional resources from Lyra:

[How to Support the Mental Health of Kids and Teens](#)

[How to Recognize Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens](#)

[4 Things You Should Know About Adolescent Mental Health](#)

[Teen Counseling: What to Look For](#)

[Children and Teen Mental Health: The urgent benefit you may not be thinking about](#)

[A Generation in Crisis: Supporting Working Parents with Teens](#)



**Optum** behavioral health benefits are also available to all Mass General Brigham Health Plan members. Search for providers who offer treatments including outpatient services, day programs, residential programs, autism care and support, substance and recovery services, and more. Try virtual therapy with in-network therapists who offer convenient and cost-effective online visits. Explore programs and tools to help build your understanding of topics like therapy, substance use support, mental health, and caregiving. [Learn more](#) about behavioral health offerings at Mass General Brigham Health Plan.



If you'd like to learn more about Mass General Brigham Health Plan, reach out to your broker or benefits advisor or follow us on social media [@MGBHealthPlan](#).



# Mass General Brigham

Health Plan