



Yamila Lezcano LMHC
Becoming Resilient

Typical Adolescent Development vs. a Mental Disorder

Help is available for parents who need guidance.

Posted Jan 30, 2021



Studies show that adolescence is often when symptoms of mental health illnesses first appear. One-half of such illnesses begin by the age of 14, while three-quarters appear by age 24.

Derived from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means “to grow up,” adolescence marks the transition into adulthood when youths experience growth, learning, and exploration. The attitudes and skills they develop can help them thrive throughout life. While most adolescents go through this stage without incident, some need additional support to foster optimal overall health. When these changes are turbulent, it can be difficult for families to tell the difference between normal growth and signs of mental illness.

Some of the changes adolescents experience may be hormonally driven. Youth—especially girls—become more prone to depression and anxiety, as “raging hormones” may cause emotional extremes and more vulnerability to stressors such as family conflict, peer pressure, and intimate or romantic relationship issues.

On the same note, teens’ desire to conform to their peer group can lead to risky behaviors they otherwise would not consider. Likewise, their feelings of non-conformity to the group also can lead to distress. Concerns about appearance, sexual orientation, and gender identity may lead to anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

The symptoms of mental illness that are difficult to distinguish from normal development include the following:

1. Withdrawal, which can indicate depression. If a teen is withdrawing from the family and spending more time with friends, this is a normal part of preparing for independence and adulthood. Socially, teens will exhibit a preference to turn to their friends as a way of learning about their world through references other than their families. In addition, it allows them the opportunity to learn to resolve conflict and cope with peer pressure. However, if the adolescent is withdrawing from everyone, there may be a reason for concern.

2. Becoming very private. This could be normal, but extreme privacy can be related to alcohol or drug use, or even the onset of psychosis and paranoia.



Source: Source: Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock

3. Struggling with school, no longer enjoying things they use to enjoy, and/or avoiding social events. As adolescents increase their level of competence, it is not unusual for them to struggle with resilience and maturity even if mental health issues are not present. Resilience is a function of developing many “protective

factors,” which could include quality of a home atmosphere, external social support, and the ability to cope with new situations.

The good news is that opportunities for early intervention can make a tremendous difference in helping a young person overcome mental health challenges and enjoy a happy and fulfilling adolescence. The first step for parents to help their adolescent overcome a mental health challenge is to seek counseling from a reliable psychologist or other mental health professional. Considering the availability of telehealth services, connecting with such a professional is easier for most people than ever before.

References

Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2015). Behavioral Health Trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/>)

Merikangas, K. R., He, J., Burstein, M., Swanson, S.A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benjet, C., Georgiades, K., & Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in U.S. adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Study-Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(10): 980-989.