



Mental health tips for teenagers

By Dr Jodi Richardson

For the first time in 15 years, thousands of Australian teenagers named mental health as one of the top three national issues in the *2016 Mission Australia Youth Survey*. Personally, they're concerned about coping with stress, school, body image and depression.

I know that reading this is enough to raise our own anxiety levels as parents, but the fact that mental health is on the radar for our young people is a good thing. It means that there's increased awareness around issues like anxiety, depression and suicide. This awareness will help reduce the stigma around mental illness and the subsequent

discrimination which can stand in the way of young people seeking help and support when they need it most.

First and foremost, we want to help protect our young people from mental illness, but we also want to know that they can recognise when they need help, and ask for it. The Youth Survey shows that when young people do need help, overwhelmingly, they turn to their friends and their parents.

If we can equip our young people with the knowledge and skills to protect their own mental health, in doing so, they're better prepared to support friends who turn to them for help too.

The following tips help promote flourishing mental health in secondary school kids:

1. Help them find a sport or physical activity they love

Physical activity is essential for flourishing mental health. Young people who play sport are more fulfilled and feel healthier and happier about life. The key is helping them to find an activity they love. Physical activity instantly improves mood and can even lift symptoms of depression. This is because it ticks so many of the 'psychological wellbeing boxes' including movement and all of the 'feel good' hormones that go hand-in-hand, social support, opportunities for them to engage in an activity that captivates them so they experience 'flow' and helping them to maintain a healthy weight to name a few. Secondary school kids need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day but even 15-20 minutes will help improve their mood.

2. Make sure they get plenty of face time

Not FaceTime, face-to-face time! Positive in-person relationships promote psychological wellbeing and happiness. The research clearly shows that people with a variety of strong social relationships live longer, and are healthier and happier.



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3. Work with your teen to set screen time limits

A recent *National Stress and Wellbeing in Australia Survey* revealed over half of Aussie teens connect five or more times a day (heavy social media use) and 15 minutes before sleep every night. Incredibly, the wellbeing of one in two teens is also affected by their fear of missing out or FoMO, causing them to feel burnt out because they're constantly connected. Work with your teen to set limits; consider no screens in bedrooms, tech-free zones in your home, limiting your own screen time and ensuring screen time doesn't encroach on time for physical activity, socialising and relaxation.

4. Teenagers need plenty of sleep

A challenge to get your teenager out of bed in the morning? You're not alone! Teens need around 9 to 10 hours of sleep yet most sleep only around 7 to 8 hours on average. The trouble is that the sleep hormone melatonin only begins to rise in their brains around 11pm and so they can't get to sleep until late. When woken for school they're not happy about it and want nothing more than to go straight back to bed! Too little sleep affects concentration, alertness, academic performance and mood. Consistently getting enough sleep is one of *the* most effective ways of protecting against depression.

These practices can help:

- Getting up at the same time each day
- Daily physical exercise, preferably outdoors
- Avoiding caffeine after 4pm
- No screens one hour before bed
- Winding down around 30 minutes before bed

5. Help your teenager develop mindfulness skills

In a nutshell, mindfulness is about paying attention in the present moment. That's it! Sounds easy, but like any skill it takes practice but is worth the effort. Our teens' minds are constantly overstimulated. A regular mindfulness practice will help them to regulate their attention and emotions; and teaches them to create a lifelong practice of taking time out to become calm, relaxed and in the moment. I highly recommend the *Smiling Mind* app for mindfulness meditations.

Or get them to try this simple breathing exercise: sitting comfortably with eyes closed, gently breathing in through the nose for two counts, holding the breath for one count and breathing out through the nose for four counts, for around 5 minutes. The longer exhale compared to inhale helps calm the nervous system and settle the mind.



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