



A Generation in Crisis - Youth in Today's America

Every generation faces its challenges as it makes its mark on the world. In 2021, being a teen or young adult has been fraught with the additional weight of living in a pandemic, where social contact has been significantly altered and life's routines disrupted.

In today's economically unstable, politically divided, socially distanced society, life can be overwhelming: youth today are at once more connected and socially isolated. In addition, young Americans are experiencing new challenges that impact their mental health and opportunities for the future. One in five young people face mental health challenges today, while seven in ten teenagers acknowledge that depression and anxiety are the biggest challenges.¹

While America has faced a growing youth mental health crisis pre-pandemic, the pandemic has exacerbated the situation prompting Dr. Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon

General, to issue a new Advisory to highlight the need to address the problem:

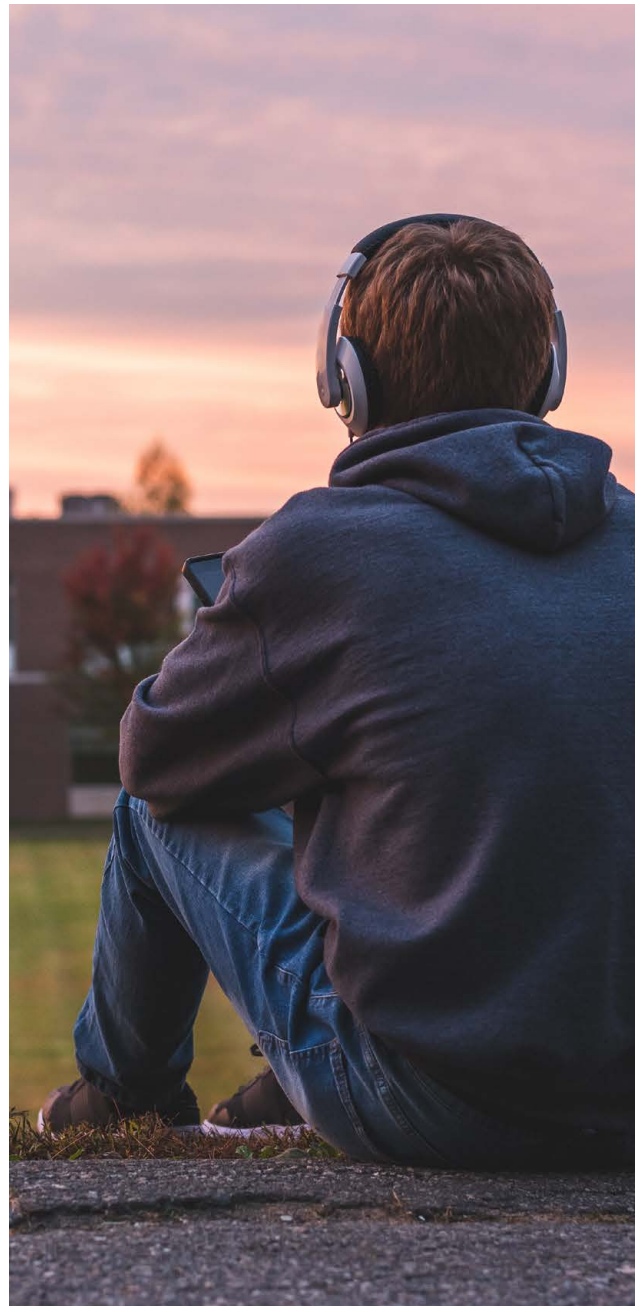
*"Mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real and widespread. Even before the pandemic, many young people struggled with feelings of helplessness, depression, and thoughts of suicide — and rates have increased over the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic further altered their experiences at home, school, and in the community, and the effect on their mental health has been devastating. The future wellbeing of our country depends on how we support and invest in the next generation."*²

¹ <https://www.waldenu.edu/>

² <https://www.hhs.gov/>

Youth face challenges beyond growing pains, fitting in, and school grades (see page 5). On top of "normal" teen issues, youth today are anxious about an increasingly uncertain future. From both the personal and national lens, the future can seem daunting if not downright frightening. Existential angst has been amplified by the ever-increasing cost of education and student debt, diminished employment opportunities, lower salaries, economic uncertainty, the environmental crisis, and a country divided on everything, including the pandemic that won't go away.

The combination of these stresses weighs heavily. When teenagers and young adults should be focusing on defining themselves, exploring life, studying, and enjoying the beauty and energy of their youth, they are distracted by a worrisome combination of factors that impact both their present and prospects. Frustratingly, they perceive they have little control over any of them. The situation can result in anxiety, depression, and fear.



“Young adults say, 55% to 44%, that they're more fearful than hopeful about the future of America -- a shift from earlier this year, when most said they were hopeful. Only about one-third now describe the U.S. as a healthy or even "somewhat functioning" democracy, with 52% saying it's a "democracy in trouble" or that it's failed altogether.”³

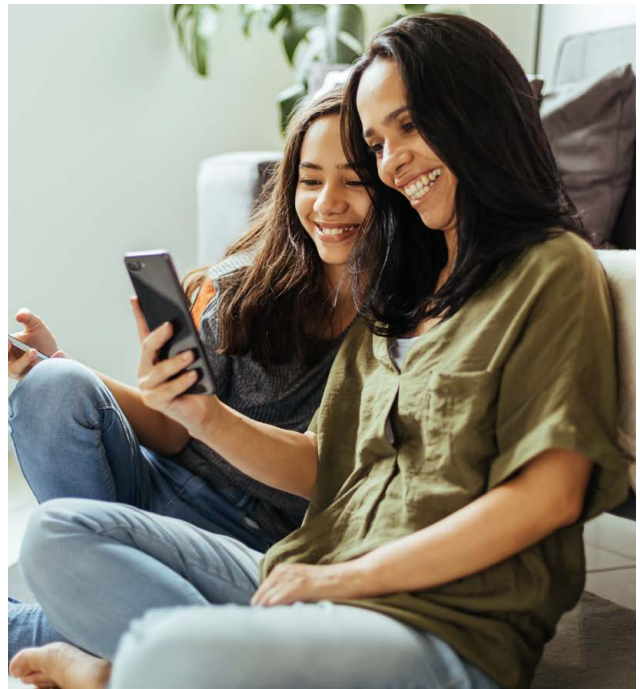
³ <https://edition.cnn.com/>

The brutal onslaught of climate-related news stories also weighs heavily on today's youth. A recent article in *The Lancet* detailed results from a survey of 10,000 respondents aged between 16 - 25 in 10 countries. The subjects shared their feelings regarding the climate crisis:

“While 84 percent of the young people surveyed were “at least moderately worried,” nearly 60 percent were “very or extremely worried,” and 75 percent felt that the future was “frightening.” More than half felt sad, anxious, powerless, helpless, and guilty about the climate. The feelings least reported were optimism and indifference.”⁴

With one in five teens living with a mental health condition, half of which emerge at 14, while 75% of mental health issues manifest by the mid-twenties, we need to address mental health head-on. However, we still have a long way to go in eliminating the stigma of mental health and educating ourselves as parents or caregivers and our children on how to talk about it openly.

“Unfortunately, research shows that most teenagers will turn to their friends and peers for support before turning to an adult. And because of ongoing stigma around mental health disorders, many won't even turn to their friends. Among teens with mental health needs, 70 percent do not receive the care they need.”⁵



So what can we do to support our youth? As there is no guarantee a troubled teen will talk to a family member, parents and carers need to create a safe space that enables real conversation and interaction to occur. A family accustomed to discussing the day's events and challenges will have an easier time supporting a family member when the conversation turns to more challenging topics.

Talking openly about feelings and experiences can be difficult for anyone. Defining their identity and independence may add a barrier to communication for young people, hampering their ability to share. Additionally, they may want to figure things out for themselves before talking to someone, as they may feel unsure how to feel or react to specific challenges, so the process of seeking guidance may take time to get to.

⁴ <https://newrepublic.com>

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org>

Initiating a dialogue at home is essential, and it is best to tread lightly, opening the space for communication without necessarily having "an agenda" to help. Be respectful, thoughtful and avoid judgment or diving into problem-solving right away. Sometimes, allowing a teen to speak and explore their emotions is enough to allow them to land upon their solution or a specific request for advice or help. Being too assertive might evoke an angry response or shut down the conversation before it begins.

If this is new terrain for you, and your teen is not responsive, it's best to approach the conversation flexibly, letting them guide its course after communicating your initial concern. Tell them why you're worried and what you've observed, allowing them the time and space to respond to your concerns by encouraging them to share their feelings and whatever experience they may be living

Be prepared for the conversation to take place over several days or weeks, depending on how your teenager feels and how they are processing whatever ails them.

Remember, depression and anxiety can lead to isolation or disconnection, particularly amongst the young as they struggle to understand their feelings. While we may not

be able to solve their problems, being available and present is a significant first step in breaking down the barriers to communication and a powerful remedy to combating isolation. The power of a funny or unusual anecdote or reliving a shared memory can strengthen the bond and sense of connection and empathy. Sometimes, addressing problems begins with a smile.

TEN WAYS TO HELP Your Young Adult Open Up.*

- ✓ Be present
- ✓ Listen more, speak less
- ✓ Let them lead
- ✓ Validate their feelings
- ✓ Show trust, avoid judgment
- ✓ Be flexible and pragmatic
- ✓ Give praise
- ✓ Control your emotions, let them express theirs
- ✓ Be observant without infringing on their privacy
- ✓ Spend time together

*Various sources



The Challenges Today's Teens Face

- 1** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, **with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the U.S. having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder.**
- 2** From 2009 to 2019, the share of high school students who reported persistent feelings of **sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%, to more than 1 in 3 students.**
- 3** From 2009 to 2019 (pre-Covid), with 19% of high school students seriously considered attempting suicide, a 36% increase over the decade. Additionally, **16% made a suicide plan in the prior year, a 44% increase from 2009 to 2019.**
- 4** Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among youth ages 10-24 in the U.S. increased by 57%, and early estimates show **more than 6,600 suicide deaths among this age group in 2020.**⁶

⁶ <https://www.hhs.gov/>