

PARENTING: Is My Adolescent's Behavior "Normal?"
Information from the CAST Seminar, "Is This Normal? Presented by MINDING YOUR MIND, February, 2016

Since adolescents are prone to mood swings, it can be tricky to determine if your child's behavior is a normal part of growing up or whether your child may be experiencing a mental health issue. The key is to observe your child, and pay attention to the moods that are normal for him/her. If your child's mood changes and stays that way for two weeks or more, then it is time to seek help. The sooner you seek help, the better the outcome for your child. Early intervention can reduce the likelihood of symptoms recurring.

With adolescents, it is important to keep the lines of communication open at all times. If you are concerned about your child's behavior, tell them! Ask, "Are you okay?" "Do you need to talk?" Even if they tell you that they are fine and to leave them alone, keep asking them, and continue to let them know that you are there for them and that you love them. Be proactive, and talk about things before there is a problem. If you have a child in middle or high school, it is important to talk to them about "THREE SAFE PEOPLE." Let them know that there may be times that they need to talk to someone about a concern or a problem. You would like to be one of those people, of course, but let your child know that it is okay for them to talk to someone else, if for some reason, they don't feel comfortable talking to you about it. The important thing is that your child makes a list of three safe people BEFORE there is a problem. SAFE people can include parents, coaches, teachers, relatives, supportive friends, clergy, neighbors, etc. The important thing is for your child to not suffer in silence and to know that she or he has someone he can go to for help.

If you feel your child is “acting out”, it is important to focus on why they are doing so. According to the experts from “Minding Your Mind,” you should ask questions of anyone and everyone in your child’s life, including your child, other family members, teachers, and coaches, etc. Next, consult your primary care doctor. Many physical problems affect our behavioral or psychological well-being. Make an appointment with a primary care physician, identify the signs you are experiencing or witnessing, and have a complete physical examination of your child. If nothing is found, your physician can refer your child for a psychological evaluation.

According to MINDING YOUR MIND, these are the signs that your child needs help:

- Sad and hopeless for no reason that does not go away.
- Strong anger most of the time, crying a lot or overreacting to things.
- Feeling Worthless or guilty often.
- Feeling Anxious or worried often.
- Unable to get over a loss or death of someone important.
- Extremely fearful or having unexplained fears.
- Constantly concerned about physical problems or physical appearance.
- Frightened that his or her mind either is controlled or is out of control.
- Crying a lot for no particular reason
- Having very low energy
- **A child or adolescent experiences big changes, such as:**
- Showing declining performance in school.
- Losing interest in things once enjoyed. Finding little or no pleasure in life.
- Experiencing unexplained changes in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Avoiding friends or family and wanting to be alone all the time.
- Daydreaming too much and not completing tasks.
- Feeling life is too hard to handle.
- Hearing voices that cannot be explained.
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts.

- **A child or adolescent experiences:**
- Poor concentration and unable to think straight or make decisions.
- An inability to sit still or focus attention.
- Having too much energy
- Worry about being harmed, hurting others, or doing something

- “bad”.
- A need to wash things, or perform certain routines hundreds of times a day.
 - Racing thoughts and/or speech that are almost too fast to follow.
 - Persistent nightmares.
 - Believing that others are plotting against you
- **A child or adolescent behaves in ways that cause problems, such as:**
 - Using alcohol or other drugs.
 - Eating large amounts of food and then purging, or abusing laxatives, to avoid weight gain.
 - Dieting and/or exercising obsessively.
 - Violating the rights of others or constantly breaking the law without regard for other people.
 - Setting fires.
 - Doing things that can be life threatening.
 - Killing animals.

If your child is exhibiting one of the signs listed above, seek professional help. Please visit the MINDING YOUR MIND [website](#) for information on early intervention and a screening tool that you can use to see if your child needs a [Check Up From the Neck Up](#). If you need to seek help for yourself or someone else, visit <http://mindingyourmind.org/resources/for-students/action/>. The Minding Your Mind website also has additional information on specific disorders and behavior as well as area resources.

If your child is not exhibiting one of the signs listed above, but you are still concerned about his/her mental health, there are several important steps you can take. Interestingly, these steps include many things you would do to improve physical health! First, make sure your child is eating healthy foods and keeping hydrated. Try to eat together as a family at least twice a week.

Second, make sure your child practices good sleep hygiene. Sleep is restorative and promotes positive mental health. Lack of sleep leads to irritability. According to our presenter, Sheila Gillin, teenagers should try to go to bed by 10:00 at night. Kids who stay up past 10 have a 42% greater chance of developing mental health issues.

Third, exercise is very important. It releases endorphins that promote positive mental health. Help your child find the exercise that works best for him/her.

Fourth, help your child deal with unmanaged stress. Unmanaged stress can lead to mental health problems, and some teens may turn to drugs/alcohol to cope with stress. Try to determine what is causing your child's stress, and take steps to alleviate it. With teens, schoolwork and an overloaded schedule are often the culprits. If your child is staying up until midnight trying to do homework, try to figure out why it is taking so long. Does your child need better study habits (not talking on the phone and playing on the I-Pad while doing homework, etc.). Perhaps, your child is involved in too many activities that don't leave enough time for homework. Perhaps, your child is taking too many Advanced Placement (AP) classes. You may need to look at your child's schedule and see if something can be eliminated. Opinions vary widely on the subject of teens and AP course, but the key is to focus on **your** child, and do what is best for his/her mental health.

Finally, it is important that your teen has established times where s/he disconnects from technology and social media.