

Teenager and Young Adult Mental Health Awareness

Welcome to Teenager and Young Adult Mental Health Awareness. My name is Melanie Ordonez, and I will be one of your moderators today. I am pleased to present Kevin Herbert, a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with individuals and families to break through anxiety and depression and reconcile grief and loss. Kevin also speaks regularly on psychology and mental health topics. He is a father of four who loves playing music, enjoying amazing meals, and going on adventures with the family.

So with that, I will hand it over to you, Kevin.

>> KEVIN HART: Thank you, Melanie. Thank you all for joining today. This talk dives into the common mental health challenges that young people face and equips you, the parent, with practical strategies to empower and support your teens and young adults on their journey to well-being.

Imagine your teen suddenly withdrawing from activities they used to love, struggling in school, or expressing feelings of hopelessness. As a parent, I know the fear and confusion can be overwhelming. Did you know that one in five young adults experience a mental health disorder each year? While that may be alarming, it highlights the urgent need for informed and supportive families. As parents, we know this age group faces unique challenges, from navigating social pressures and academic stress to figuring out who they are in the world. It's a whirlwind. And amidst all this, their mental health can sometimes be overlooked. And so here is the thing. Mental health matters for everyone, especially during those crucial years. Today we will explore the topic together, demystifying the difference between mental health and mental illness and discussing some common challenges that many people face and equipping you with tools to support.

By the end, I hope you feel empowered to create safe space, open communication, and offer to support your teens and young adults.

Let's start by clearing up a common misconception. Mental health is not the same as mental illness. So mental health is a state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Think of mental health as a spectrum. On one end is well-being, feeling good about yourself, managing stress effectively, having healthy relationships. The other end represents mental illness. These are diagnosable conditions, like anxiety or depression, that can have a significant impact on a person's daily life.

And so mental health, it's something that we are constantly balancing throughout our lives, but especially in adolescence. And this can affect our ability to cope with new stressors, it can help with learning, work, and relating to others.

I did see something about sound. Hopefully everything sounds a little bit better.

It's important to remember everybody experiences highs and lows. Feeling anxious before a big test or feeling down after a fight with a friend, that's normal. If feelings become persistent or interfere with daily functioning, then professional help would be needed.

So again, mental illness relates to specific diagnosable conditions that specifically disrupt an individual's functioning and require professional intervention.

Diagnosis requires a trained and licensed mental health professional. It requires that symptoms meet a specific set of criteria that are based on age, based on duration of the symptoms and the severity of the symptoms.

And it's also very important that these symptoms are impacting this person's ability to function in life.

Mental illness encompasses mental, cognitive behaviors, physical behaviors, and emotional behaviors. There are diagnoses around each of these categories. It's also important to remember that mental illness is not a personal failure. Throughout a lifetime, each one of us could meet the criteria for a mental health disorder at some point in our lives.

It's also important to know that many disorders that can be diagnosed also have evidence-based effective treatments that can be utilized as long as somebody gets the help that they need.

So what kinds of hurdles or issues are people dealing with? This time period between pre-adolescence and going into our early 20s involves a lot of big changes. Most of us are -- think about puberty, and we think about changes in hormone levels. While that is a big piece of it, we also see the brain go through dramatic changes between the age of 12 and the age of 20, where it is literally rewiring itself to automate behaviors that us, as adults, often take for granted.

So on the one side, we have a young person, 13, 14, 15, they are at the peak of their mental ability, their mental flexibility. They have the ability to take in information and make a determination about it and solve that problem. But they have to think about it. They have to put that brain power to work to come up with answers. Whereas the older we get, the more we have already solved those problems, we have already answered those questions, and we have a pool of resources and automatic information that we can pull from so we don't have to think through every situation that we face. Young folks are also dealing with figuring out who they are in a constantly and increasingly changing world. They have pressure coming in not only from their family and the people that they know and talk to every day. But they are also connected to all these virtual communities across the planet, and that also creates peer

pressure in a way that we haven't seen in a long time.

On top of that, we've got academic stress, athletics, things they are devoting their time to. And of course, developing relationships. They say that this age, we are figuring out who we are so that we can figure out how to be with others, how to serve others, how to develop fulfilling and trusting relationships in our adult years.

Some other unique emotional aspects are heightened sensitivity. Ability to perceive, to receive information, to feel feelings. Those things are all heightened to a degree. And that can sometimes lead to difficulty managing emotion. Knowing what emotion is prep and for how long in particular situations. For us as parents, we can model that. This is something we see not only in adolescence, but younger children, is just about the time that you are trying to figure out how to get a meal made, pack up the bags, and get out the door, the child is asking for things, running around, you know, and basically in a state of chaos. And then you stop for a second, and you realize that's kind of what we are doing in that moment. You know, that we are talking faster, we are talking louder, we are going from here to there rushing to try to get all these things done. And it's funny how that behavior gets modeled. And so we can help ourselves and our child by stopping for a second, slowing down for a moment. Or helping them to figure out what the time and place for different requests might be. Here's what we need to do now, but I will listen, I will address this soon.

Self-consciousness. Being aware of who you are in the social space is also really unique to adolescents and young adults. We are suddenly becoming aware of what social connection can mean, what's at stake. We are learning now to see ourselves in the context of others, but we still haven't got the full picture yet. We still feel like people can read our minds. You know, we still feel like that others know what we are thinking or know what we should be doing. As adults, we learn that people either don't know what we are thinking or they don't care what we are thinking. And coming to terms with that can be pretty challenging sometimes.

So I want to talk a little bit more about the mental illness side of things. As I said, there are diagnoses. Many of these are things that people are familiar with. Anxiety and the class of anxiety-related disorders is one of the two most common. Chance that somebody could meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder in their lifetime is very high, almost like 100%. Same thing for depression. Depression, it looks like a lot of other things. Sometimes it looks like how we feel when we are just totally overwhelmed. Right? We sort of go from this balanced place to this imbalanced place where we are going to fight; right? We are going to flee. We are going to take charge of a situation. But if it becomes too overwhelming, if

we go too far beyond that, then we go into this physiological state that can look a lot like depression. And the way back out of that is sometimes paradoxically to get into a fighting situation so that you can get your feet under you and restore your ability to be in balance.

Stress is a huge factor, feeling overwhelmed by pressures at school, pressures from home, pressures from peers. Some other specific disorders that we start to see around this age are eating disorders, our young folks having unhealthy relationships with food or body image. And of course, a lot of folks who are dealing with stress, they are looking for a way to cope with it. We hope that we can find and teach healthy coping mechanisms, ways of being practical in solving our problems or ways that we can manage our emotions when we are confronted with currently unsolvable problems. What happens many times is somebody gets caught up in satisfying those needs and reducing their stress in other ways that might be harmful to them. They procrastinate on their school work. They put off doing important tasks and chores that they have. Or even worse, they start to damage their relationships. They could get involved in substance abuse, using alcohol or drugs to cope with their difficult emotions. Beyond that is some even more concerning things that we see. So just looking down this list of recognizing the warning signs, these are things that should get your attention. They are sort of in order of severity here, but if you start to see that your child is having academic difficulties, they are not keeping up on their grades, they are not doing as well as they used to, or they are losing interest in classes or subjects that they used to enjoy or be good in. Same thing with their sports and other activities that they are involved in.

Substance use, excessive worry or fear, extreme mood swings. Again, in an individual situation as a reaction to a loss, as a reaction to a conflict with a friend or a family member, you know, the mood can get elevated. How do they recover from that, though, is a more important question. As we grow older, our measure of success as adults is really correlated to what's called the half-life of our negative emotion. Right? If we get our -- find ourselves in a place where something's got us so worked up that we spend the whole rest of the day feeling awful about it, then we are not getting much done that day; right? Even for us as adults, I mean, to lose an hour worrying about something or being tied into a negative emotional state can really set us back. And so learning for ourselves and helping our kids learn how to change that emotional state. It's okay to have anger. It's okay to have frustration. It's okay to be sad. You know, every emotion that we are capable of experiencing as adults is available to us for a reason. And so recognizing that, acknowledging that, validating it, and letting it run its course, asking, is this

the appropriate response? Do I need to keep holding on to this? Is there something I need to do to either address the situation now or address it in the future? So that we can break that pattern and restore some peace and calm.

If you start to see changes in eating or sleeping patterns. We all know that teens like to stay up late. They get by pretty well with not as much sleep as we think they ought to have. But it can add up, especially if there are other health concerns or other things going on we are not aware of. And so just looking for any changes, whether that's significant weight loss or weight gain, staying up for days, or you know, sleeping in a way that isn't characteristic.

Any changes in personality. Social withdrawal. There's a term anhedonia. It's losing interest in things that used to please us, things that used to satisfy us. We find joy in our sports, our hobbies, our friends. Looking and seeing those things go away, seeing apathy as the ruling emotion, is definitely a warning sign.

These are two important ones to consider: Self-harm. This could be a person who is engaging in more risky behavior. It could also be somebody who is cutting themselves to relieve the tension or to cut through their pain or their emotions. And of course, if somebody is talking about any kinds of plans to harm themselves or harm other people, those are major warning signs.

Some major warning signs within suicidal thoughts are going to be significant hopelessness, helplessness. Kind of a tunnel vision about what the future holds, what their alternatives are. So we want to definitely support them in these times and seek professional help when necessary.

So what can we do to continue to build a space that supports our young people, supports our families? Open and honest communication about mental health and well-being are really important. These are topics that, in the past, were taboo in some places or for some families to talk about. Mental health, you would be surprised the conversations that are happening. A lot of our young folks are talking about mental health and are thinking about things that they can do to promote their own well-being.

And so it's really important to hold on to the trust that we have, to provide a space that validates emotions and the changes, that holds a space to discuss things and perhaps difficult conversations, conversations that open us up to our own vulnerability. Being vulnerable can be a great thing. But having space to do that, having somebody to do that with is something that we can build and we can encourage.

Sometimes the aspect of trust is hinged on the expectations. And sometimes in a family we might have some implied rules or implied expectations, or you know, we get tired of saying things four, five, or six times. And sometimes things

do need to be said again. So always kind of finding a balance between saying it five or six times in a ten-minute period or saying it, you know, five or six times over a year and a half. Those are things that can sometimes, you know, wear on a relationship.

If you find that talking more and more, right, or if there's even emotional escalation that's happening between you and your child, stop for a second and think about your own ability to manage that emotion, to model calm in the face of stressful situations.

So some things that we can do. The simplest thing is spend time. I know a lot of times families will try to have together time, and they want to be together, all four or five, ten or twelve family members at the same time. But that can be challenging. That can be difficult to manage. And when we are in a group of people like that, most of us don't feel a strong personal connection to one other person in that moment. And so something that has really been helpful for me, it's been really helpful for my clients, is to consciously set aside time, even if it's only 15 minutes, for one-on-one time. And so with each of your children, each of the young people that you want to spend time with -- and of course, today it's Valentine's Day. With your own partners and loved ones, one-on-one time trumps family time every time. So make sure, obviously, to have a balance. It's good to be all together as a family. But make sure that you've also got that balance with some one-on-one time when possible, and especially (audio faded out)

Active listening without judgment. That can be challenging for folks sometimes. We are listening, hearing the words, and seeking to understand those words as opposed to whatever our agenda is or whatever we are trying to promote or persuade or coerce, you know, in the conversation. We want to have moments when we can just be a listener, just be a witness. There are some things that we can do as adults to improve our ability to do that, like learning about and practicing mindfulness. There are exercises and activities that you can engage in that allow you to set aside judgment and develop a feel for that.

Again, as I said before, validating children's emotions. Every emotion has a purpose, and emotions can be pretty intense at times for this age group.

Avoid lecturer. This is good for both teens and younger children. It's less important how many times something has been repeated or how thoroughly something is rationally explained than it is simplicity. So if you ever find that you have just explained it as far as you can and it's still not making a difference, flip it around and try a different strategy of focusing on one thing. And if it's discipline related, one thing, one consequence, one simple and very short correction. A

lot of times I see parents who they take away a kid's phone for a month. This is like a lifeline for young people these days. And so 15 minutes is enough to get the point across.

Listen to their concerns. Help them sort out what those concerns might be, and continue to offer support.

All right. If you notice warning signs or are concerned about your child's well-being, please take it seriously. Seek professional help if needed. If you are here on this call today, you've got access to some excellent resources, some excellent help. Early intervention and professional guidance are very important in managing the challenges that we face. If you are a doctor, you know your child has a regular pediatrician or somebody there, make sure that you are talking with them, especially if you are seeing those physiological things, like changes in sleep, concerning changes in appetite.

Seek support for yourself as well. If you are dealing with more things than you can handle, it's not a bad thing to have somebody who focuses on you, somebody who will hear you out, somebody that you can confide in. And even when we've got the best family and friends, it's not always easy to lay it all out. Seeing a counselor can be a really profound change for a lot of people.

We've got some additional resources. I believe these are also in your materials. Some important ones to point out are going to be if there's any indication of suicide or homicidal behavior or you are aware of anyone threatening your child. The suicidal helpline can now be accessed with a simple 988 number, just like 911, you can call 988.

Top of the left is the National Parent Helpline. Get that number and seek help there.

Another great organization with local chapters that provide mental health first aid trainings, free groups and materials and classes is the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

>> Great, Kevin, thank you so much. I am going to take it from here for a few moments, and then we are able to get to some questions. So I want to remind you all, I don't know if you are aware of this, but your program, which could be called Embrace, maybe your Employee Assistance Program, maybe something else, right, so companies name it different names at times. We have people from all over the United States on this call. So I encourage you to reach out to your program, especially if you have questions. We can't answer all your questions here today. I will be honest, this isn't the platform for it, for some of the questions that we get, especially when they are very detailed. Right? You deserve to have your question one on one with somebody. So I encourage you to call your toll-free number or pop on your website. If you don't know what your toll-free

number is, go to your website. I have a link that I posted in the Q&A pod, and if you click on that, it will allow you to search for your company website. Once you get on the website, you will be able to see your toll-free number. If you can't -- you may -- also, you need to possibly use your parent company name to search for your company. So if you can't find your company for some reason and you need to know your number, go to your leadership or your HR department. They can give you that information. You may -- your teen or young adult may be eligible for services at no additional cost to you. That's especially important if some of the things that Kevin talked about, if you are seeing some of those warning signs and you want some assessments done, you can take your child in and possibly have a consultation with someone. So everyone's benefits are different. I encourage you to call in. You may have telehealth sessions or online sessions that are available. But there is assistance for you and your family members. Maybe you, as a parent, are having trouble. Please, please use your benefits. That's what they are here for.

So Kevin, we have a few minutes for some questions. But I know you were talking about a takeaway, so can we pull that up and see what people take away from this today?

>> KEVIN HART: All right, let's bring them on over before we go.

>> Who had the information that they learned today? So as we work through maybe some of the -- we'll look through some of the questions here. Type in the pod that's there, the poll question here, where it says "type your answer here," type it there, and then click the icon to the right. Okay. I am going to broadcast these so people can see what they write. We will look at questions while they are answering those as well. I am just curious, though. I see a lot of people talking about listening and not judging. That came through loud and clear.

Okay. Great. So we have a few questions here and some comments as well, Kevin, so I am just going to scroll through these.

One of them I wanted to bring up was someone was talking about they have a teenager. And what they are noticing is that their teenage son and friends are labeling what are normal feelings, like feeling nervous or sad or shy, as more clinical issues. So they kind of use those terms, like this is anxiety or depression or social anxiety. And they are really happy that they have this awareness of mental health but wondering if they are focusing too much on kind of a clinical perspective of it rather than just knowing that they are normal feelings. So if that's happening, like how would you have a conversation with your child about that?

>> KEVIN HART: Yeah, certainly. And the more and more we have access to Internet, the more and more we have platforms like TikTok, you know, where there's, you know, whole streams

related to specific diagnoses, this reminds me a lot, I have been teaching Introduction to Psychology for about 20 years now. And I get freshmen college students coming in. And you know, what I see again and again in these classes is you can't help but diagnose yourself once you hear about a diagnosis. So kids hear about these things, and they start looking for reasons, they start looking for answers. And like you said, shyness, you know, it can be a personality trait. It can be a reaction to a situation. And that's kind of tying into what I said earlier. The way to differentiate between sort of natural, normal behaviors and something that, you know, is perhaps needing treatment is the length of time, you know, that this has been happening. Is it in reaction to something else? And is it -- you know, how deeply is it affecting a person's function? So is this particular thing calling all of the dysfunction? Is there a larger sort of spread of this function and this is just one little part of it? So if you've got somebody that has kind of this larger, pervasive problem, it might be helpful to get some help for that. But some of these little things, know that if they are sharing it with you, that's huge; right? There must be an iceberg of things that they are not sharing with you. So if they do have this moment of vulnerability or they express that they are having concerns about their ability to manage stress or their ability to connect with others or the fact that they have been withdrawing from the friends they used to love spending time with, hear them out. And you can collaborate. They might ask for some help, and you can help them to do that.

>> Great. Thank you. Someone mentioned -- we talked about suicidal ideation a bit ago and risks related to that. And teens tend to have difficulty with, you know, talking or telling, you know, people in authority if their friend's in trouble; right? So how do you talk to your teen about how they might tell someone that a friend of theirs is at risk? So if a friend of theirs discloses that they are having thoughts of harming themselves or they are cutting on themselves and they think that that person is at risk, how can they have conversations with that friend and be able to come and tell someone who can help them?

>> KEVIN HART: To be a friend, to be someone who can have that intimate and vulnerable conversation with somebody, is really important. And teens, they want to be that kind of person. Even if it stretches them, you know, thin at times. And so being willing to listen is, you know, really important. And by letting that person talk, right, by not asking a lot of questions, just encouraging them to elaborate on it can get them into telling more about what the experience is. And then if they offer up something to you, like you know, I have been scratching at myself or cutting myself. I, you know, thought at times that, you know, what's my point in being here? When you get that moment where they open the door to you to say something

like that, then you can ask frankly: Are you having thoughts about harming yourself? When you say that you've got this feeling, are you thinking that you might try to end your life? And so you start the front end by being present, by listening, by having this conversation and just encouraging them to express themselves and to tell it. And if they do say something that sounds like they need help with it, then just ask them frankly, you know, tell me more about what you are dealing with. Tell me more about what you mean by that.

And then there's more questions that we can ask from there. You know, if they disclose to you that they have a plan or that they have access to some kind of means, those are things that we, as parents, want to take charge of. If they are taking medications, you know, distribute less medication to them. If they are having other problems, you need to take care of that.

Another part of the question was what if this is another person, another friend? Again, being a good friend. Listening. Letting them know that these are things that can be addressed. You know, this is something that doesn't have to continue to be this way if you seek help.

I had a caller the other day who was a mother. And she was concerned about her child. And she had just learned some things, you know, that were concerning to her. But she had heard previously from a mother, you know, that there were some concerns around cutting. So the child had the courage or the trust in their own parent to share what was going on. And they were able to take action to get some support.

>> Great, great. So one quick other question. If two teens are together, can a teen call 988? Can one teen say to another teen, hey, why don't we call this number and let you talk to someone? Is that an option?

>> KEVIN HART: Yeah, because even with best intentions, you know, we are not equipped to deal with stuff like this, especially as teenagers. And we are not professionals. And professional is one phone call away or one text away. There's a text crisis line as well. And so yeah, just saying hey, let's call somebody. Because -- and here's another thing too. These lines are confidential. And so they will be able to listen, they will be able to provide some kind of assessment in the moment if there is some danger, then they will do everything that they can to encourage that person to get help and to reach out to somebody else so that they are not alone in that moment.

>> Great. I guess as parents, we could teach our kids, just like we do 911, our adolescents can call 988 if they are having these things happen.

>> KEVIN HART: That's right.

>> We have time for one more question, it looks like. So someone asked -- I hope you can answer this quickly -- what's the difference between lecturing and communicating or guiding our teens? So you know, how do you keep from lecturer and more

like communicating and guiding them when it comes to these areas?

>> KEVIN HART: Yeah, that's a tough one; right? Mostly the gauge is, you know, being aware of how they are taking it. Sort of you are maybe thinking in your mind, I've got to cover these eight things, and then then they are just glazing over or they are getting irritated. I think it really is the amount of things or the amount of talking that becomes a lecture. So if active listening is making eye contact and being close and nodding and saying things reflect what has been shared with you for the sake of understanding it better, that's very different than here are all the things you need to do or here's my advice to you. Advice-giving doesn't really work that well for anybody, but especially teens and especially in a world where they can instantly Google, you know, eight other answers than the one that you are providing to them.

>> Very good point. Thank you so much, Kevin, for everything that you shared today. I can tell by the comments people have lots of questions. And of course, this is a huge audience base. And also, as I said earlier, we are really not equipped to deal with some of the more intricate situations that you are in and the details that you need to share with someone. So I encourage you to reach out to your program. Again, link is in the Q&A pod. Click on that. Add your company name. And that will tell you what website you get on. If you can't find it using your direct company name, you might have to try a parent company name. If that doesn't work, please reach out to your HR department or your manager to get that information. This program is here for you. You may have the ability to have your teens see someone. You may see someone. You may have phone consultations. All kinds of available benefits for you. So we are so happy that you joined us today. And do want to remind you of the certificate of completion. It's ready for download. Hover over the title and click that Download button, and that's how you will receive it.

Again, Kevin, thank you so much for sharing all of your knowledge. This does end our presentation.

>> KEVIN HART: All right. Thanks for being here. I don't know if this person's still there, still listening, but there was a question about very brief corrective action as opposed to taking away a phone for two weeks. And when it comes to effective behavioral management, you are breaking a pattern, not exacting a punishment. So you always want to break patterns and then build it with positive reinforcement.

>> Great. Thanks so much, Kevin.

All right, everyone. Have a good rest of your day.

(End of session, 2:47 p.m. ET)

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