



Supporting Your Teen's Mental Health - Advice on boundaries, communication, and spotting early warning signs



Created by ARC with input from local young people and counsellors

Why this matters

Teenage years are full of change – emotionally, physically, socially. It's normal for teens to feel moody, withdrawn, or uncertain at times. But how can you tell when it's more than just “growing pains”?

Mental health challenges like anxiety, low mood, or self-harm are on the rise among UK teens. Early support can make a huge difference – but many young people struggle to open up, and many parents feel unsure how to help.

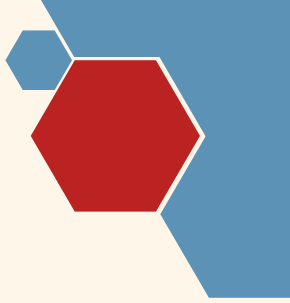
When issues like anxiety, low mood, self-harm, and depression go unacknowledged, teens may begin to withdraw, skip school, shut down emotionally, lash out at family members, or panic over everyday situations. Left unspoken, these struggles can become much harder to manage – for teens and their families. This guide is designed to ensure things don't get that far.

This guide is here to support you in:

- Spotting warning signs early
- Building trust through communication
- Setting healthy boundaries without shutting down conversations

You don't have to be perfect – just present, open, and willing to listen.





Spotting Early Warning Signs

Not all mental health struggles look the same – and many teens won't come right out and say they're struggling. But there are clues in how they behave, feel, and interact with the world. Learning to notice these early signs can help you step in with support before things spiral.

Emotional changes

- **Irritability, tearfulness, or sudden mood swings:** These are often the first sign that something isn't right emotionally, even if your teen can't explain why.
- **Feeling hopeless or worthless:** Expressions like "I'm useless" or "What's the point?" may sound dramatic but can be a window into low self-esteem or depression.
- **Constant worry or fear:** Anxiety doesn't always look like panic. It can show up as overthinking, avoidance, or needing constant reassurance.

Behavioural changes

- **Withdrawal from friends or activities:** A shift away from hobbies or people they once enjoyed can suggest low mood, anxiety, or social overwhelm.
- **Drop in school performance or attendance:** Trouble focusing or keeping up may reflect what's happening emotionally or mentally.
- **Sleeping too much or too little:** Teens do naturally need more sleep, but big changes in sleep patterns can signal distress or depression.
- **Spending more time online or on their phone:** This could be a form of escape or distraction from emotional pain. It can also expose them to harmful content or unhelpful comparisons.
- **Changes in eating habits:** Skipping meals, bingeing, or sudden loss of appetite may reflect anxiety, low mood, or body image struggles.
- **Secretive behaviour or lying:** Not all privacy is cause for concern, but a sudden increase in secrecy or dishonesty can be a red flag.

Spotting Early Warning Signs

Physical signs

- **Unexplained aches and pains:** Emotional stress often shows up in the body, especially in teens who find it hard to talk about feelings.
- **Fatigue or low energy:** Constant tiredness isn't always about late nights. Mental exhaustion from stress, anxiety, or low mood is common.
- **Visible signs of self-harm:** Look out for unexplained cuts, burns, or bruises, especially in places that can be hidden by clothing.

🧠 **Tip:** Don't wait until your teen "asks" for help. Many young people don't have the language to express their struggles, or they fear being judged. A calm, concerned approach can help open the door to conversation.

📱 **Remember** – today's teens are growing up in a digital world that looks nothing like the one we knew. We didn't have smartphones, filters, or constant notifications. So try not to compare their experience to your own teen years – it's not the same world. In some cases, it's best not to compare at all.





Setting the Tone: Boundaries & Communication

Boundaries help your teen feel safe – even if they resist them. But how we communicate those boundaries matters just as much.

As your child grows into a teenager, your role starts to shift. The days of them accepting your authority without question are changing – and that’s developmentally normal. Teenagers are learning how to become independent thinkers, test limits, and form their own identity. That often means questioning rules and pushing back against authority.

This is why communication now needs to be rooted in **mutual respect**. Speaking with teens as young adults, not little children, helps them feel heard and validated. That doesn't mean giving up your authority, but it does mean inviting them into conversations rather than imposing decisions on them. And just as you offer respect, it's okay to expect it in return. Creating a level playing field in tone and language helps make difficult conversations less confrontational.

At the same time, your role as the adult in the room remains critical. Teens may act in ways that seem irrational, moody, or defiant – but their brains are still developing, and their emotions often overwhelm their ability to self-regulate. They need you to stay calm, grounded, and focused even when they’re not.



Setting the Tone: Boundaries & Communication

It's not easy. But modelling emotional regulation is one of the most powerful ways to teach it.

- ◆ **Be consistent.** If your teen knows what to expect from you, they're more likely to open up.
- ◆ **Stay calm during conflict.** Try not to meet shouting with shouting. You are their emotional anchor.
- ◆ **Explain why you are saying "no" to something.** Help them understand the reason behind it – safety, trust, wellbeing.
- ◆ **Respect their space.** Teens need privacy – but not secrecy. Balance is key.
- ◆ **Use curiosity over criticism.** "I've noticed you're not eating much lately – is everything okay?" goes further than "You need to eat properly."
- ◆ **Be honest when things are hard.** If you're unsure how to handle something, it's okay to say, "I don't know the right thing to do, but I care and I want to help." Teens respect honesty and vulnerability.
- ◆ **Validate their emotions.** You don't have to agree with everything your teen says or does – but you can acknowledge that their feelings are real. Saying, "That sounds really difficult," can go a long way.
- ◆ **Stick to boundaries with empathy.** Saying "no" doesn't have to sound like rejection. Try: "I know this matters to you – but this is where I have to draw the line, because I care about your safety."
- ◆ **Repair after rupture.** If a conversation goes badly, it's never too late to circle back. A simple "I'm sorry I lost my temper" models emotional responsibility and keeps trust alive.



Starting Difficult Conversations

You don't need the perfect words. You just need to be open, consistent, and real. Small shifts in how you speak can make a big difference to whether your teen feels safe enough to open up.

Try:

- **“I’ve noticed you seem a bit down lately. Want to talk about it?”** – This shows care without pressure. It focuses on what you’ve observed, not what you assume.
- **“You don’t have to go through anything alone – I’m here.”** – It reassures them they’re not a burden and reminds them of your presence, no matter what.
- **“I might not have all the answers, but I’ll always listen.”** – Teens don’t expect perfection. This takes the pressure off both of you.
- **“Would it help to speak to someone who isn’t me, like a counsellor?”** – Offers a way forward if they don’t feel comfortable talking to you yet.

Avoid:

- **“It’s just a phase.”** – This can make a teen feel dismissed or not taken seriously. It minimises their experience.
- **“When I was your age…”** – While meant to connect, it can feel like a lecture or a way of shutting the conversation down.
- **“You have nothing to be sad about.”** – Even with good intentions, this message invalidates how they feel and may stop them from sharing in the future.

Reassure them that:

- Feeling overwhelmed is okay
- Mental health isn’t a weakness
- They can talk to you without judgement

By choosing curiosity, patience and non-judgement over assumptions or correction, you help keep the lines of communication open – and that’s what teens need most.



Exercises for Parents & Teens

 Try This: Exercises for Parents & Teens

For Parents:

- ◆ **Journal your worries vs facts:** What are you assuming about your teen, and what do you actually know? This helps separate fear from reality.
- ◆ **Model mental health check-ins:** Say things like, “Today was tough for me – I felt really stressed, so I went for a walk.” This normalises mental health talk.
- ◆ **Ask permission:** Try “Can I ask you about something I’ve noticed?” before jumping into tough topics.
- ◆ **Plan one-on-one time:** A walk, car ride, or shared meal can create natural space for check-ins without pressure.
- ◆ **Learn together:** Watch a mental health video or read an article side by side, then talk about what stood out. You don’t have to be the expert – you just have to be present.

For Teens:

- ◆ **Emotion tracker:** Use an app or journal to track mood, energy, sleep, and triggers. Patterns can help with understanding.
- ◆ **Create a “safe words” system:** A way to say “I need space” or “I need help” without having to explain everything.
- ◆ **Self-care menu:** List things that help when feeling anxious or low (e.g. music, petting the dog, going for a walk, texting a friend).
- ◆ **Make a “Who can I talk to?” list:** Write down three people you trust – friends, family, teachers, or a support service.
- ◆ **Design your a calm corner together:** A space at home that feels safe or comforting. Fill it with things that soothe: blankets, books, fidget toys, headphones.



What If My Teen Is Already Acting Out?

If your teen is already showing signs of distress through anger, outbursts, silence, or risky behaviour – you're not alone. These behaviours are often expressions of inner pain or confusion, not simply 'bad behaviour.'

✦ **Stay steady:** Reacting with anger can escalate the situation. Stay calm and consistent, even when it's hard.

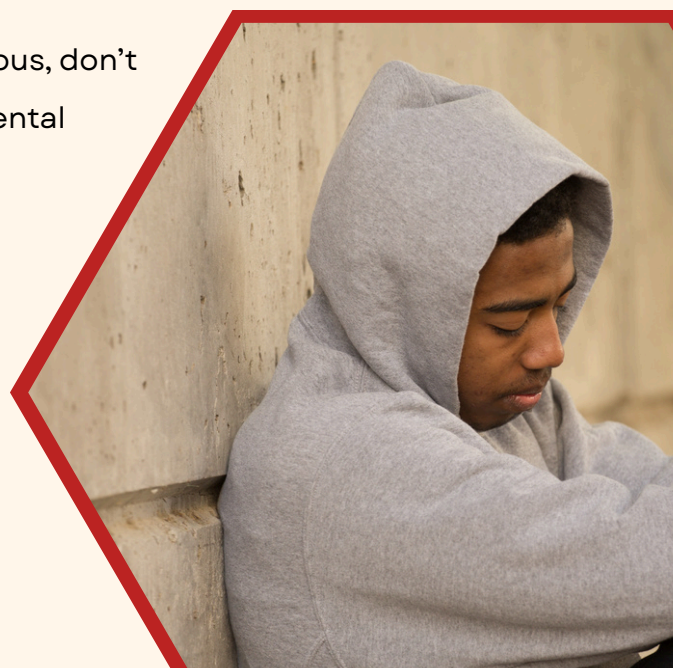
✦ **Don't take it personally:** Teens often direct their frustration at the safest target: home. This doesn't mean you're doing something wrong.

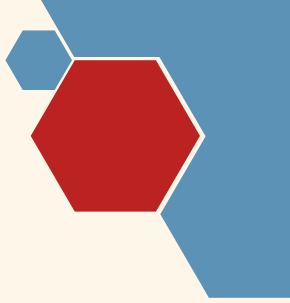
✦ **Look behind the behaviour:** What might they be trying to express? Anger can mask anxiety. Silence can signal sadness.

✦ **Offer time and space:** Instead of pushing for a conversation in the heat of the moment, try again later. "You seemed upset earlier – want to talk about it now?"

✦ **Keep showing up:** Even if they push you away, your presence matters. Leave small reminders of your care: a note, a cup of tea, a lift offer.

If the acting out becomes unmanageable or dangerous, don't hesitate to involve a GP, school support staff, or a mental health service like ARC.





Did You Know?

- 1 in 6 children aged 7–16 in England has a probable mental health condition. (NHS Digital, 2023)
- 58% of parents say they feel unequipped to support their teen’s mental health.
- Most mental health issues begin before the age of 18.
- Self-harm rates among 15–19 year olds have increased by nearly 70% over the last decade.
- Nearly 30% of UK secondary pupils avoid school due to anxiety – rising to 50% among those with mental health issues. (The Guardian, 2024)
- The proportion of pupils persistently absent from school has more than doubled in recent years – from 10.9% in 2018/19 to 22.3% in 2022/23. (Kids Inspire)
- About 1 in 15 young people in the UK engage in self-harm. (Mental Health Foundation, 2022)
- Among 17–24 year olds, 32.8% have self-harmed or attempted it – rising to 69.5% among those with likely mental health conditions. (YoungMinds)
- Self-harm incidents in children rose by 61% in one year, with a rate of 560 per 100 young people annually. (UK Government, 2024)
- 90% of UK teens worry about not earning enough to support themselves in future. (YoungMinds, 2024)
- 69% of teens say back-to-school anxiety impacts their academic performance, and 20% experience this anxiety daily. (Save My Exams, 2024)

♥ You’re Not Alone

You don’t have to solve everything. Just showing up, listening without judgement, offering calm support, and encouraging healthy habits goes a long way.

If your teen is struggling:

- **Reassure them they’re not broken**
- **Let them know help is available**
- **Remind them that you’ll face this together**



Get in touch



0118 977 6710



office@arcweb.org.uk



www.arcweb.org.uk

ARC offers one-to-one counselling to Adults and Young People across Wokingham and the surrounding areas. We provide confidential counselling at our main site in Wokingham, Oakwood in Woodley, schools and GP surgeries across the area.

ARC provides an important role within the community, with referrals coming from other agencies as well as self-referrals.

In addition to counselling, we also offer important support for 16 – 25 year olds through our Youth Access program. This program provides information to young people on where and how to access support, from housing, to work and mental health.

Our counselling services are free to young people under the age of 21 years and low cost for adults. We believe that counselling should be accessible for all and that cost should never be a barrier to better mental health.

We are a charity with over 25 years offering support within the Wokingham area.